

# Boundary and Ambiguity: Merleau-Ponty and the Space of Psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>

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## SYNOPSIS

Through its immersion in the philosophical vision of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this text explores our lived, embodied expressions of boundary and its ambiguity, which reveal our chiasmatic relations with others and with the world. These have implications for the way we live our lives, commune with people and practise existential psychotherapy.

## Introduction

My business is circumference. (Emily Dickinson, 2011: 170)

Existence is not a set of facts... capable of being reduced to others or to which they can reduce themselves, but the ambiguous setting of their intercommunication, the point at which their boundaries run into each other, or again their woven fabric.

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 193)

What is a boundary? According to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* it is 'a *thing* which serves to mark the limits of something; the limit itself, a dividing line' (Brown, 1993: 267). What is on the other side of that something? What does the line divide? What thing is a boundary? For me a boundary is not a limit. It is a threshold where two, or more, meet; it is a crossing, a point of transformation and revelation; it is a place where perspective, once essential, becomes unstable; it is an end and a beginning, but actually a continuation and a communion between now similar, now disparate things. A boundary is also that which denotes a surface and a depth. A boundary is the notional line between fusion and separation, terror and serenity, life and death. It is the moment of intertwining and chiasm, which reveals our inalienable inherence in others and in a world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ontology examines the equivocal nature of the boundary between ourselves,

others and the world, thus revealing the essential ambiguity that runs through our life and our acts, because 'If we are in a situation, we are surrounded and cannot be transparent to ourselves, so that our contact with ourselves is necessarily achieved only in the sphere of ambiguity' (1962: 444). For Merleau-Ponty we are in a situation firstly by means of our body – not our consciousness and not our mind. It is our body which is our anchor in the world and the medium of all our relations with it; it is that which 'establishes our first consonance with the world' (ibid.: 192). Through his philosophy of the lived body Merleau-Ponty seeks to 'rediscover this bond with the world that precedes thought itself' (2007: 86). This bond with the world is always already a boundary. I would like to explore the ambiguity of this boundary through our embodied human connections and to offer some thoughts on how this speaks to the psychotherapeutic encounter.

## Coming into the World as Boundary and Ambiguity

With the first vision the first contact the first pleasure there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content but the opening up of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 147–51)

We are always in a situation, always embodied in it. As such, our ambiguity is mapped on our body in the intricate relationship between its perceptive surface, proprioceptive ability and visceral depth (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964a, 1968, 2010; Leder, 1990). For Merleau-Ponty, 'the idea of situation rules out absolute freedom at the source of our commitments, and equally, indeed, at their terminus' (1962: 528).

The source of my commitments is the body of another. I am created, shaped and nurtured inside a dark liquid hollow of a female body, my mother's. I am conceived in fusion and elaborated in symbiosis. This is my first experience as a sentient being. It is also yours. As the foetus, I have skin, viscera and a beating heart from the first month of my existence. By the end of the second month I feel pain; later I hear sounds, I grasp, move, smile and sleep. One day I am violently propelled through a tight, fleshy tunnel out into a dry, bright world. My existence within and my existence without are palpably now 'a being of two leaves' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 137); I am detached upon my mother's body and detached from it, 'ineluctable and deferred' (ibid.). I begin as part of her viscera, the depth of her body, invisible, pure interiority, all the while founding and assuming what will become my incarnate being, with which I will take up my life in the world (Young, 2005). By means of a primitive will and an act of Nature I am mapping space, creating and extending my boundary, preparing my interiority, my invisibility, for a life in the exterior, the visible.

