

36th Annual Meeting of the International Merleau-Ponty Circle Flesh, Truth, Sacred Life

Conference Director: Prof. Susan M. O'Shaughnessy

All sessions held at the Morrie Jones Conference Center, Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, with the exception of the recital Friday afternoon. Abstracts appear below.

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15

8:00-9:15 Registration, Coffee, Light Breakfast

Session One *Moderator: Gail Hamner, Syracuse University*

9:15-10:00 Critique of Transcendental Violence: Images of Violence and Passivity in Merleau-Ponty's Descriptions of the Flesh
Ann Murphy, Fordham University

10:00-10:45 Merleau-Ponty and the Manifestation of the Sacred
William Hamrick, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

10:45-11:00 Refreshments

Session Two *Moderator: Nancy Barta-Smith, Slippery Rock University*

11:00-11:15 Welcome from **Provost Mark Krejci** and **Dean Jim Aageson**

11:15-12:00 Flesh Ensouling
Glen Mazis, Penn State University Harrisburg

12:00-12:45 "A Confirmation of its Astonishment": Ontological Humility in Merleau-Ponty
Nancy Holland, Hamline University

12:45-2:00 Lunch, Anderson Commons Dining Room

Session Three *Moderator: Oz Blaker, Temple University*

2:00-2:45 Merleau-Ponty's *mundis imaginatis*: towards an apophatic ontology of reality
Elodie Boubilil, McGill University

2:45-3:30 Merleau-Ponty and Sacramental Gesture
Vincent Wargo, North Dakota State University

3:30-4:00 Refreshments

Session Four *Moderator: Matthew Goodwin, Northern Arizona University*

4:00-4:45 From the Phenomenology of Lived Space to the Ontology of 'Immemorial Depth'

Scott Marratto, Michigan Technological University

4:45-5:45 Further Questions: A Way Out of the Present Philosophical Situation (via Merleau-Ponty)

Leonard Lawlor, Penn State University

Reception

6:00-7:30 Radisson Hotel, Prairie Rose Room

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 16

8:00-9:00 Coffee and Light Breakfast

Session Five *Moderator: Olga Louchakova-Schwartz, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology*

9:00-9:45 Life, Flesh and Materiality

Jen McWeeny, John Carroll University

9:45-10:30 At the Overlap: How to Cosmologize-in-Place

Ernie Sherman, Pace University

10:30-10:45 Refreshments

Session Six *Moderator: Lawrence Hass, Austin College*

10:45-11:30 Searching for Truth among the Living: Reading Montaigne with Merleau-Ponty

Sarah Star, Simon Silverman Phenomenology Centre, Duquesne University

11:30-12:15 **M. C. Dillon Memorial Lecture**

Merleau-Ponty and the Permanent Dissonance of Being: The Temporal Extension of the Transcendental Field in *Phenomenology of Perception*

Keith Whitmoyer, New School for Social Research

12:15-1:15 Lunch, Anderson Commons Dining Room

Session Seven *Moderator: Gail Weiss, The George Washington University*

1:15-2:00 Synaesthesia, Recollection, Resurrection: Searching Out Transcendence after Merleau-Ponty

Jessica Wiskus, Duquesne University

2:00-2:45 Proust's Disenchantments, the "Refusal of the Sacred" and the Repoetization of Ontology

Stephen Watson, University of Notre Dame

Harp Recital

- * Christiansen Recital Hall, Hvidsten Hall of Music ***
3:00-3:45 Merleau-Ponty and Early 20th Century French Music for Harp
Timothy Isley, Chapel Hill, NC
Russel Peterson, bassoon and saxophone; Deb Harris, flute; Amy Mercer, piano
- 3:45-4:00 Refreshments

Keynote Address Moderator: Galen Johnson, University of Rhode Island

- 4:15-5:30 Merleau-Ponty's Critique of "Explanatory Theology"
Emmanuel de Saint Aubert
École Normale Supérieure/Archives Husserl de Paris

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 17

- 8:30-9:30 Coffee and Light Breakfast

Session Eight Moderator: Patricia Locke, St. John's College

- 9:30-10:15 Merleau-Ponty's Nietzschean Notion of the Absolute: Flesh, Truth and God as Circle
Frank Chouraqui, United Nations' International School, New York
- 10:15-11:00 Heretical Sacrality: An aesthesiology for life's *never not yet*
Randall Johnson, Practicing Psychiatrist
- 11:00-11:45 Touching the Virgin: Jean-Luc Godard's Phenomenology of the Body
Stefan Kristensen, Université de Genève

Business Meeting

- 11:45-2:30 Sarello's Restaurant, Moorhead, Minnesota

Session Nine Moderator: Kirk Besmer, Gonzaga University

- 2:30-3:15 Touching Matters: Embodiments of Intimacy and the Nature of Flesh
Kym Maclaren, Ryerson University
- 3:15-4:00 Transfiguration in Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche
Galen Johnson, University of Rhode Island
- 4:00-4:15 Refreshments

Keynote Address Moderator: James Morely, Ramapo College of New Jersey

- 4:15-5:30 The Sacred: a world beneath the world
Richard Kearney
Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy, Boston College

Note: The Music of Being and the Silence of Nature, **Ted Toadvine**, University of Oregon was originally on this program. Due to illness, Dr. Toadvine was unable to attend.

ABSTRACTS

Merleau-Ponty's *mundus imaginalis*: towards an apophatic ontology of reality
Elodie Boubil, McGill University

In this paper, I aim to explain the connections of flesh, truth and sacred life in Merleau-Ponty's works as a configuration leading to an "indirect" and apophatic ontology- ensuring thereby the overcoming of metaphysical dichotomies. I will first recall Merleau-Ponty's theory according to which the intertwining of flesh and perception redistributes the relations between truth and reality by configuring anew a certain space of visibility (I). Then, I will compare Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied and creative perceptual life to the notion of the "mundus imaginalis" developed by Henry Corbin - his contemporary and colleague at Sorbonne, better known as the French translator of Heidegger's texts - in his works on Islamic mysticism and negative theology (II). In the last part, I will show that Merleau-Ponty's indirect ontology could be considered an hermeneutics of *mundus imaginalis*, an experience of the sacred rhythm of Being which points to what could be called a phenomenology from within (III).

Merleau-Ponty's Nietzschean Notion of the Absolute : Flesh, Truth and God as Circle
Frank Chouraqui, The United Nations' International School, New York City

In one of the working notes to the *Visible and the Invisible* from February 1959, Merleau-Ponty provides some indication of the place he reserves for the concept of divinity in the ontological account he is preparing. For him, the 'reversal' that his book shall both describe and exemplify is 'circulus vitiosus deus,' that is to say, some sort of non-fallacious circle, a circle that is in some way related to god. In this paper, my aim is to offer an elucidation of Merleau-Ponty's use of the Nietzschean phrase and of the many motifs of reversal and reflexivity it involves, and to examine its implications with regard to the notions of truth and flesh, which are discussed more extensively in the *Visible and the Invisible*.

Merleau-Ponty and the Manifestation of the Sacred
William S. Hamrick, Southern Illinois University

This paper is an exploration of the resources that Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh offers us for comprehending the manifestation of the sacred. The senses of the divine that somehow appeal to Merleau-Ponty, as well as the meaning of God that he definitively rejects, serve as a springboard for understanding how, on his view, the sacred can appear as the Invisible of the visible. To describe these modes of appearance, the author appropriates the Stoic distinction between the *logos endiathetos* and the *logos proforikos* to which Merleau-Ponty appeals, as well as crucial insights articulated in Galen Johnson's *The Retrieval of the Beautiful*. The paper concludes with concrete examples of experiences of the sacred that are consistent with Merleau-Ponty's ontology.

Transfiguration in Merleau-Ponty and Nietzsche
Galen A. Johnson, University of Rhode Island

It has been little remarked that Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* ironically made Raphael's Transfiguration the "monogram" of Nietzsche's account of the origin of tragedy, the philosophy of Dionysus, and the death of God. We will explore the meaning of transfiguration and Raphael as "exemplary artist" for Nietzsche and bring his account into a comparative dialogue with Merleau-Ponty. Transfiguration is a problematic event and figure for phenomenological philosophies of the truth of appearances, yet Merleau-Ponty explicitly adopts the language of transfiguration, along with that of miracle, mystery, and grace, in relation to art, the body, and Flesh. We will examine Merleau-Ponty's texts in which "transfiguration" appears and reflect upon the meaning of transcendence and the sacred in his philosophy of art and ontology. Commenting on the Preface to the second edition of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, Merleau-Ponty wrote: "God is dead means everything, except: there is no God (*Dieu est mort, cela veut tout dire, sauf: il n'y a pas de dieu*)" (*Notes de Cours, 1959-1961, 279*).

Heretical Sacrality: An aesthesiology for life's never not yet
Randall Johnson

In his later writings, Merleau-Ponty uses the term *aesthesiology*—an almost forgotten word—to characterize his philosophy. For the purposes of heretical gnosis, we will develop the phrase *never not yet*, which should be heard with the trace of an erased comma, inasmuch as discourse remains within the logics of reason which necessarily return a doubly expressed negative to the realm of positivity. This phrase, both with and against Heidegger's *always already*, will help us think the maintained divergence of aesthesiology in its Greek origins as the *logos of aisthesis* and may help us understand the manner by which Merleau-Ponty at times expresses flesh: in the via negativa of what he calls negative philosophy. This will lead to a reading of his *perceptual faith* as a heretical sacrality of *how to live* by reclamation of the affective sensibility of an intelligibility which does not renounce its matrixial body.

The Sacred: a World Beneath the World

Richard Kearney, Charles Seelig Chair of Philosophy, Boston College

Merleau-Ponty never directly addressed the question of God, though he was, according to Sartre and de Beauvoir, disturbingly elusive and ambiguous on the question. This paper examines the enigmatic role of the sacred in the writings of Merleau-Ponty as a mystical anatheism beyond both theism and atheism. It then relates Merleau-Ponty's sacramentality of the flesh to the notions of epiphany and transubstantiation in the writings of Proust which so intrigued him. It concludes by contrasting his response to Christianity as a divine kenosis to Sartre's militant anti-theism.

Touching the Virgin. Jean-Luc Godard's Phenomenology of the Body

Stefan Kristensen, Université de Genève

This paper interrogates the representation of the body in Jean-Luc Godard's works, in particular in *Hail Mary* (1984). My argument is that Godard's idea of the image is best understood in a parallel to the phenomenological reduction: the image is a means to turn away from the world of the "natural attitude" and learn to see the world in another fashion. Following Merleau-Ponty in his essay on cinema, the epoche of the image is the attempt to see as things the interval between things, i.e. to invert figure and ground. This leads to a specific interpretation of the sacred in terms of the flesh demanding a perceptual faith, i.e. a realm of primitive and unprovable certainty. My aim in this tentative merleau-pontian analysis of Godard's oeuvre is to shed light on this preobjective dimension of experience and on the ways of representing it with filmic means. Women's bodies and faces play a crucial role in the revelation of this realm of experience and thus in Godard's cinematographic mission of redeeming the real.

Touching Matters: Embodiments of Intimacy and the Nature of Flesh

Kym Maclaren, Ryerson University

Touching matters. Touching, this paper argues, can be cognitive or transgressive. In its cognitive form, touch may not only give us pleasure but incarnate us, organize our bodies in new ways, give birth to new ways of being, and enliven us to new dimensions of reality. For these reasons, touch therapy has proven crucial for premature babies, the elderly, the disabled and the chronically ill. On the other hand, a transgressive touch can lead us to withdraw from our bodies, to lose our sense of vitality, to disintegrate and disassociate. This paper considers what touch must be such that it has these possibilities. It argues that touch is an intercorporeal form of intimacy that precedes developmentally and undergirds permanently the truly intersubjective intimacy that we can find between adult subjects; it considers the inherent temporality of touch; and in these ways it aims to shed light on the nature of flesh.

From the Phenomenology of Lived Space to the Ontology of ‘Immemorial Depth’
Scott Marratto, Michigan Technological University

In his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty shows that space has a fundamentally temporal structure: the past-present-future dimension, he says, corresponds to the here-there dimension. But of course Merleau-Ponty also speaks, in that work, of a more radical sense of pastness, what he calls an “original past,” and, in subsequent works, he also speaks of a more original spatial sense of depth. In this paper I show that these concepts are crucially linked, leading Merleau-Ponty to write, in *Eye and Mind*, of an “immemorial depth of the visible.” This sense of immemorial depth is a development of the notion of an original past and is, I argue, key to understanding Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of chiasmic Flesh.

Life, Flesh, and Materiality
Jennifer McWeeny, John Carroll University

My aim in this paper is to explore the complex relationships between life, flesh, and materiality in Merleau-Ponty’s work for the purpose of further clarifying the contours of his non-dualistic ontology. In his recent paper “Life, Movement, and Desire,” Renaud Barbaras claims that recognizing the ambiguous character of life will lead to “a genuine ontological reform” because established ontological divisions such as subject/object and interior/exterior will be thrown into question.¹ Barbaras’ analysis of “life” raises the following questions: Is “life,” as described by Barbaras, the same concept as “flesh” as it is conceived by Merleau-Ponty in *The Visible and the Invisible*? And, in what sense can we say that these phenomena are material, if at all? Although Merleau-Ponty claims that “the flesh is not matter,”² conceiving of flesh as a deeply relational medium seems to require some kind of materiality, namely, bodily proximities and distances that are both spatial and temporal. This study integrates Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of flesh with more recent literature in the phenomenology of life in order to expose places in Merleau-Ponty’s thought where the themes of “life” and “flesh” are not only used interchangeably, but are also coincident with a special kind of materiality.

¹ Barbaras, Renaud. 2008. Life, Movement, and Desire. Trans. Jen McWeeny. *Research in Phenomenology* 38: 3-17.

² Ibid., 139.

Critique of Transcendental Violence: Images of Violence and Passivity in Merleau-Ponty's Descriptions of the Flesh

Ann Murphy, Fordham University

To the degree that Merleau-Ponty abstains from invoking violent imagery in his discussions of materiality and corporeality, his philosophy continues to serve as vital corrective to the normative and even transcendental status that violence assumes in contemporary philosophical discourse on the body. It is not simply in highlighting the passivity of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty breaks with the assumption of violence. Rather, it is in his descriptions of activity of the flesh, and its expressive powers, that Merleau-Ponty's singularity in reference to the canon is laid bare. My essay argues that there is a "critique of transcendental violence" implicit in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the flesh. In other words, Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy can be read as a rebuttal of the claim that violence universally (potentially or actually) conditions embodied life. Contra thinkers in the tradition such as Levinas, Derrida, and Foucault – for whom there is no knowledge or perception of a body *without* violence – Merleau-Ponty's later work illumines those dimensions of embodied life that resist the conflation of corporeality and violence.

Merleau-Ponty's Critique of "Explanatory Theology"

Emmanuel de Saint Aubert, CNRS, École Normale Supérieure, Archives Husserl de Paris, France

Merleau-Ponty was always interested in the complex relationship between Christianity, philosophy, and theology. In both his published and unpublished work, we find a regular opposition between the "novelty of Christianity" — as experience of man, as religious attitude, and in its conception of God — and a theology characterized as "explicative", which fails to think this novelty, and even betrays it. This theology is accused of importing the God of the philosophers: of explaining God, and of using God to explain — but only to better evade — the mysteries of man and the tragic dimensions of his condition, thus paradoxically overlooking the space of negativity from whence the religious attitude itself unfolds. In this original confrontation, Merleau-Ponty transposes his own battle against certain philosophers, and mobilizes the essential axes of his thought: his conceptions of humanity and being, an anthropology of the perceiving and desiring flesh, and an ontology of a being that is both unfinished and inexhaustible.

Searching for Truth among the Living: Reading Montaigne with Merleau-Ponty
Sarah Star, Simon Silverman Phenomenology Centre, Duquesne University

In “Reading Montaigne”, a postwar meditation on the writings of the 16th century essayist, Merleau-Ponty suggests that Montaigne perhaps achieves “something like an ultimate truth” in the purposeful and painstakingly honest disclosure of himself: “this ambiguous *self* – which is offered to everything, and which he never finished exploring”. This intriguing notion of a truth that is at once “ultimate” and grounded in a self that is both “ambiguous” and “never finished exploring” can be more fully understood in light of three earlier essays also concerned with the question of what it means to live truthfully: “The War Has Taken Place”, “Faith and Good Faith”, and “Man, the Hero”. Merleau-Ponty’s attempts in these essays to wrest sense from the tragic events of the 20th century may be read as giving a new, global voice to his predecessor’s more personally transformative insights about life and the choices it forces upon us.

The Music of Being and the Silence of Nature
Ted Toadvine, University of Oregon

In his 1971 memorial essay to Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss makes the provocative claim that Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of music in his last writings reveals a decisive ambiguity in his thought. In particular, he argues that Merleau-Ponty’s depreciation of music in favor of painting in *Eye and Mind*, where music is described as providing no more than an “outline” of Being, is contested by the nearly contemporaneous treatment of music in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where Vinteuil’s “little phrase” becomes a privileged example of the incarnate idea. For Lévi-Strauss, this ambiguous treatment of music demonstrates the gap between the phenomenological and the ontological in Merleau-Ponty’s final writings and elucidates his ambivalent relationship with structuralism. This essay takes up the question of the role of music in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology with respect to the light that this sheds on the relations between phenomenology and ontology, experience and structure, and culture and nature.

Synaesthesia, Recollection, