

THE WORLDWOOD OF THE CINEMATIC IMAGE

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Let us begin by allowing the film to do for us its own philosophy, while considering how it compares to ours. The film-philosopher is, for once, the filmmaker, Akira Kurosawa; and the film – indeed, one of its episodes, ‘*Crows*’ (in *Dreams*¹) – philosophizes in its own terms through forcefully performing a reflective act of phenomenological *description* that nonetheless coalesces with the very *situation* thus described². That is to say: in order to show what cinema consists in (as the complex relation between filming, the cinematic image, and spectator), the film emphatically makes its own pure cinematic phenomenon happen.

Recoiling itself in the silence of pure, detached vision, the first shot masterfully displays in the briefest and most banal, inconspicuous way the structure of *natural perception* as a complete system of presentation of the world that ultimately implies some gaze located at the zero point of observation (probably ours), sufficiently receded as to obtain a sort of ‘flyover vision’ of the world (or of any object within it) from the outside, according to the Cartesian logic (and geometry) of ex-tensive space, the logic of the *partes extra partes*³: within the objective space of a museum room containing

¹ Akira Kurosawa, *Dreams (Yume)* [film], 1990

² A descriptive turn through purely cinematic means similar to, and far more satisfying than, Merleau-Ponty’s account of how sensation and sentient mingle, like in falling asleep: ‘falling’ from *intention* to *situation* and inviting the Phenomenologist himself to attune the description of passivity to a sort of passive description. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 245 – henceforth *PP*)

³ Thus repeating a typical phenomenological (double) procedure: (I) first, presenting Cartesian ‘survol’ occularcentrism, in order to then didactically overcome it through a ‘being-in-the-world’ approach, which indeed emphatically ensues in the movie as at the same time (II)

a wealth of well-known paintings by Vincent van Gogh hanging like as many objective, separate units on the wall, a Japanese visitor, whom we perceive from behind as an objectified observer interposing himself between us and the wall further ahead, wanders across the room in front of the paintings, keeping his well measured distance from them as much as they keep theirs from one another, from him, and from us, within a general network of diatopic, mutually external points of existence assigned to each object.

Kurosawa's *alter ego / dreamer*, the actor Akira Terao, depicts before us the canonical condition of the self-conscious onlooker, mirroring ours: he is located on an objective place within a larger space, from where to look at selected focal points in front of him, be it the masterworks of a great painter or the glories of creation. His upstanding silhouette throws us back to our own condition as viewers within a movie theatre⁴, looking from our seat in F row at another framed spectacle ten meters away, the movies 'on the screen', as we say about its obvious location, acknowledging it to be the true effect of a technical projection.

This telescopic viewing of a viewer as viewer parallels the paradoxical, 'surrealistic' condition staged by René Magritte in his famous 'La reproduction interdite' ['The Forbidden Reproduction'], featuring a sort of over-fidelity of the mirror to the very *action* of the thus *over*-portraited man (transitively, not reflexively) looking so intently that he transfers anonymously himself into the realm of the visible, while at the same time remaining in his first empirical location. The implication of a mirror that 'forbids itself to reproduce', but, instead, also looks on in its own right, and this not as an ocular speciality, but as a full-body unobtrusive, virtual activity towards the visible, is the ground for its being chosen as the front cover image in Vivian Sobchack's book 'The Address of the Eye'⁵. In line with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, this work thematically stresses 1) the embodied and enworlded synaesthetic and synoptic status of (visual) perception; 2) the reversible intertwining of the (more passive) intentional act of interpretive perception and the (more active) intentional act of motile meaningful expression; and 3) the ascription to film itself of a specific bodily (that is: perceptive, intelligent, mobile, and distinctively individuated) behaviour – a body that notwithstanding "(...) need not be visible in its vision – just as we are not visible in our vision as it accomplishes its visual grasp of things other than itself" (ib., p. 133), although this late specification plainly contradicts Merleau-Ponty's crucial remark that

the aesthetical intensification of trivial, everyday perception. CF. Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, Chps. III and IV (henceforth, *OE*).

⁴ See Image I.

⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye. A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.

we only see in so far we are ourselves visible and viewed as integral to the 'world flesh' process⁶ – a core thesis in the French philosopher, enough to impugn the structural equivalence of film as body, advocated by Sobchack, whose thought we shall nevertheless follow in the next paragraphs.