As the woman who hosts the child, which is of me but ultimately not mine, I too enter the sphere of the primitive. The depths of my body inaugurate an event over which I have no control and only a tacit understanding. I am 'systematically inhabited by another being' (Merleau-Ponty, 2010: 78), part of an anonymous process which happens through me and of which I am merely the seat (ibid.). All the while I continue to live my life in the world, through this body which is daily being transformed by – and transforming – another, and which constitutes the shifting boundary of my existence (Young, 2005). Somatically, my boundary extends both inwards (my womb) and outwards (my breasts and belly), and my body image undergoes a radical change. My sense of self will also undergo tectonic shifts, depending on the particulars of my life. Something dies in me and something new emerges through the advent of my child; there is joy and grief and the boundary between them is fluid. This child is an extension of my body and utterly other. Birth is a violent loss to us both, as well as the

intimation of a freedom, yet one that finds me even more deeply embedded in the fabric of the world since my body has become the battleground of phylogenetic and ontogenetic facts (Merleau-Ponty, 2010). The general and the particular find concrete expression in the future child. And at my terminus, when all situations cease for me, my connection and communion with the world – past, present and future – of others persist, through the life of my child.

This gestalt of conception, gestation and birth is our common experience, the ontological seed of our intercorporeality and intersubjectivity; also of our fundamental responsiveness to the *other*, as we have been that *other* inside a body (Weiss, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty's ontology and especially his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, contain the experience and expression of this gestalt, in his singular language and vision. To him, carnal being is a being of depths, consisting of several leaves or faces and a prototype of Being, 'of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 136). The sensible sentient is now the mother, now the foetus folding in upon each other, touched and touching, both of them a surface and a depth: 'the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life, of making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside' (ibid.: 144). This is a linguistic gesture of our first symbiotic relationship, which contains the paradox of boundlessness (the foetus's suspended state, floating in Being) and boundary (its adherence to the lining of the womb, its enclosure in the amniotic sack, the edge of its skin). This relationship contains also the paradox of life and death in the fact that mother and foetus are both most resilient and most vulnerable during pregnancy and birth.

We come into the world precariously perched between survival and annihilation, both physical and psychic. The boundary that is traversed in the natural occurrence of reproduction is struggle and ambiguity, which constellate the ground of our being and our relations with others.

### **I and Other as Boundary and Ambiguity**

There is no way of living with others which takes away the burden of being myself... there is no 'inner life' that is not a first attempt to relate to another person. In this ambiguous position, which has been forced on us because we have a body and a history... we can never know complete rest. (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 66–7)

'How can I perceive across this body, so to speak,

another's psyche?', Merleau-Ponty asks in 'The child's relations with others' (1964a: 114), and traces the journey of the newborn from the visceral, interoceptive state of sleeping, feeding and excreting to an emergent exteroceptivity (which begins with the mother's breast) and to 'a body which rises towards the world' (1962: 87). This interweaving of depth and surface, the invisible and the visible body, together with a nascent perceptual, spatial and kinaesthetic sense is the corporeal schema, with which the child will grasp the surrounding reality. Merleau-Ponty (2003) calls the corporeal schema 'a lacunary being' and 'the hollow on the inside' (p. 278), which includes both precise and vague regions; through it I in-corporate the world, things and other bodies.

The transfer of corporeal schema results in postural impregnation (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a) with which I take in the other's bodily conduct – gestures, movements, mannerisms – before I have learnt to mimic it. As I do not have a developed visual sense of the other or of my own body I do not distinguish myself from the other; the truths of my body are the truths of the other's body. I live what the other lives, there is an absence of boundary between myself and the other, and this is transitivity, or syncretic sociability (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a; Dillon, 1997; Diprose, 2002). Through it I recognize myself in everything and am able to apprehend others and their emotional atmosphere in a carnal way (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a; Leder, 1990). Intersubjectivity – which is also inter-corporeality – is founded on postural impregnation, transitivity and the transfer of the corporeal schema (Dillon, 1997), all working simultaneously on our surface and our depth.

