body and image

EXPLORATIONS IN LANDSCAPE PHENOMENOLOGY 2

christopher tilley

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF WAYNE BENNETT

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Christopher Tilley

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2008 by Left Coast Press, Inc.

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Tilley, Christopher Y.
Body and image : explorations in landscape phenomenology 2 / Christopher Tilley ; with assistance of Wayne Bennett.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-59874-313-5 (hardback : alk. paper) —
ISBN 978-1-59874-314-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Megalithic monuments. 2. Architecture, Prehistoric. 3. Petroglyphs. 4. Land settlement patterns, Prehistoric. I. Bennett, Wayne, 1954– II. Title.
GN790.T54 2008
930.1'4—dc22
200804089

ISBN 978–1–59874–314–2 paperback
ISBN 978–1–59874–313–5 hardcover

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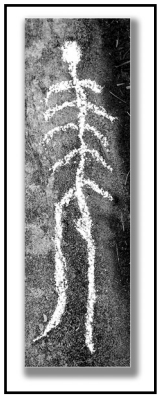

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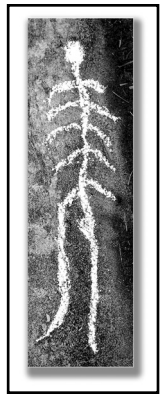

Preface

This is the second book in a trilogy of volumes on landscape phenomenology following on from the first volume, *The Materiality of Stone* (Tilley 2004). In this volume I attempt to explore the relationship between images and bodily experience, developing a kinaesthetic approach to the interpretation of images on rocks in landscapes. The general theoretical and conceptual approach is outlined in Chapter 1. Chapters 2–4 consist of three extended case studies chosen because they represent contrasting periods, societies, economies, and landscapes in prehistoric Europe. Chapter 2 considers Mesolithic imagery from Vingen, western Norway, imagery dominated by the depiction of animals in a foraging society. Chapter 3 discusses the relationship between megalithic architecture and imagery in the context of the middle Neolithic landscape of eastern Ireland. Chapter 4 examines Bronze Age rock imagery from the Norrköping area of eastern middle Sweden (see p. 12 and Figure 3.1 for the location of the study areas in Scandinavia and Ireland). In the concluding chapter some comparative observations are made in relation to the different case studies, together with a series of reflections on what it means to interpret the landscape through phenomenologically walking in it.

This book, like any other, has its own particular biography and trajectory. My interest in Vingen was first stimulated by reading Hallström's (1938) account during the preparation of my book on the Nämforsen rock art locality in Northern Sweden (Tilley 1991). I had to wait for fifteen years before I had the opportunity to visit it and experience the drama of the place. About the same time, an interest in Irish megalithic art was stimulated by taking a field trip of students to Loughcrew and the bend of the Boyne, together with Julian Thomas. The idea of conducting fieldwork in the Norrköping area of middle eastern Sweden was by comparison recent, an interest generated by visiting some of the localities during the summer of 2001 when I was conducting ethnographic research on domestic gardens in Sweden. The study of the Norrköping landscape was the first to be undertaken, during the summer of 2003. This was subsequently written up as a draft chapter in the winter of 2003–04. Fieldwork in Ireland was conducted during the spring of 2004 following exploratory visits during the summer of 2003, but only finally written up

The location of the Norrköping and Vingen rock carving localities in Scandinavia. The Irish localities studied are shown on Figure 3.1.

during the summer of 2006. Fieldwork was undertaken at Vingen during June 2005 and subsequently written up that summer. The final versions of Chapters 1 and 5 were written during the summer and autumn of 2006 and the spring of 2007 while at the same time revising the drafts of Chapters 2–4.

A small part of Chapter 1 was initially presented at a conference on 'cognition and signification in northern landscapes' organized by Lars Forsberg and Eva

Walderhaug, held at the University of Bergen in November 2004. Chapter 4 was first presented as part of a series of lectures on the topic of phenomenology and landscape held at the University of Kalmar, Sweden, in March 2005. A few of the observations made at Newgrange in Chapter 3 were presented at a conference, 'Cult in Context', held at Magdalen College, Cambridge, organized by David Barrowclough, Caroline Malone, and Simon Stoddart in December 2006. Part of the concluding Chapter 5 was presented at a research seminar in the College de France, Paris, 'The ecology of perception and the aesthetics of landscape', organized by Nicolas Ellison in March 2007. I am grateful for the comments I received on all these occasions.

All the periods of fieldwork were extremely intensive. The summer light at Vingen was such that it was even possible to work long after midnight. Time not dedicated to studying the images themselves in the field was often spent reflecting on, writing down, and analysing fieldwork experiences, providing new ideas and further impetus for the next day's work. A book inevitably changes and develops in focus as it goes along. The idea for a comparative analysis of visual imagery in the landscape developed out of the fieldwork conducted during 2001 in the Simrishamn area of southeast Sweden, published in *The Materiality of Stone*, as discussed in Chapter 1; but it was only during the last period of fieldwork on which the book is based, at Vingen, that I 'discovered' (it rather forced itself on me!) the significance of the weather—hence the absence of much substantive discussions of this in relation to the Swedish and Irish images. The experience of the Vingen rock carving area was particularly powerful, not only because of the drama of the place, but as a result of actually living and sleeping among the carvings, completely cut off from the outside world. As usual, I am indebted to Wayne Bennett, who provided enormous help, support, enthusiasm, critical, and interpretive comment throughout the fieldwork periods and then also prepared all the illustrations.

I am most grateful to Gro Mandt and Trond Lødøen for inviting us to Vingen and sharing their knowledge of it. On the visit to study the rock carvings, Trond and Sigrid Gunderson provided much needed shelter and hospitality. They introduced us to the different parts of the rock carving area over a period of several days. They also helped locate individual panels on Vingeneset, Urane, and Bak Vehammaren which would otherwise have proved quite impossible to find. Gro and Trond have also kindly provided me with copies of the unpublished documentation, to appear in their forthcoming book, of the rocks at Hardbakken, Teigen, and Leitet, which has been of great help in writing this account. They also generously provided useful comments on a draft of Chapter 2 for which I am most grateful. Clare Tuffy, manager of the Newgrange Visitor Centre, was kind enough to facilitate unrestricted access to the interiors of Newgrange, Dowth, and Knowth. Mike Rowlands provided useful criticism of a draft of Chapter 1, and Muiris O'Sullivan was kind enough to read through and comment on a draft of Chapter 3. I also want to acknowledge the useful comments of two referees who chose not to remain anonymous: Cornelius Holtorf and Andrew Jones. I have not followed all their

advice, but I am most most grateful for it. The inadequacies, of course, remain my own. I also want to thank the publisher, Mitch Allen, for his enthusiastic support for the book and the wider project of which it forms a part.

Christopher Tilley
London, 2008

Chapter One

BODY AND IMAGE

A Phenomenological Perspective

'Our perception being a part of things, things participate in the nature of our perception' (*Bergson* 1991: 182).

'The first drawing on a cave wall founded a tradition only because it was the recipient of another: that of perception' (*Merleau-Ponty* 1973: 83).

"What do pictures *really* want?' (*J. Mitchell* 1996).

Introduction

A few years ago I undertook a study of the rock carvings in the Simrishamn area of southeast Sweden. One of the major places with rock carvings, Simris 19 is today a sadly marooned block, quarried away on two sides and cut off from the beach by a modern road. Opposite the carved rock one finds a small car park and a picnic area. A large 'hällristning' sign points toward the rock with the carvings. Because of its accessibility there were a fair number of visitors to the site, and

because I had a clipboard, scrolls of documentation, and must have looked as if I knew something about the carvings, people would ask me how old they were and what they meant. The first question was easy, the latter much more difficult, since this was precisely what I was attempting to find out! Couples would arrive, or family groups, stay for about ten or fifteen minutes, and then drive off. After a morning I became a little irritated by the constant interruptions to my work and by my new status as unofficial guide who, quite remarkably, spoke broken Swedish with an amusingly thick English accent. Better, I thought, to leave the rock when people came and wait until they went away. This might save a good deal of time.

But my study of the Simrishamn carvings was only partly concerned with what the images might mean. I wanted to experiment with a phenomenologically informed kinaesthetic approach to the rock art. In other words, I was interested in what effects the carvings themselves had on my body as someone looking at them: What did I have to do to see the carvings? How did I have to move? How did the qualities of the stone itself (colour, smoothness, presence or absence of cracks, surface morphology, size, and the like) affect my perception and relate to the positioning of the carvings? How might the location of the rock in the landscape affect my perception of it in relation to its surroundings? These questions were not in any direct way related to the meaning of the images at all. They were concerned with what the rock and its carvings were doing to me: their bodily or kinaesthetic influence on the way I moved and what I perceived.

In relation to Simris 19, I rapidly realized that it was not possible to see the carvings in any way that I might wish, or decide. If I wanted to see them closely, I was forced to move about the rock in a particular manner and in a particular sequence. The carvings were exerting their own power and influence in relation to what I saw and from where I saw it, and how I saw it. I was no longer a free agent who could simply move about and see whatever images I liked from wherever I liked. There was a dialectic at work between the rock itself, and its landscape location, and the positioning of the images carved on it. Even if one had no clue at all about what the images meant, it was still possible to describe bodily movement in relation to them. Furthermore, might not these patterns of bodily movement, dictated by the images themselves, be a fundamental part of the significance of the rock art? Might it not just be an arbitrary intellectual presupposition that meaning is somehow primary in the study of rock art?

Moving off the Simris 19 rock when people arrived, I decided to learn something from watching them observing the carvings. What did they do? What did they look at? How did they move? Where did they go? Were my own bodily movements simply a fickle personal engagement no doubt encouraged and helped by the fact that I had detailed plans of the carvings whereas they did not? People would approach from across the road. They would then stand below the rock and look across at the images on it. Although the total carved area is small enough for most of the images to be seen at once and from off the rock, those farther away are indistinct and difficult to make out. Furthermore, from any particular perspective many of the iconic images—the boats and the axes, and the human figures—appear upside down, while others are

right side up. In relation to the perceiving body, this is a bit like displaying a painting upside down on the wall, or even hanging it at an angle—intensely irritating!