And indeed, we do not see the body of Magritte's onlooker seeing *itself* (he would see his front, and namely his eyes staring), but his duplicate: a replica of the investment of his own invisible or virtual body upon the mirror/screen, which in turn appears thematically (over)represented as a 'mirror-that-bodily-looks-on' – as *a film*. Premised by this combined operation of a double seeing (the spectator's, and the film's), which together and correlatively constitute the experience of film, the author eventually organizes the entire systematic square of the criss-cross interplay of the three intervening factors between intentional acts and intentional objects –, (I) 'the moving stagecoach', (II) the film's act of perceiving/expressing, (III) our act of perceiving/expressing; the possible combinations ranging from (for instance, and among others) us perceiving the film's expression (us viewing its viewing-itself-viewing [the-half-bracketed-stagecoach]), to us perceiving the film's perceived object, the stagecoach (namely as a film's *perception*, not as a [real] object)⁷. Whatever the fascinating amplitude and reach of this framework may be for analyzing and understanding cinema, however grounded in a phenomenological description going back to the thing itself (that which we call 'cinema') and got rid of external or previous, entrenched assumptions, Sobchack's original image nevertheless betrays itself in that its 'unseen' body is precisely that which remains so external to its vision, as to be located as an opaque, obstructive block in the middle of the scene, at a distance from its object, separated from the screen and from the film, and by far not as much participant and living [*erlebens*] as it thinks itself to be.

I take the whole of Vivian Sobchack's theorization as perfectly corresponding to a most valuable phenomenological second level of intentional

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 181 (henceforth *VI*): "S'il les touche et les voit, c'est seulement que, étant de leur famille, visible et tangible lui-même, il use de son être comme d'un moyen pour participer au leur (...) [même s'] Il n'est pas simplement chose *vue* en fait (je ne vois pas mon dos)", *et passim*. ("If it [the body] touches and sees them [the visible things], that is only because, being one of their family, itself visible and touchable, it uses its being as a means to partake in them (...) [although] it is not a simple thing factually *seen* (I do not see my back)"). [My translation]. Bodily reflexion is not a marginal trait, but the pivotal *sine qua non* condition for perception, and the distinctive 'chiasmic' feature of Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenology: the acts of perception suppose a passive quality in them, so that a body (not just 'an eye') can see the visible world *only insofar* as it is itself visible (and touchable) 'amidst' that very world to which it always-already belongs.

⁷ Vivian Sobchack, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-283.

operations correlating embodied consciousness and its object (applying 'in film as in life', meaning, a phenomenological reflective description which is as suitable to the exceptional situation of a powerful and thoroughly engaging artform, as to the most elementary process of constituting our very being-in-the-world). And it is true that we can self-consciously relate to film as viewers of not just a world, but of a viewed world; however, when I exclude myself from that world – because another subject (the film) is already occupying my place out there in the mirror / on the screen, and dislodging me –, I am, and thus I *appear*, as an object, and namely, as one that is contained anew in 'the space outside'. Self-positing paradoxically objectifies the subject, and if the moving image is to be taken as the film's body, it operates as the same sort of 'phenomenal', virtual (but now technologically mediated) body Merleau-Ponty distinguishes in *Phénoménologie de la perception* as a lived extension of our 'physical' one⁸.

Despite all her efforts to overcome the Cartesian stance, alongside with Merleau-Ponty's founding gesture (or 'establishing shot'...), the fundamental and operative scheme of Sobchack in 'The Address of the Eye' actually remains the conscious (bodily) subject / intentional object correlation. And even when, in a later work⁹ the author takes many steps further while describing the diffusive tactile flesh that allows her fingers to commingling 'know' and feel the fingers of the character onscreen (Holly Hunter's *Ada*, in Jane Campion's *The Piano*) before her consciousness or her sight does – in a passage redolent of Merleau-Ponty's page about the double feeling of the hot pipe both in my fingers and in those 'glorious fingers' (of mine) reflected in the bottom of the mirror¹⁰ – the description still assumes the separation between offscreen viewer and onscreen movie. Similarly, while "(...) having a carnal interest and investment in being *both* 'here' and 'there' " so that "(...) suddenly my skin is both mine and not my own" and "objectivity and subjectivity lose their presumed clarity (...), subverting the very notion of *onscreen* and *offscreen* as mutually exclusive sites or subject positions, (...) because the subversive force of the body is partly in its capacity to function both figuratively and literally" – even then, *et pour cause*, the screen defines film, and duality conditions its own transgressive interchange of the outside and the inside, or "(...) our capacity to feel the world we see and hear onscreen and of the cinema's capacity to 'touch' and 'move' us offscreen"¹¹. Magritte's doubling never quiet vanishes away, but perhaps the key to the charade is not the 'both'

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *VI*, p. 269.

⁹ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts. Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *OE*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 33.

¹¹ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, pp. 66-7.

word ('both literal and metaphorical'), but the conjunctions 'neither/nor'. Film is neither reality nor fiction, neither an image nor a thing, because it comes before (and instead of) the very possibility of choosing between conjunction ('both') and exclusion ('neither/nor'). Film is, when and only when there is *nothing between which* its status should be decided.

In fact, this Magrittian-like character of Akira Terao embodies the modality – and the realm – of trivial, natural perception in its cognitive agenda, which Kurosawa is set to immediately counter through another, utterly contrasting regime, which I will argue to be the one of aesthetical, phenomenological and indeed 'mechanical' perception, all at once. The one that corresponds to the most elementary and primary level of the latent constitution of experience – as such, and as film experience.

Lolling about the exhibition room, the visitor starts at a point to walk back and forth, as if no longer idly dissipating, but rather collecting (or slightly beginning to let himself be assaulted by) the concentrated force of *a style* capable of establishing for itself the consistency of *a world*.

And where would that van Goghian world abide, if not in its own plane, as a world constituting a plane with itself and being its own location as a world (and certainly not as the sum of all the items to be found in the *Catalogue Raisonné*...)?...

The question is an important one, because we will soon notice that the Japanese visitor will eventually become persuaded by the symbolic pregnancy of the drawbridge picture – either allowing or preventing the 'initiating' passage –, to prepare his body for a visual journey (or his vision for a bodily leap). He puts his hat on, tightens his painter's equipment on his side – and gets ready. Between the two Japanese screen dreamers, the painter and the cineast, the cliché of touristic photography is the self-humorous missing link...

What prompted him to risk such an adventurous trespassing? Was it the luring bridge to 'the other side' (foreboding the final path van Gogh will cross in the wheatfield, abruptly opposing each other's directions and sending the foreigner back to his world)? Did the previous Promenade 'at an exhibition' imbibe van Goghs world in him?

What is a bridge, though – *without a world*? And what is a world – *without a bridge* (in the sense of the tension between getting close to and keeping distant from that, according to Heidegger, makes up Dasein's spatiality)¹²?

The world *of* that bridge and the bridge *of* that world precede (and reinforce) each other hermeneutically in a circle, catching the uncautious wanderer.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 23.

This is a process similar to the constitution of the artwork, according to Gilles Deleuze. An artwork is not a materialized assemblage of meaningful elements so disposed as to arousing aesthetic sensations on the observer (the sort of behaviouristic 'bundle of stimuli' Adorno so disdainfully dismissed), it is itself a 'block of sensations' (as we listen to sad music or to the sadness of music, not to music that causes sadness in us). The difficulty for the artist is twofold: how to create artistic sensations (as distinctively different from psychological, emotional sensations) – and how to hold them together as living sensations without a living substract nurturing them, except for themselves? The answers to the two problems intertwine: the artistic sensations are disengaged from the subject like 'percepts' from perceptions and 'affects' from affections (the sadness of music is not so much a transposition from ours, as musical sadness, disengaged from (current) human sadness), and precisely this new musical status – being music – is the plane of consistency which mutually consistent musical sensations are thus able to build among themselves, and which nevertheless was always already anticipating, as the musical dimension as such, those sensations and their consistent block.

Not music in general, though – but a specific musical world, that is being created by each of the composer's pieces, and that creates the plane in which the following pieces are to be created.

That is what it means to say that we saw 'a van Gogh': an instance of a pictorial world, and a doorway into it. But it can only be a doorway, inasmuch as it does not count as a separate parcel in a series, but rather virtually contains the world of van Gogh wholly present in it. That is the meaning of the two possible ways to survey van Gogh's *opus*, suggested by the film: either viewing each (worldless) picture one by one (their separation among themselves is also ours from their realm, and vice-versa), or embarking in one single, continuous crossing of the world contained in one picture, the world as the gestalt whole that leads internally from picture to picture untill eventually letting the voyager out through the last one, and not the other way round, a world made out of the addition of frames: of 'framed' paintings, indeed. The same obtains in the case of film frames, scenes, or shots, wherein the world-sized principle of montage is the same: montage is 'Kuleshov' gestalt, not a sum total.

Now, the only way for us to feel (or to be exposed to, to get 'punched in the stomach by') the artwork world-grown disengaged sensations, is of course trying to feel them in the terms of their own consistency, which means, in their own plane of consistency.

A personal disengagement (akin to the author's) awaits us.

The notion that the space of the work of art (or the location for a 'dwelling building') is established and displayed by itself, locating both the work and our no longer mundane relation to it, is to be found notably in Heidegger's

philosophy of art and of space. The impossibility to assign an exact place to the painting, to inscribe it in the ordinary physical space, is famously recognized by Merleau-Ponty in several passages of *L'oeil et l'esprit*. Beginning with the example of the "animals painted on the walls of Lascaux, [which] are not there as the swelling of the limestone, [but] also not somewhere else – a little nearer, a little farther (...), radiating around it without ever breaking its elusive tie" (*OE* 22-3), going through the example of another 'radiating' form of presence (*OE* 29) – the pointing hand, attested by its shadow over the Captain's uniform in Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*¹³ –, Merleau-Ponty ends, in Chapter IV (*OE* 70-1), by acknowledging that the same fundamental radiating, chaotic ambiguity not only pervades the most common cases in everyday experience, but indeed constitutes the very structure of our being-in-the-world at its innermost level, fully drawing the consequences of his demolishing confutation of Cartesian geometrical space in Chapter III: the things, us, space and place are "further away than any identical place"¹⁴.