Our meshing and extending into the other organizes our motor skills such that we can anticipate attitudes and gestures before they have happened in the other or in simultaneity with them. Merleau-Ponty (1964a) links this ability to what he calls sympathy (and what psychotherapy might call empathy, or attunement) in which there is no distinction between myself and the other as I live inside his expressions and he lives inside mine (ibid.). He believes, furthermore, that while this ability in the adult is usually overcome with regards to daily life, it is not overcome in the realm of feelings. When we love we intertwine with another, we 'enter into an undivided situation with another' (ibid.: 154). In jealousy and in cruelty, too, we define ourselves in relation to another; to sense our lack we identify with his fullness, which we are able to taste transitively, in the texture of his experience. This experience is also in part ours. When I hurt you I am hurting myself; I am where you are, lost to myself,

and found. Whether in strife or pleasure, I am always in relationship with you.

The very being of man... is the deepest communion.

To be means to communicate... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another... I cannot manage without another; I cannot become myself without another. (Bakhtin, 1984: 287)

With the development of a visual consciousness arrives the understanding of otherness and distance as an emotional and carnal reality; 'the initial spatial distance grows into a more complex psychic distance' (Dillon, 1997). When I eventually recognize myself in the mirror I not only feel myself here, inside my own body, but see the total image of myself there – a me I have never experienced before. There I stand but here I feel. A dissonance, a hollow emerges between my felt body and my image in the mirror. I am subject and object to myself, and the incorporation of this truth will have a bearing on my life. In time I come to understand that others, too, see me as the mirror captures me; they do not apprehend me from within, as I apprehend myself. A tension arises between my natural ability to access and feel the other through transitivity and my understanding of myself on this side of the other, and of him on that side of myself. Merleau-Ponty notes that 'The acquisition of a specular image... bears not only on our *relations of understanding* but also on our *relations of being*, with the world and with others' (1964a: 137).

My 'body is not in space like things. It inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 5). Through boundary transgressions (postural impregnation, transitivity) corporeal, affective and visual, I learn to negotiate the space that has opened up before me; the other inside of me, the other at a distance; myself in him, myself in the things, myself at a distance. These intertwining and separations I have learnt from my first host, my mother's body. There are no fixed points in space, everything is movement towards, from, around. Our relations with others, throughout our lives, wax and wane in this way because our existence both generalises and particularises everything at which it aims, and cannot ever be finally complete' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 528). Starting from a gamete cell we expand outwards into the world, becoming a member of a family, a language, a community, a historical and cultural moment, a landscape,

an aesthetic idiom. We are singular and anonymous, intimate and detached, unique selves and 'all the names of history' (Nietzsche, in Deleuze, 1985: 146). I am ambiguous precisely because I am caught always between the general and the particular, because I am a temporal creature whose present contains in itself infinite variations of my past, concealed in the folds of my body, which is the concrete expression of my existence – my beating heart, my freedom and my servitude (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

### Flesh and Chiasm as Boundary and Ambiguity

The idea of chiasm, that is: every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 266).

As soon as two glances meet, we are no longer wholly two, and it is hard to remain alone. This exchange realises... a chiasm of two 'destinies', two points of view. Thereby a sort of simultaneous reciprocal limitation occurs. You capture my image, my appearance; I capture yours. You are not me, since you see me and I don't see myself. What I lack is the me that you see. And what you lack is the you I see. (Valery, in Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 231–2)

How do we conquer this lack between us? How do we avoid the Cartesian duality, exemplified by the Sartrean 'look'? Merleau-Ponty's (1964a) response is that we do it through the primacy of perception, which establishes morality because by entering the visual field of the other, I submit to him my most personal experience and my incommunicable solitude. This act in itself opposes scepticism and pessimism; I render myself present to you and to the world through my body, and in perceiving me so do you (ibid.). Merleau-Ponty explains:

The other's gaze transforms me into an object... only if both of us withdraw into the core of our thinking nature, if we both make ourselves into an inhuman gaze, if each of us feels his actions to be not taken up and understood, but observed as if they were an insect (1962: 420).

But if we move, or speak or gesture, then we cease to transcend each other and we are in communion. Merleau-Ponty goes further and asserts that to be 'is to be evident in silence, to be understood implicitly' (1968: 214) because we are all part of the same primordial flesh, which is not matter, mind or substance but 'the formative medium of the object and the subject... the concrete emblem of a general manner of being' (ibid.: 147).

Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh philosophically recreates our first situation. The flesh of the world reinstates us into the womb of the world; we are

suspended, held, taken up by the membrane of the world, as we were once suspended and held in our amniotic sack in our mother's womb. There is no boundary between our body and the world, 'since the world is flesh' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 138). Merleau-Ponty understands this flesh as an element, like earth, fire, wind and water, an 'incarnate principle... an element of Being', which constitutes a cohesion and a visibility that 'prevails over every momentary discordance' (ibid.: 139, 140). This visibility is shared by both the seer and the seen; there is no separation between subject and object but communion and reciprocity (Dillon, 1997).

I am not a stranger to the world I look upon and my vision<sup>3</sup> is a palpation of the world, of things and of others – with my look; but the visible, the flesh, the world, you, look upon me also. I exist within the visible, I emigrate into it, I am 'seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantom, so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 139); we are possessed by the visible and are of it (ibid.). The distance between us and the things themselves – our specular image, the image of the other – is not alienating and divisive, rather, it is the thickness of flesh between the seer and the visible and their means of communication (ibid.).

A year ago I was with a friend in a hospital recovery room; she had just undergone a five-hour surgical procedure and was coming out of sedation. As I stood next to her, I found myself imbibing her trauma – somatic and psychic. I began to lose consciousness, barely made it out of the room and fainted. Despite her semi-sedated state, she had *felt* that something had happened to me. She had felt me walk out the door and collapse; she had felt my presence drain away. When my father was dying, I remember the day after his operation, walking slowly up and down the hospital corridor with him. As I fell into step with him, holding his arm, it was as though he passed, ghost-like, into me. I experienced the shutting down of his body, death's slow colonizing of it, all across and in the depths of my own lived body. I knew then how it felt to be dying slowly and knew what I must do. These are both instances of boundary transgressions, of incorporation, of inter-corporeality, of chiasm, where the flesh of the world, to which I am always bound, binds me also to the other, transfers his depth and surface into my own and my own into his, so that 'I am the other person and he is myself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c: 230) while still, significantly, keeping my own expression and style of being' (ibid.: 1968: 139).

When I speak to you of a landscape, of an experience, of a memory, what I see passes into you, through our intercorporeality, but without leaving me:

an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general, in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 142).

You and I do not coincide, but we intersect, we borrow, we encroach, we are in chiasm (ibid.). I assume segments 'derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them; man is mirror for man' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a: 168). The chiasm is a reversibility (Dillon, 1997) which removes the boundary between the seer and the seen, between the seer and the world which sees.

What are the implications of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh for psychotherapy? How does all the above impact on the way I encounter and sit with clients in the psychotherapeutic space? If I and other are part of the flesh of the world, boundless and bounded only superficially by the duration of our session, the room, the skin boundary, the code of ethics I adhere to, what is the nature of the work we undertake together? What does it look like? Where does it take us? Can it be formulated, measured, researched, analysed? What might be revealed in our chiasmatic relation? People come with pain, suffering, confusion, darkness and terror. I do not always know who the other is, and what extreme might be revealed in our encounters. When we engage in phenomenology, in palpating the world and the other by means of our vision – which is also our viscera – we have to be prepared to allow sinister and dangerous things to show us their naked truth (Levin, 2001), and we must find a way to contain these – in our bodies, with others and in our lives. In our encounter there is potential danger; therapists burn out, clients may access forgotten events that can radically alter the horizon of their existence. Chiasm is not just an intertwining but a crossing out as well, as in the X-shape the word signifies in Greek. Our chiasm might obliterate one or other of us, or those things which brought us together in the first place.

Merleau-Ponty reminds us that 'vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, "exterior", foreign to one another, are yet absolutely together, are "simultaneity"; this is a mystery psychologists handle the way a child handles explosives' (1964a, p. 187). I concur. We prefer to look away from the mystery; we keep optimal distance, a 'professional' attitude. But boundary situations – illness, death, violence – shatter these illusions. Life

demands our response-ability and I think that accepting the paradox of the boundlessness we live within but also of our personal limits enhances our ability to respond.

## Nίκος – a Visitation

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world since the world is flesh?

(Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 138)

I am a sonorous being. (ibid.: 144)

I was going to discuss how Merleau-Ponty's vision of boundary and ambiguity contends with a psychotherapeutic culture of research outcomes and results, which seeks to erase every ambiguity and which imposes boundaries that are null and void when it comes to the truths of our human existence. But now Νίκος has come, and I must tell you about him. He was my closest friend at university – intelligent, gifted and haunted, diagnosed with manic depression, as it was known then, at the age of 19. 'I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 525) describes him perfectly. He had uncanny insight into people, was curious, intense, bold, at one with all things; at other times shy, quiet, trapped in himself. We spent much of our time together, and I was with him through one severely 'manic' episode, which lasted for several weeks. Νίκος took me on long drives, talking in an ecstatic way about everything in his field of vision and existence. He was submerged in the flesh of the world – his car, the sky, surrounding objects, buildings, nature, others, me, the pen he wrote poetry with. He was skinless; he laughed and danced; he hardly slept. Being with him was like swimming in a sea of huge rolling waves – majestic, terrifying, real, exhausting and heartbreaking. We were nineteen. I was alongside him, on the boundary.

Seven years later he hung himself. I was on my way to visit him that day, to surprise him; but I stopped off elsewhere along the way and forgot myself there. What would have happened had I got to him? Would I have found him? Would he have put it off for a day, a week, a month? I wrapped my guilt up in silence. For 22 years I took flowers to his grave but had never mourned him until now.

He is with me as I write this, smiling at me with his radiant blue eyes; he is peaceful and quiet. He has come from our common past into my present and into his unconstituted future, as himself at the age of 19. I am 49 now and I am also 19. Why has he come today, after so many years? How has he crossed Chronos and Mnemosyne, to recover his trace in my heart, his imprint

on my body, his voice on my lips? Where is the boundary between our joint past and this moment, between the space and experience we inhabited then and this space, all mine, now, into which he has appeared? What has he come for? Why am I compelled to tell you about him?

The living present is torn between a past which it takes up and a future which it projects. It is thus of the essence of the thing and of the world to present themselves as 'open', to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, to promise us always 'something else to see'. This is what is sometimes expressed by saying that the thing and the world are mysterious. They are indeed when we do not limit ourselves to their objective aspect, but put them back into the setting of subjectivity. They are even an absolute mystery, not amenable to elucidation... The world... is not an object, for though it has an envelope of objective and determinate attributes, it has also fissures and gaps into which subjectivities slip and lodge themselves, or rather which are those subjectivities themselves. We now understand why things... are not meanings presented to the intelligence, but opaque structures, and why their ultimate significance remains confused. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 388–9)

Do the philosopher's words clarify why Νίκοϋ has come and why I want you to know this? Has he come through a fissure in the world as an expression of boundary and ambiguity? To me he is here and he is real, a part of my life and of this moment. What if a young man like him walked into my consulting room? What would the boundary between us be? The weekly 50 minutes and the fee? And my keeping vigil on his life? Can I be alongside him in that weekly structure? I hear Gilles Deleuze's words urging us to share the moment, to put ourselves in the other's situation, to enter into it. Deleuze wonders if this sharing is sympathy, empathy, or identification, and decides that it is more complex; that we sense 'the implied necessity for a relationship that is neither legal, nor contractual, nor institutional' (1985: 144). What does this relationship look like, how do we manage it, where does it take us? Deleuze suggests that we need to embark together, to row together, which is 'to share something beyond law, contract or institution. It is a period of drifting, of "deterritorialization" (ibid.). Our life is made up of many such moments. We have such moments in therapy – which is also our life – with our clients, where we lose our bearings and enter fogs where all boundaries collapse and there is only ambiguity. Then the ground clears and we return; to embark again, to drift, to row together. Grief teaches us how to see. (Merleau-Ponty, 2010b).

Καλή αντάμωση φίλε μου.


### **Coda: Boundary, Ambiguity, Therapy**

Adult thought... must not masquerade as divine law, but rather should measure itself more honestly, against the darkness and difficulty of human life and without losing sight of the irrational roots of this life. (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: 56–7)

Merleau-Ponty's ontology acknowledges that it is hubris to seek absolute knowledge, clarity and truth. By virtue of our birth, our experience, the fact that we are embodied in a historical and cultural situation, in temporality and fatedness, we are constantly traversing boundaries and we are steeped in ambiguity. This ambiguity also clears a space for us to be and do something *other*; it defies determinacy and grants us a new possibility, a freedom. Yet Merleau-Ponty also warns us – We never get away from our life. We never see our ideas or our freedom face to face.' (1964b: 25)

Given this statement, what is therapy *for* and what can we do in its space? All therapy is body work' (Romanyshyn, 2011: 54), since everything that is revealed in our encounters issues forth from our embodied presence – gesture, language, silence, gaze, inscription; and it is with this full corporeal presence that we are called to respond. If I am forever incapable of living the experience of the scorching the other suffers, the bite of the world as I feel it upon my body is an injury for anyone exposed to it as I am' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 137). It is this bite of the world, common to us all, which I am called to attend to in my clients. A disembodied mind or consciousness cannot help me here, but my body, my viscera – which see, feel, absorb and commune with the world – can. So I incorporate, I embody, I extend my corporeal boundaries, which embrace my historic, cultural, aesthetic and emotional hypostasis; I *live* the experience of the scorching the other suffers. But sometimes the bite of the world is too deep, the injury fatal and then I must find the grace to accept my limits and to incorporate this, too.

Finally, can we consider disorder' or disturbance' as an acute dissonance between our inherent transitivity and the shocking displacement our image in the mirror initially presents? Some of us can navigate these positions with a degree of ease; many of us cannot. Did Νίκοϋ suffer from too much transitivity, too much chiasm interrupted by a too prominent presence of his specular image? Did he see too much, was he *seen* too much? Did the flesh of the world encroach, invade, engulf him?

Or was it that ultimately, none of us could take him up; hold him, as he was, as himself, because that threatened our own precarious existence? At a conference recently a psychologist suggested that boundaries should be shifting but not permeable. Is this possible? Can we have a true encounter with another if our boundaries are impermeable? Are there 'safe' levels of permeability and can they be controlled? How do we *care* for our client and for our self too? I am compelled by Merleau-Ponty's question and want to ask it again, to myself and to you: 'Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world since the world is flesh?' (1968: 138). Does not everything follow from this? 

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#### Notes

1. This paper was first published in the *Journal of The Society for Existential Analysis*, 23 (2), July 2012. It is published here with kind permission of the Society for Existential Analysis.
2. The woman will live out this cycle in her blood and guts, by virtue of her physiology. She is void and vessel and has a *priori* experience of being formed in the void and of forming the void. Man, on the other hand, while formed in the void and containing that experience in his embodied being, cannot form the void within his body, but only through his acts and works. There is much critical literature by feminist writers, philosophers and cultural theorists in which male philosophers, Merleau-Ponty amongst them, have been taken to task for offering a predominantly masculine vision of the lived body. I will not comment on this in this paper as for me, Merleau-Ponty's vision speaks to fundamental aspects of the human condition, irrespective of gender.
3. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of vision, especially as it evolves in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), incorporates more than just what the eye sees; it includes all the senses. It is a perceptual, visceral and psychic attitude of being in the world and a communion with the world.

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