In order to see the images more clearly, people would climb onto the rock and walk *within* the image fields. In so doing, their feet were keeping the rock glassy and shiny. Other rocks with carvings in the area, not now visited, are covered with lichen and vegetation and browned by soil stains. They have lost some of their important experiential qualities. People would typically move around the groups of images in a circular fashion: clockwise or counterclockwise from bottom to top. They would also move around the sides of different groups of images in order to see them from different perspectives. Images that were the wrong way up from one angle righted themselves from another. What I had experienced, they were experiencing. The images themselves were orchestrating a spatial dance: bodies were moving in relation to them. People rarely stood still for any length of time but were moving and twirling and adopting different positions: generally looking down, but sometimes crouching or with their heads to one side, and sometimes it was obviously necessary to touch the carvings as well as to look at them. So these images had a direct influence, agency, and power in themselves: they set people in choreographed motion around them. And this force of the image was quite independent of verbal exegesis—of talking about meaning—although the movement often promoted talk of a rather different kind: 'Oh, look! There's a man holding a huge axe. I didn't see him from over there!' The main difference between my experience of the carvings and those of other visitors was a matter of knowledge. Having a plan, I knew what I was supposed to be seeing (for anyone unfamiliar with the study of prehistoric rock art, it has to be pointed out that at the wrong time of day and in the wrong kind of light it is often impossible to see anything on a rock that is known to be covered with images, such are the effects of weathering over thousands of years) and where it was, and therefore could see more on different areas of the rock. As a result, my movements were more complexly choreographed, or influenced by the images, and their relationships to each other. But the essentials were the same. The images on the Simris 19 rock prompted a 'placial' (I prefer to use this word to the much more abstract and distanced term 'spatial') dance around distinct groups of carvings within the overall image field occupied by all the carvings. By means of this extended anecdote I hope to have introduced the reader to some of the essential elements and important differences between iconographic and kinaesthetic approaches to rock art. I now want to discuss this in a more formal way.

The Iconographic versus the Kinaesthetic

I use the term 'iconographic' as a shorthand term to refer to the entire tradition of interpreting prehistoric rock art from its nineteenth-century origins to the present day. This approach to rock art has, of course, radically altered over the years, in tandem with wider intellectual trends within archaeological research. In the context of Scandinavian rock art research addressed in Chapters 2 and 4 (for a discussion of research

on Irish megalithic art, see Chapter 3), the manner in which the images have been interpreted has altered in relation to the differing perspectives and intellectual agendas of 'traditional', 'new' or functionalist, and 'post-processual' or interpretive archaeology (Mandt 1995). Early work on the southern Scandinavian material attempted to find in it an entire pantheon of Nordic gods and related the carvings to the Nordic sagas. For Almgren (1927) the southern Scandinavian carvings were to be related to fertility cults and sun symbolism in the context of an agricultural economy. The material from northern Scandinavia, mainly depicting game animals, was alternatively understood in terms of hunting magic (Gjessing 1932; Hallström 1938), functionalist ideas that continued to be employed and refined during the 1960s and 1970s in broad comparative analyses (e.g., Hagen 1976; Malmer 1981). 'Post-processual' approaches have, alternatively, rigorously pursued a linguistic analogy in which the carvings can be read as texts and as sign systems (e.g., Nordbladh 1980; Tilley 1991). Gender differences and relations and transformative human states have been read into the carvings (e.g., Yates 1993; Tilley 1999; Mandt 2001; Hauptman Wahlgren 2002), and they have been related to totemic systems of social classification and structures of social and political power (Tilley 1991), shamanism (e.g., Helskog 1987; Devlet 2001; Viste 2003), social geographies (e.g., Bertilsson 1987; Mandt 1991), symbolic and experiential qualities of the landscape (e.g., Helskog 1999; Bradley 2000; Goldhahn 2002; Hauptman Wahlgren 2002), or various combinations of all of these. Such a list could go on and on. Despite all these changes, and the recent blossoming of different alternative approaches in a healthy theoretical pluralism (Mandt 1995; Hauptman Wahlgren 2000), there has remained a core concern subscribed to implicitly, and more usually explicitly, by all rock art researchers. The fundamental question and the foundation for all this research has always been: What does it mean? This, whatever the particular answers given or types of analyses undertaken, has been the primary motivation for rock art research, providing both the driving force and the intellectual motivation. Even if the question of meaning has been frequently sidestepped, in favour of an obsession with chronology in older traditional and functionalist studies, it still provided, and provides, the principal justification for empirical documentation: unless and until we have documented this art as precisely and comprehensively as possible, we cannot begin to understand what it means.

The hoped-for outcome of an iconographic approach is to lead us to a better understanding of the images as bearers of meaning, images that necessarily require decoding and interpretation. The potential outcome of a kinaesthetic approach is to tell us something different: about the manner in which the bodily postures and motions of people changed or remained the same in relation to the imagery and the manner in which it was encountered on different rocks.

Iconographic approaches are usually primarily cognitive in nature. They grant primacy to the human mind as a producer of the meaning of the images through sensory perception. It is the mind that responds to that which is seen in a disembodied way. Structuralist studies and, in particular, most semiotic perspectives have nothing to tell us about the role of the body in perception. Of course, they do under-

score the structuring and structured qualities of the human mind which produces, or decodes, and thinks through the images. Kinaesthetic approaches, by contrast, stress the role of the carnal human body: perception is regarded as being both afforded and constrained by the sensuous human body. The general claim is that the manner in which we perceive, and therefore relate to visual imagery, is fundamentally related to the kinds of bodies we have. The body both limits and constrains, and enables us to perceive and react to imagery in specific embodied ways.

In iconographic approaches the rock art itself becomes ultimately superficial because it always represents something else, something more fundamental than itself. So, in studying images, we might perhaps hope to reclaim the intentions of the artist. It is these that are primary, and the task is to recover these from their material manifestations. Or the art may be held to be a visual representation of underlying structuring principles generating social practices. These are fundamental, and the aim of analysis is to go beyond the superficiality of the visual image to recover the underlying system. Alternatively, various styles of rock art may be held to objectify or represent particular cosmologies or mythological systems or rites. Again these are primary. The images themselves are simply manifestations of something deeper and more fundamental, something that might also be expressed in words or actions, or in structured systems of ceremonial beliefs and practices. What is common to all iconographic approaches is that they require us to go beyond and beneath the image to explain its meaning. The image itself is never enough. It is a material manifestation of something believed to be much deeper and more fundamental. What is curious about this approach, from a kinaesthetic perspective, is that the power of visual imagery ultimately becomes *dematerialised* because it is simply an opaque representation of something else: individual intentions, societal culture and values, history, myths and cosmologies, gender relations, or politics and power.

The intellectual background to the traditional iconographic approach to rock art is mainly derived from art historical analysis and developments in that field, and more widely, the analysis of visual culture heavily influenced since the 1970s by linguistics and a textual model, together with limited use of ethnographic analogies. As mentioned earlier, it has been transferred by archaeologists to the study of rock art in one form or another in terms of discussions of genres and styles, traditions and historical horizons, or more recently in the form of various structuralist and semiotic and post-structuralist approaches. It might be suggested that this is the wrong starting point to consider rock art because it ignores the very materiality of the medium, pretending that stone is just another form of canvas or page to be written on.

In the history of rock art research, the heavy influence of the art historical tradition in which we attempt to decode meaning, a language of pictorial representation, has had two striking and deleterious effects. First, the landscape context of rock carvings has hardly been discussed, or analyzed at all, in relation to the art. It has been peculiarly treated like a backdrop, in many ways equivalent in significance to the whitewashed walls of an art gallery in which paintings are displayed. Second, the material medium of the rock has been reduced in publications documenting the carvings

to a white, two-dimensional space. Rock, being regarded as 'natural' rather than 'cultural', has been effectively eliminated from the documentation. Only the images themselves are regarded as significant. The rock itself is only an interpretive worry: Might the cupmark be simply a hollow caused by erosion? Is this line a crack? Have carvings differentially eroded away? With all the emphasis put on the images themselves, the rock carvings become decontextualised, both from their own landscapes and even from the rocks on which they are found. They become pure images. Because rock carvings have been represented as images on a two-dimensional surface, they become understood and thought of simply as surreal, disembodied images, rather than a physical form and presence on a rock at a particular place and in a particular landscape. It is then perhaps not so surprising that rock art has proved so difficult to understand: half the information has usually been stripped away in the process of documentation before the analysis of that which is left on paper even begins. From a kinaesthetic approach, the material medium—that is, the rock and its landscape context—is as fundamental in understanding the art as the imagery itself. Indeed, the claim is that one cannot be understood except in relation to the other. Thus, rock art is a relational nexus of images, material qualities of rocks, and landscapes.

This chapter attempts to develop such a kinaesthetic perspective on visual imagery. It suggests that a truly phenomenological study of imagery is grounded in the kinaesthetics of bodily movement. It explores the manner in which imagery impacts on and through the body and is understood through the medium of the relationship of the body to the phenomenal world within which it is enveloped. It suggests that an inappropriate 'gallery view' of imagery, the dominant perspective of the art historian until very recently, has led us astray in the study of prehistoric rock art (and, indeed, of other non-mobiliary forms of 'classical' art such as the paintings in the Sistine Chapel or contemporary earthworks, environmental art, and performance and body art, which have a fundamental carnal as opposed to purely cognitive significance). I argue that imagery works first and foremost through the flesh to influence the embodied mind. In this process cognition is secondary rather than primary. When the question of meaning arises, it works its way through and is distributed in relation to the plural kinaesthetic motions of the sensing and sensed body. What the body does in relation to imagery, its motions, its postures, how that imagery is sensed through the fingers or the ear or the nose, as much as through the organ of the eye, actively constitutes the mute significance of imagery which to have its kinaesthetic impact does not automatically require translation into either thoughts or meanings. The kinaesthetic significance of imagery is thus visceral. It works through the muscles and ligaments, through physical actions and postures which provide affordances for the perceptual apparatus of the body in relation to which meaning may be grafted on, or attached. Meaning is derived from and through the flesh, not a cognitive precipitate of the mind without a body, or a body without organs. However, to pretend that a kinaesthetic approach on its own is all that is required to study rock art would be little more than an exercise in empty rhetoric. There needs to be something more, and this, I argue, is a rejuvenated form of 'phe-

nomenological semiotics' approached through the prism of a theory of metaphor and linked to sensory perception in the broadest sense.

The text attempts to develop this general argument for a kinaesthetics of rock art through a series of critical reflections on the work of key thinkers in phenomenological philosophy and anthropological approaches to art, material, and visual culture. I realise that for some readers, especially those with a pragmatic and empirical disposition, much, if not all, of this discussion will appear useless and irrelevant. I, on the other hand, feel it to be both necessary and relevant to develop the position I am advocating within a wider historical, philosophical, theoretical, and conceptual context. The argument begins with a brief discussion of ideas first outlined in Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (Bergson [1896] 1991), in which some key aspects of a phenomenological and kinaesthetic approach to images can be found. This serves as an introduction to a more detailed consideration of Merleau-Ponty's studies of art and aesthetics (collected together in Johnson 1993) and his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1973). I then critically consider 'agency' theories of art currently fashionable in anthropology, principally through the work of Gell (1998; 1999). This leads to the development of a kinaesthetic, as opposed to a cognitive, understanding of the significance of imagery. Finally, the link between a kinaesthetic approach and a traditional 'iconographic' perspective concerned with meaning is explored through the notion of a phenomenological semiotics.

Body, Image, and Memory in Bergson

Bergson's contemporary significance is that he helped to direct philosophical inquiry back to the body, rejecting the dualism of materialism on the one hand—stressing the physical realities of things (and the body as a thing)—and idealist approaches on the other—putting all the emphasis on the mind and, most crucially, on perception as being a product of the operation of that mind which has no bodily basis. The outcome of such dualistic thought is to oppose an inert and objective 'outside' world inhabited by the body and a living heterogeneous and subjective 'inside' world of the mind, inevitably leading to discussions of the reality or ideality of the sensory perception and recognition of images in the external world. Do we see the 'real thing' or only a 'cognised image of that thing'? Do the things that we perceive exist in themselves or only in our minds?

For Bergson, the carnal body mediates these dualities; it provides the ground for all perception. The problem with standard views of perception, either materialist or idealist, is that perception is regarded as entirely a cognitive act which either reflects the way things really appear in the world or produces a representation of them. The most significant point about Bergson's conceptualisation of the body is that it is a body in action, a moving body rather than the frozen or static body of the materialist (or empiricist), or idealist, gazing at the world. The moving body experiences a flux of sensations in time, linking matter to memory. That which we perceive is intimately linked to the manner in which we encounter and remember the world through ambient

movement in it, and as part of it. The body in motion is always betwixt and between, transitional. Following a path means not being present in a position, but always passing through. Movement relates to a reality that is very different from a divisible and measurable empiricist 'space' and an abstracted spatialised and measurable time in which past and present become a dynamic unity and perception is inhabited by temporality. This means that the body itself has to be put at the centre of analysis:

> As my body moves in space, all the other images vary, while that image, my body, remains invariable. I must, therefore, make it a centre, to which I refer all the other images. My belief in an external world does not come from, cannot come, from the fact that I project outside myself sensations that are unextended. . . . *My body* is that which stands out at the centre of these perceptions; *my personality* is the being to which these actions must be referred. (Bergson 1991: 46–47, hereafter *MM*)

The moving body is not for Bergson distinct from 'personality'—it is that person. It provides perceptions that are also recollections. Memories consist of images that may either be recalled in the mind (voluntary memories) or are a product of an inscribed corporeality, habits that accumulate in the movement of that body (involuntary memories) (*MM*: 81–82). The former are like pictures in the mind; the latter require no visualisation. Bodily memory, made up of the 'sensori-motor systems organized by habit, is then a quasi-instantaneous memory to which the true memory of the past serves as base' (*MM*: 152). Voluntary or bodily memories are thus not just visual but corporeal, involving the full human range of sensory perception from sight to sound to taste to touch to smell. There is a 'mental ear' as much as a 'mental sight', an auditory 'image' as much as a visual 'image' registered in the body (*MM*: 129). The general tendency is for corporeal memory to take over from voluntary memory in familiar surroundings. In a town unknown to me, I halt at different street corners, deciding where to go. Movement is broken and discontinuous. Later, after a 'prolonged sojourn in the town, I shall go about it mechanically, without having any distinct perception of the objects which I am passing' (*MM*: 93). Perception is an action of the body, and pure perception is a recording of sensations brought about by objects that are external to the mind. But perception is never a mere contact of the mind with an object in the present; it is replete with memory images 'which complete it as they interpret it' (*MM*: 133) so, and as a consequence of this, 'to *picture* is not to *remember*' (*MM*: 135). The 'present' of the self always has one foot in the past and another in the future, because the present conjoins sensations or perceptions and movements:

> My actual sensations occupy definite portions of the surface of my body; pure memory, on the other hand, interests no part of my body. No doubt, it will beget sensations as it materializes, but at that very moment it will cease to be a memory and pass into the state of a present thing, something actually lived. (*MM*: 139)

So, through the perceiving and moving body, past and present interpenetrate each other. Perception draws the past into the present and reworks it; sense and sig-

nificance form part of each other through their embodied mediation. Memory may consist of sensory 'images' produced in the mind or worked through habitually in the movements of the body which remembers itself without sensory images. The self is a combination of perception and memory, always reworking embodied perception in a creative and generative process, creating at any particular moment a new self in relation to the old selves that preceded it. Merleau-Ponty comments:

> He does not at all say that things are, in the restrictive sense, images, mental or otherwise—he says that their fullness under my regard is such that it is as if my vision took place *in them* rather than in myself. . . . Never before had anyone established this circuit between being and myself, which has the result that being is 'for me,' the spectator, but that in return the spectator is 'for being'. (Merleau-Ponty 1962a: 138)

In other words, perception involves immersion in a world of duration and simultaneity, which constitutes the self. Our perceptive being is brought about through our involvement in a world of things that participate in the character of our perception. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology expands and develops aspects of Bergson's conceptualisation of the body in relation to matter and memory, and it is perhaps no coincidence that he was appointed to the same chair of philosophy that Bergson occupied in Paris.

The Fleshy Image: Merleau-Ponty

Merleau-Ponty specifically attempted to develop a genuinely phenomenological perspective on imagery through a consideration of the art of painting. In so doing, he regarded painting as philosophy in action. By thinking through what painters actually do in their practice, one could develop a theory of the embodied significance of imagery. Thus, he did not apply a ready-made theory of imagery in order to understand paintings, but rather built up that theory from a study of the relationship between painters and that which they actually produced. In other words, Merleau-Ponty attempted to construct a thoroughly materialist rather than idealist perspective, and this is the enormous virtue of his effort. His dual interest was both in the images themselves and the processes by means of which those images emerged in paint on canvas through the technique of the painter. What is at stake here is the relationship between the image and reality, that which is beyond and outside the picture itself.

In 'Cézanne's Doubt'(Merleau-Ponty 1993a; hereafter CD) this is explored in relation to Cézanne's attempt to paint what he actually saw rather than follow the Renaissance rules of linear perspective which could only provide a mathematically inspired illusion of reality. While the Renaissance artists created pictures according to rules of outline, composition, and the distribution of light, Cézanne wanted to capture 'nature', the world outside on the canvas: 'It took him one hundred working sessions for a still life, one-hundred fifty sittings for a portrait' (CD: 59), and he still was not satisfied with the result. The 'suicidal' attempt, according to one contemporary critic, to represent reality while abandoning the very means for doing

so (linear perspective, attention to composition, outline, light, and shadow) virtually destroyed him and his faith in what he was able to produce. What others saw in his paintings was not 'nature' but distortion. Cézanne's incessant attempt to capture the reality of the distant mountain in his paintings always finally failed. In the end, and as he grew old, he wondered whether he had trouble with his eyes.

Empiricist perspectives on perception, never failing to imply that they represented a truth, had long distinguished between primary and secondary aspects. For Locke the primary aspects of perception were visual, mathematical, and spatial—things that could be measured. Point, line, plane, and ratio were therefore of primary significance in painting. Secondary aspects of perception were 'subjective' and therefore insignificant (colour, sound, odour, touch, taste). But to Cézanne's 'innocent' painterly eye, colour was absolutely fundamental to both the world he tried to paint and visual sensation. The significance of things resided as much in the colours they possessed as in their forms. One could not be understood or represented apart from the other. Cézanne did not want to separate thought from feeling, the apparent stability of things seen from the shifting manner in which they appear (CD: 63). He understood that what we actually perceive is neither geometric nor photographic. Objects that are close to us appear smaller, those farther away, bigger than in a photograph. The contour of an object bounded by a line has nothing to do with the visible world (lines do not bound mountains) and everything to do with a geometric perspective: 'to trace just a single outline sacrifices depth—that is, the dimension in which the thing is presented not as spread out before us but as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves. . . . The outline should be a result of colours if the world is to be given its true density' (CD: 65). This is precisely why Cézanne paid so much attention to colour: the colours on the palette, a material medium, could be articulated so as to provide an echo of the world. Cézanne's concern with colour was far more than a concern with the visual. He was also trying to portray the depth, smoothness, softness, and hardness of objects and even claimed one could see their odour (CD: 65). He wanted to capture the manner in which the world emerged through colour. In his landscape paintings he was as much interested in their geological foundations and the manner in which they emerged on the surface. The landscape 'thinks itself in me' . . . and 'I am its consciousness', he would say (CD: 67).

From a phenomenological perspective, what we witness here is Cézanne's immersion in that which he was painting. It was part of him, and he was part of it. In other words, subject and object are mutually constitutive. There is a clear bracketing of prejudicial assumptions with regard to what is primary versus secondary in human experience, and a rejection of rules for 'correct' representation and perspective based on such assumptions. Renaissance perspective painting is the visible manifestation of scientism and technological reductionism. Cézanne reverses the terms of the debate, and colour becomes primary as a means of depicting the density and textures of things and revealing them in their emotional intensity. Perception arises not from a disembodied mind but from a lived relation and bodily presence in the world. Both the painter and the philosopher share the same problem: how to interpret and express

through the medium of paint, or words, the observation of lived experience. Cézanne fuses himself with 'nature' to reconstruct a view of the world from a lived perspective, a pre-scientific perception of the visible, which is neither a mimetic duplication of the form in which that world actually exists (what he sees) nor solely the product of his subjective imaginative expression (what he thinks). These are all fundamental aspects of a phenomenological approach to visual imagery.

Merleau-Ponty develops these perspectives further in 'Eye and Mind' (Merleau-Ponty 1993b; hereafter EM), his last published work prior to his sudden death. In this, and in his unfinished text *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1973), he develops a new ontology of experience articulated in relation to the union of the visible and invisible in human experience. Again painting provides a key to a new understanding, but here Merleau-Ponty is less concerned with the 'worldly' landscapes of Cézanne than in the abstractions of Klee and the lapidary remark that became his credo: 'Art does not represent the visible; rather it makes visible' (Foster et al. 2004: 141). Basic colour terms such as 'red' are merely abstractions in comparison with the *precise* red of the woollen garment or the metallic surface. The precise red of the thing concretises a field of visibility; it summons up a hidden depth of the thing uniting the visible with the invisible; the sensible thing captures the invisible in the visible (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 132). The invisible provides a depth and richness to the visible world. Imagery brings forth the invisible depth of the world and, however 'realistic', is always a translation, simply because a grape on canvas, even in the most figurative style of painting, is not like the grape itself. In this respect, differences between figurative imagery and nonfigurative imagery, 'classical' or 'modern' art, is undermined. Neither captures reality, but both are similarly mediated through the body of the subject; they involve a relationship between his or her being and the sensible world (EM: 127). The eye of the painter is a 'thinking eye', an embodied eye. Painting is a celebration of the enigma of visibility. It gives visible existence to what profane or ordinary thought believes to be invisible. A mind cannot paint, or sculpt—the body does (EM: 123). The body intertwines vision and movement, sight and touch, and sight is like touch:

> My body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the "other side" of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. (EM: 124).

The body in the world, with its bilateral symmetry, vertical axis, back and front, is simultaneously an object and a subject, a thing among things, and a subject immersed in relation to things, sensing and sensed. While painters look at the world, the world looks at them; the relations are reversible. Merleau-Ponty reports the comments of Klee: 'In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt the trees were looking at me' (EM: 129). Herein resides Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of vision in this thesis of perceptual interchange or reversibility. The painter looks and he is in turn looked at, and this exter-

nal gaze has a profound effect on the manner in which that vision is made visible within the imagery. In other words, the painter's vision is indebted to the mute powers or visibility of the sensible. It does not take place in isolation. There is an important relation of reciprocity at work between the flesh of the painter and the flesh of the world in which he or she is immersed (Merleau-Ponty 1973: Chapter 4):

> Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting scrambles all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings. (EM: 130)

Through depth, space, and colour, the painter represents the visible, and this does not necessarily require any form of iconic or figurative resemblance. One analogy Merleau-Ponty gives is looking at the tiled bottom of a swimming pool. We do not see it *despite* the ripples of the water and the reflections. We see it through them, through the 'distortions' and ripples of sunlight, the 'aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element' (EM: 142) which are fundamental to the visual experience. It is both specific and placial, related to space and time, materialised, a depth experience of embodied vision, a mixture of the visible and the invisible and the inherent visibility of the invisible in all things. In attempting to describe visual experience through material media, the artist's vision is touched by the world just as his or her vision touches it. A line on a painting does not represent that which is visible in the world; it rather renders its visibility. Klee wanted to 'let a line muse': 'the beginning of the line's path establishes or installs a certain level or mode of the linear, a certain manner for the line to be and to make itself a line, "to go line"' (EM: 143).

Merleau-Ponty, despite emphasizing the synaesthetic nature of human experience throughout his work, involving an intertwining of all the body senses, gives a particular power and importance to vision. An overriding concern and privileging of the visual is manifested in the attention he pays to the visual arts, and vision in general, while ignoring music or cooking and paying rather little attention to odour and sound. In his later work, visual perception provides a new way of thinking through and understanding embodied and fleshy carnal perception in general. It is interesting in this respect to note that in his analysis, the sensation of touch provides the key metaphor for understanding vision, and vision is itself understood through employing the metaphor of flesh. The reversibility thesis is first introduced by considering touch (Merleau-Ponty 1962b: 123; cf. Merleau-Ponty 1973: 133), the manner in which my right hand touches my left hand and is simultaneously touched by it, and then extended to objects: I touch a thing and it touches me back. This provides the model for visual 'touch' or the manner in which the world touches us even when it is beyond the reach of the body. Touch provides three distinct kinds of experiences: encountering the sleek or the smooth versus the rough; touching a thing and being touched by it; and touching one's own body where subjective and objective experiences cannot be disentangled, as the body is both subject and object (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 133–34). In an analogous way, vision occurs in the movement of the eyes in relation to the visible world, being seen by that world, and the eyes seeing themselves seeing in the mirror. So touch and vision involve the same sets of embodied relations between the sub-

ject and the world—but what of odour, sound, and taste? The general reversibility thesis can easily be extended in relation to auditory experience: we can speak and hear the vibrations of ourselves speaking in our throats in a relation of interiority; we can hear the world outside and it can hear us; we can smell and be smelled, smell ourselves smelling. Beyond this we can see ourselves smelling and touching and anticipate the taste of things before they enter our mouths. Taste is dependent, in part, on touch. All aspects of carnal experience are thoroughly intertwined, inseparable from one another. Sensory experience is a totality.

For Merleau-Ponty, painting is grounded in a visual metaphysics and in an ontological understanding of the human subject as seeing and being seen. In so doing, he raises the invisible to the same ontological status as the visible. An anonymous visual 'flesh' of the world grounds subject and object, seer and seen, body and mind:

> We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body. . . . Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? . . . The world seen is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelops it nor is enveloped by it indefinitely. The superficial pellicle of the visible is only for my vision and for my body. But the depth beneath this surface contains my body and hence contains my vision. My body as a visual thing is contained within the full spectacle. (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 138)

This passage says it all: the body as seer and seen is embraced within a field of vision beyond and outside the self, anonymous, all encompassing, in which everything is constituted, a field of worldly visuality that can see the subject from every point of view while he or she has a single, if shifting, visual field within the generalised visuality of the world. The binding visual 'flesh' of the world is neither opaque nor transparent; it resides in plays of light and shadow, being and becoming. My vision is an exemplar of a universal visuality existing prior to my being. This visuality is mediational, and it completely explodes any binary opposition between 'subject' and 'object'. Painting (understood as an expression of phenomenological observational principles) does not seek to represent things as things but rather seeks to express their carnal essences or the properties (invisible depths) that make them things in the first place. It is not about mimetic imitation, an attempt to produce an exact copy of the world. Vision is presence in absence: we look at things in the world and become fused with them. We become part of them and they become part of us. The painter's expression of this world, his or her particular interpretive style, is an operation of his or her body, a worldly event. However, in comparison with language, it only produces a 'voice of silence', a radically different mode of signification (Merleau-Ponty 1993c). Cézanne performed phenomenological analysis of the world through the medium of paint, while Merleau-Ponty himself uses 'another less heavy more transparent body'—namely, language (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 153). One is not superior or inferior to the other. They remain incommensurable domains,

alternative expressive mediums for thinking through perceptual experience of that world. For Merleau-Ponty, vision was clearly the 'noblest of the senses'. It is a fleshy, all-encompassing medium within which the subject observer is immersed. None of the other senses are considered in this way, although to do so would fully embrace their synaesthetic entanglement. Jay's (1993) argument that Merleau-Ponty's perspective is part of a general trend towards a suspicion or 'denigration of vision' in twentieth-century French thought seems to be entirely unfounded. Vision for Merleau-Ponty was co-present with the lived world. Merleau-Ponty provides for us a foundational perspective for the phenomenological understanding of the visual, which will now be explored in relation to Gell.

GELL: IMAGES AS PERSONS

Gell (1992; 1998) argues that much of the anthropological tradition of thinking about art fails to engage with what is really important, the specificity and efficacy of art as a material medium that does something as opposed to being simply considered a bearer of meaning. Gell's book *Art and Agency,* subtitled, 'An Anthropological Theory' (Gell 1998), could equally well be understood as 'a phenomenological theory' of the significance of visual forms. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that there is only one passing mention of the work of Merleau-Ponty in a discussion of Malekulan sand drawings (Gell 1998: 95), and his name does not even appear in the book's references. Yet he informs us that Merleau-Ponty's (1962b) *The Phenomenology of Perception* was one of a few books he took with him to provide inspiration during his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea (Gell 1999: 6), and he cites from it elsewhere in a discussion of language (Gell 1995). He probably knew the major themes of this book inside out, and his work is perhaps best understood as phenomenology under another name, that name being anthropology.

The general approach taken in *Art and Agency* elaborates on ideas first published in a paper on the 'enchantment of technology' (Gell 1992), in which he sets out a captivating thesis with characteristic wit and humour. Why, he asks, does art put us under a spell? What is its magic, its power? Why is it thought to be a 'good thing'? Why do we persist in having an 'art cult' in our own society? In short, wherein resides the *value* in art? His answer is that an anthropology of art must first challenge that category in order to understand it in the first place. As far as Gell is concerned, and as becomes clear in a passage in which he refers to a matchstick model of Salisbury cathedral, for the term 'art' we could easily substitute another—'material culture' or 'visual culture'—although he avoids doing so himself. Studies of art have always been dominated by a concern with aesthetics, providing a kind of 'theology' for the subject, and anyone interested in art almost has to ascribe it some kind of aesthetic value. This is what makes an artwork more than a mere variety of thing and makes it valuable to study. Gell's first manoeuvre, then, is to make a complete break with aesthetics, asserting a 'methodological philistinism' (ibid.: 42). Rather than assume that artworks do have some inherent aesthetic value ('truth' within