The painter, the artist, does not anything fundamentally different from ordinary perception, when the later devises the checkered bottom of the swimming pool not despite, but thanks to the undulating water (Cartesian geometry through Merleau-Pontian ambiguity); in turn, the water is no more inside the swimming pool than in its lively reflections on the canopy above, and "it is this internal animation, this radiation of the visible, that the painter is seeking under the names of depth, space and colour".

Let us retain two complementary ideas for what follows: (I) the world of the work, a fundamental concept in Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics (mainly concerned with the written text), is not only incomparably larger than the work 'to which it belongs', but, as such an horizon, reverses the common-sense relation and 'radiates' as the realm to which the work belongs – and from where it is to be read. (II) The other remark concerns Merleau-Ponty's exposition about the 'tacit' nature of the literary novel¹⁵, whose fabric, much like painting's, consists of what is actually written *and* of the stylistic impulse that offers a form for directly shaping the silent forces of life and its unspeakable meanings, conveying them up to the width of a (tacit) world. We do not see this world in the text, but 'according to' the text ("to see, not the painting, but according to the painting", says Ponty): a text is a way of seeing addressing to our non-artistic, but deepest (though athematic) experience, that Ponty resumes in another formula: 'perception already stylizes'¹⁶. And if

¹³ See Image II.

¹⁴ Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06lJzjrD5D0>

¹⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Le langage indirect et les voix du silence', in *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, pp. 95-6.

¹⁶ *Id.*, *ibid.*, p. 67.

'style' is the keyword for the sheer disproportion that creates a world out of the unspoken space between the words, it is only because the world is itself already a vast effect of style, of the unsteadiness and excess that chaotically over-presentifies things like trees and water and pipes in the mirror and fingers all over the place, 'beyond all identical place', "plus loin que tout lieu identique" – beyond the walls of a museum room and the irregular surface of a van Gogh canvas. And certainly no longer retrievable by the grips of any intentional constitution of the noematic pole. It is not just that things are to be found unfolding in many places at the same time: it is that what a thing is, and what place is, are themselves similarly unfolding – and so do we within ourselves and in our very placement within the world.

This common nature of things, space, (Saussurean) language and meaning, as 'écart' – a swerving gap –, that makes us (as yet another dispersive nature) spouse the presence of a thing out of its *persistent* originary and athematic dispersiveness, is no longer accommodated in the terms of Merleau-Ponty's lifelong theoretical allied, the Gestalt principle, and it figures rather as the unsettling 'Être sauvage' of the *impossibility* structure of all presence, beneath the stabilizing Gestalt field – or at least as the unsolvable tension whose dynamic balance the later so precariously procures. The two sides of the threshold, the Cartesian and perspectival space of positive units of local presence and the Kurosawa-like 'dreamscape' of the worldhood of the world, are emphatically presented in the film episode in their reciprocal belonging. I take Merleau-Ponty's 'anti-Cartesian' crusade less than his personal way of accomplishing his somewhat upside-down phenomenological (historical) reduction, than as his tacit acknowledgement of "the impossibility of [any] complete reduction"¹⁷, letting 'vision de survol' and 'chair du monde' – the non-ambiguous and the ambiguous – ambiguously co-exist. And it is just this extremely productive *economy of the bypass*, through which the projective and radiating elements of things communicate 'beyond their identical place', that constitutes simultaneously, and reciprocally, those same things and the immense world they interweave among them.

Perhaps it would not be too bold to suggest that Merleau-Ponty's swimming pool establishes a Deleuzian plane of consistency, going from the water to its shimmering on every surface and to its atmospheric freshness all around the garden (similar to the plane Stendhal offers Julien Sorel, in Merleau-Ponty's example¹⁸: not the dramatic journey, but the hidden *dimensions* of the journey),

¹⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, 'Avant-Propos', p. VIII.

¹⁸ Cf Note 15 above.

instead of being located *there*, below the trees, just like some Japanese visitor would be *there*, in front of the pictures.

Taking full advantage of the cinematic device of the cut (after the long first shot and the brief second one, jumping into the third), and avoiding the empirical literalness of the zoom in, we are offered the sort of contemplative and concentrated viewing Walter Benjamin ascribes to the pictorial tradition (in its sharp contrast to the *nevertheless* surgical penetration in the body of reality through the cinematic equipment...)¹⁹, mostly in its legendary expression as the *Wang Fô* fable, of which Marguerite Yourcenar has provided a well known version: the plunge of the painter and of the spectator into the very scene depicted. And which is not a fable, but an actual philosophical procedure in classical Chinese 'landscape' painting – as François Cheng explains in his precious title 'Vide et plein' / Emptiness and Fullness²⁰ –, reaching one of its peaks in the reglementary doctrine of the so-called 'double perspective' – seeing at the same time the landscape and the objects in it from the outside (wherefrom the painter is deeply involved in contemplating it) and from the inside (which the now neighbouring painter is longing to visit and wherein he is yearning to dwell), until the outside and the inside become one single dimension (Merleau-Ponty's 'profondeur', depth, neither as the third dimension nor as one-dimensional, but as uncountable 'dimimensionality': *OE* 48, 64-5). Such a 'chiasmic overlap' happens when the three terms engage in a new kind of rapports among them, in which (I) 'seeing' happens as and through the manual, haptic, motor, in a word, bodily activity of painting; (II) painting happens as and through 'walking' (a 'phantasmatic' sort of projective or ex-static movement a Pontyan body must accomplish in order to catch the thing in its irreducible location *there*, and yet wrapped within a common flesh overlapping that very distance *as such*); (III) and the separate entities of the painter, the natural landscape and the painting all permute with each other – as far as they have been 'disengaged', in the sense of the Merleau-Ponty's Lascaux cave paintings and of Deleuze's Francis Bacon's blocks of sensations. That is to say, as far as they have established their own plane of consistency – in which, according to the Oriental tradition, the actual landscape enters as a 'real' moment, too.

The visual displaying of the 'Vincent van Gogh's world' (correlative to the verbal account for the essence of painting that Kurosawa puts in the mouth of *his* van Gogh), blending together nature and painting in variable

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Eng. Transl.), in *Illuminations*, London, Fontana Press, 1992, Section XI.

²⁰ François Cheng, *Vide et plein. Le langage pictural chinois*, Paris, Seuil, 1991, pp. 92-105.

proportions until the full assimilation of the former by the later will verify the final accomplishment of the progression ascribed to the spiritual process in the painter's monologue, confirms the oriental influence guiding the theoretical insight of Kurosawa concerning the art of painting. Here we have a Japanese filmmaker transposing (under the misleading, conceptually feeble designation of 'dreams') an ancient Chinese theory of painting to the case of a Dutch Modernist, if 'East and West would ever meet'.

And yet: is it possible that the painterly quality in general, perhaps not that differently from the cinematic image, surgically works out the (Leibnizian-Deleuzian) chaotic microperceptive level of forces, not forms (not unlike the Pontyan-Cézannesque magnifying and intensifying of the macro- and the micro-levels of 'radiation' that '*fragment and reconstruct*' the things in their images in a surprisingly Benjaminian manner), as to create a sort of engaging 'biased' *pulp* of the visible ('in' the canvas), a stylistic dynamism prone to open, in extreme cases, a gap before the beholder that lures him, not just to look awry, but to actually cross the 'space of image' thus constituted? The one painting once famously meant to be walked through, is the large National Gallery canvas by Hans Holbein, the Younger, '*The Ambassadors*' (1553)²¹.

A painting in which the 'real landscape' really happening, is us. The skull is just a borderline case of a *general anamorphics* in painting that is likely to generate a sort of neuro-haptic McLuhanian answer from the part of the post-Benjaminian *global-tribal* spectator – desperately sticking his eyes, his brain, and *his skull* to the screen (where, in the weirdest and creepiest way, he will find he was already waiting long before). Beside the obvious mental component of *The Ambassador's* sophisticated devinette and symbolic game, Andy Warhol's haunting, deadly persistent images, do have their ancestors.

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Let us go back to the Kurosawa counterpart of the Holbein ominous trespassing: what happens in that first crucial moment in the movie: is it a close up, a jump cut, a POV (point of view shot, *camara subjectiva*)?

Not the first one [close up]: it does not come *close* to the object we were seeing: it is not even the object (the painting), but, if so, its tableau. (But we *watch* tableaux vivants, we are not *in them*).

Perhaps the second [jump cut]?: in a sense, the new shot concentrates on the very same object (the framed painting), slightly varying the angle; yet, in another sense, while loosing sight of its edge, it *switches worlds*. It's quiet a jump. A cutaway shot, then – the 'something else nearby' –? Shouldn't we say,

²¹ See Image III.

instead, that it is *the same, far away*? And certainly not a cutaway *scene*, when the scene is reverting so thoroughly to itself.

Or perhaps the third hypothesis [POV shot]? But the scene is no longer what the beholder sees, rather, it is where this *picture-goer* now stands.

A better scrutiny of the actual image/camera interplay will cast some light on the issue.

It corresponds undoubtedly to a POV, but no longer a POV *of* the scene, in accordance with intentionality: it is rather one *on* the scene. Indeed, this POV is the very scene's point of view: the beholder is finally viewing the painting – when *his* is the very *painting's* point of view. Yet, in another sense, the scene does not *have* a point of view about itself: the scene *is* its own point of view, the reciprocal constitution of the 'angle' from which the world appears, and which indeed it *draws* when manifesting itself – as a *scene*, precisely –, lets say, 'from the west', a westward scene, and the 'eastern angle' that cuts it thus and reveals the shape of its vision in the shape of what is seen – as inseparable as figure and ground within a gestalt whole. "Je suis le ciel même qui se rassemble", says Merleau-Ponty, that blue of the sky I do not have *in front* of me but rather into which I merge, in a sort of reciprocal interlace, homologous to the formulae we find in Deleuze, Cheng and Kurosawa's van Gogh²².

(Of course, the point from and to which the world appears is itself world – that is what 'being-in-the-world' means: it means being 'of' it, 'en' être, says Merleau-Ponty of the visible condition which my viewing body shares with the visible, but non-viewing, other bodies –, and appearing is not a secondary phenomenon to the world – that is what '*being-in-the-world* as the one whole phenomenon' means –, despite its appearing being so to say located somewhere within itself – that is what 'Dasein as being-in-the-world' means, that is to say, *as* that very *one whole phenomenon*. That much has Merleau-Ponty inherited from Heidegger, and that is also why he does not limit his 'anthropology' to the bodily-situation and bodily-engagement, but reinterprets it ontologically as 'chair'. Which makes all the more interesting for us to discern how the notion of 'chair' comes to fulfill, on the other end, the logical implications of the gestalt principle: a field structurally inseparable cannot be contained within a field structurally separable, which entails, separated from the first one: this second separation would brake the inseparability-structure of the first field. That is precisely the '*partes extra partes*' analytical program of Descartes, his notion of seeing as 'reading' (v.g. translating) visual signs with a blind's stick, his reduction of depth to the play of the two dimensions

²² Merleau-Ponty, *PP*, p. 248: "Je m'enfonce dans ce mystère, il «se pense en moi»" [I plunge into this mystery, it «thinks itself in me»]. Compare to 'van Gogh's' lines: "I just loose myself in it (...) I devoure it completely".

of the pure 'objective' space 'in itself'. In short, there cannot be any separate part whatsoever (that would be a gestalt whole of inseparable parts). That is to say: there cannot be a partial gestalt field, and such a field must be the whole field (hence the typical Merleau-Pontyan fighting (in *VI*, Ch. I, in his courses of the Collège de France on Nature) against the primacy of realism or of idealism, of thing or of consciousness, all presupposing separation). Intentionality may very well be correlative and always correlative and nothing but correlative – it is still not reversible. The passive-becoming of that painterly feeling of "beeing looked by things (...), by the trees" (*OE* 31), "ce mystère de passivité" (*OE* 52) regarding vision, does not open a second, maniac act of 'counter-intentionality': it corresponds, instead, to an actual destitution of intentionality, resonating to the old Chinese doctrines brought around by François Cheng: "(...) respiration in Being, action and passion so hard to tell apart that we no longer know who sees and who is seen, who paints and who is painted" – who gawks at a world inside a clumsy golden frame and who gets 'enworlded').

That is the reason why the coincidence of the point of view of the raptured beholder and the 'point of view' of the scene (= of the place from where Akira Terao looks to the painting and the place from where that 'view' was formed and taken by the artist) cannot be lessened to a mere adjustment of the plane of his eyes to the plane of the painting, the later understood as the 'pellicular' outer first plane of the scene that 'begins from there on', as if it were the thinnest skin around a bubble: its abstract limit. Being in the first plane is not watching it: it is being 'there' in such a way that *there*, *where* he, the Japanese, is, be not a *location*, but the location *of that* location, i.e., where that 'there' in its turn is: the world (answering to the question: in which 'where' is this 'there'?). That is why such a 'coincidence of planes' posits, not a 'there' – a mere optical transference to an 'immanent' point on the edge of the foreground, launching the perspective upon, and sovereignly overlooking, that painting –, but a 'where': the world of that painting, that painting in its worldhood, *wherein one just loses oneself completely*, to take the words of 'van Gogh', while "devouring it completely and holding it". And that is why Heidegger insisted in not translating the meaning of Dasein as the banal 'being-there' (responding to the common-sense banality that puts us 'in the world' and not, like perhaps in 'Gravity'²³, somewhere else), but as 'being *the* there... of the Where'.

In that sense, being placed allegedly at the utmost edge of the picture is being virtually everywhere, surveying it in its entirety, and that is why the Japanese can 'enter into' and travel across the painting as world: he was not firstly at the entry and then (more and more) inside, it is the other way round:

²³ Alfonso Cuarón, *Gravity* [film], 2013.

the 'impersonal', undisturbed totality of that purported 'first plane', lingering as the sole image for a couple of seconds, was the totality of the co-presence of a world, and it is only on that ground that the visitor becomes able to fragment that unity (as we see him arriving from the right 'behind' his own ocular 'zero point', that is, as already 'in', as a sort of a *Matrix* pre-electronic hero) and to consecutively displace himself from one spot to another within 'where' he was 'always already in advance' (and that is the meaning of the *ex-sistential* facticity, preceding the very *transcendental* anticipation itself).

Let us attempt to recapitulate and unify the three layers of signification (text, painting and the film itself) that, while translating into one another in reciprocal connivance, constitute the bulk of the film's thesis.

We will begin by recalling the text of the soliloquy:

- Vous êtes Vincent van Gogh, n'est-ce pas?

- Why aren't you painting?

- To me this scene is beyond belief. A scene that looks like a painting does not make a painting. But [I]²⁴ if you take the time and look closely, all the nature has its own beauty. And when that natural beauty is there, [II] I just loose myself in it. And then, as if it's in a dream, [III] the scene just paints itself for me. Yes, [IV] I consume this natural setting, I devour it completely and hold it. And when I'm through, [V] the painting paints itself for me completely. But it's so difficult to hold it inside.

-Then, what do you do?

- [VI] I work, I slave, I drive myself like a locomotive.

I have to hurry. The day [?] is running out. So little time left for me to paint...

- Are you all right? You appear to be injured.

-Oh, this? Yesterday, I was trying to complete a self-portrait, and I couldn't get the ear right; so, I cut it off and threw it away.

The sun! It compels me to paint. I can't be here wasting my time talking to you!

One common trait brings together the 'methodology' of landscape painting professed by van Gogh (interweaving trivial perception, aesthetical perception of the natural beauty and the painterly and perceptive work of the artist on his blended come-and-go between the scene and the canvas) and its existential correspondents. Kurosawa will be the first to do full justice to this interwoven dimension of *building a world*: before those ontologically differentiated and separately existent events such as painting *qua* painting, painter *qua* painter or

²⁴ Please notice the six fases in the process of *painting*. Only the last one corresponds to 'actually' painting.

landscape *qua* landscape take place, there is their inextricable togetherness or reciprocal involvement, in a non-empirical consistency of space and place of their own.

The visitor asks in French for the Author (“êtes-vous monsieur van Gogh?...”), only to receive the right answer ‘in a foreign language’: “Why aren’t you painting?”. What follows is a step-by-step breviary of the art of painting we shall resume and comment at once: a) by transforming the qualitative space and time of perception (“if you look close” – to the point of entering inside pictures?: that is, not us, physically, in them, physically, but what the first Merleau-Ponty calls the phenomenological motor-sensitive, pre-reflexive body, in the expansion of the non-posed space ‘where’ he always already is), every piece of “nature” reveals “beauty”; b) After this first operation has taken place, there comes a clear movement of merging into it: “and when that natural beauty is there, I just loose myself in it”: like the Japanese in the paintings, the camera and the filmmaker in the scenery, and us, in the characteristic *position* of the film-watcher (which is emblematic for any similar phenomenon of this sort of Kantian free subjectivity without a subject, indeterminately in front of an object whose objectivity has no interest to it). And namely, *no position at all*: not *in the* theatre, not *in the* film, nowhere else but ‘in a state of film’, ‘in a state of poem’, of painting, of music (Paul Valéry’s “my feeling without myself”); c) “then, the scene just paints itself for me”: this strange twilight episode, somewhere between natural beauty, my incorporation into it and, on the other side, the actual painting still missing, corresponds to the care with which Kurosawa gets his sceneries built, oscillating between photographic retouching of the image, ‘over-painting’ actual nature, finding – and painstakingly *gardening* – equivalent landscapes, or having three-dimensional replicas of some of van Gogh’s objects made; d) a further step in the series is obtained by inverting the first engulfment (of the artist in the already worked out ‘beautiful landscape’) into the symmetrical one, creating a reciprocal incorporation that prefigures Merleau-Ponty’s approach to the phenomenon of the *Chair du monde*, his carnal and militantly embodied reply to Heidegger’s In-der-Welt-sein: “yes, I consume that natural setting, I devour it completely, and when I’m through, the painting just paints itself [be]for[e] me completely”. “La pictura è cosa mentale”, in the famous word by Leonardo... Only this time è cosa corporale... e) and *only then* – the ‘locomotive’: *painting*. Painting, and not ‘the author’, is the driving force. In any case, as an objective historical metaphor, the locomotive suggests the intervention of broad, ambiguous historical forces – both progressive and regressive at once – rather than offering some handy image for inner psychological or authorial mythical skills).

In short: van Gogh enters the landscape; in order to paint it, he swallows it. His world is a *continuum* of nature and ‘landscapes’ – so is Kurosawa’s

rendering of it: making patent, as 'the surgeon' in an anatomical theatre, the intriguing intermediate phases. There's where the painter lives; and that is why the visitor crosses a world, not an opus.

But the lesson does not end in here. In its complete version – which Kurosawa assumes to be his duty to reveal –, it runs further. It is as if van Gogh were showing to the visitor and to us, by words and by actions, the true nature of art: the art of life and death.

Such an interpretive direction is, however, out of reach within the limits of this essay. Let us end our text with a resumé of the epistemology at stake in all that precedes.

As for the phenomenological background: a) the shift from the Cartesian consciousness-centered subject to the perceptive-motor Pontyan body is most emphatically realized – filmed – in terms of the didactic opposition between a cognitive-like subject's passive external contemplation (the Japanese *amateur* idly wandering about the museum rooms), and the literal ex-stasis of his subsequent extreme bodily agency, which has come, in late phenomenology, to animate the traditional Heideggerian framework of the hitherto disembodied Being-in-the-world. Our kind of presence does not develop from a self-foundational *position* in front of (and somehow abstractly outside) the world, then measurably acceding into it, but as being always already in-the-world, and thence ontologically implicated within it. b) The present *Dream* provides a blatant illustration of '1st Merleau-Ponty's' general thesis about (visual) perception as (total) body agency actively projecting itself in pragmatic terms upon the horizon (by bringing its own virtual, radar-like locomotion system to compose with the entire dynamic structure of the perceptive field thus being at once constituted and disclosed). c) Its aesthetical and artistic intensification corroborates – both in Ponty and Kurosawa – the interlacing of body and world (not merely the 'painting realm') in such a way that it would eventually prompt the later Merleau-Ponty to theorize the Flesh as their ontological 'inter-carnation' (quintessential to the philosopher himself is the loop between the trivial and the aesthetical-artistic perceptions, which reciprocally make sense of each other, and I am suggesting here that it was the unavoidable task of redescribing phenomenological perception, urged by the much more acute and puzzling extra-philosophical features of aesthetical perception and the new artistic ontology of the visible, that gave rise to his last 'manner'). And it prompts Kurosawa to plainly show what happens when Kandinsky's (in "*Rückblicke*") or Benjamin's (in "*Berliner Kindheit*") nostalgic demands made to art, to let oneself thoroughly in, find a medium where they can be (almost too) ostentatiously fulfilled: quoting Kandinsky, 'to take the beholder for a walk in the picture'. In Kurosawa's film, in fact, one is thematically shown what already happens in all aesthetical experience, be it cinematographic, literary, musical,

architectonic or pictorial: entering (and becoming) aesthetical space-time, while suspending trivial empirical space-time coordinates and subject/object's positive face-to-face (a phenomenon whose complex and consequent structures could be drawn back as early in Modernity as to Kant's aesthetical judgement). But, then, one is actually, if inevitably, shown too much: if we ourselves are *in* the film as much as also *in* van Gogh's pictures (with our cicerone of sorts), we do not see *additionally* ourselves crossing it, for that matter: by showing too much (author and spectator as part-of-the-picture), Kurosawa fails to (not-) show properly the a-thematic chiasmic presence of the 'spectator' in the flesh of being: instead, he separates him abstractly once again outwards from the Flesh he was already incorporating. d) But that shortcoming will prove to be the cardinal virtue of the whole enterprise. As a concentrated piece of theory in action, not only does the film present a complete phenomenological body of doctrine (as much visually illustrated as reflexively constructed: if the image didn't think or philosophize itself, montage as logos would), but it establishes itself as the most tightened correspondence between van Gogh's dictum and practice concerning the process of creation (in a rather complex but rigorously phased interplaying of seeing, the moving body, and the actual painting hand) and the similar involvement in the aesthetical realm experienced by its 'visitor' – the Japanese, Kurosawa, ourselves.

Images

Image 1



René Magritte, *La reproduction interdite*, 1937

Image II

Rembrandt van Rijn, *De Nachtwacht*, 1642

Image III

Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533

ABSTRACT

A close analysis of the specifically cinematographic procedure in Akira Kurosawa's *'Dream' Crows* reveals it as an articulated and insightful philosophical statement, endowed with general relevance concerning 'natural' perception, phenomenological *Erlebnis*, mechanical image and aesthetic rapture. The antagonism between the Benjaminian lineage of a mechanical irreducibility of the cinematic image to anthropocentric categories, and the Cartesian tradition of a film-philosophy still relying on the equally irreducible structure of the intentional act, be it the one of a deeply embodied and enworlded consciousness, in accounting for the essential structure of film and spectator (and their relation), i.e., the antagonism between the decentering primacy of the image and the self-centered primacy of perception, cannot be settled through a simple Phenomenological shift from occularcentric,

intentional consciousness to *its* embodiment 'in-the-world' as yet another carrier of intentionality.

Still it remains to be explained what is it in the mechanical image that is able to so deeply affect the human flesh, and conversely, to what features in the human bodily experience is its mechanical other, the fascinating image, so successfully addressing? It should be expected from the anti-Cartesianism of both the early and the late Merleau-Ponty the textual support for an approach to the essential condition of *passivity* in movie watching, that would be convergent with Benjamin. The Chapter 'Le sentir', in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, will offer us the proper guide to elucidate what we are already perceiving and conceiving in Kurosawa's film, where the ex-static phenomenological body of the aesthetical contemplator 'enters the frame' like the Benjaminian surgeon enters the body and like the painter – and *always already* like our deepest level of 'sensing', previously to any act of consciousness – 'just loses himself in the scene before him'. The Polichinello secret of cinema watching is nonetheless too evident to be seen, and that is where Phenomenological description and reduction are still required.

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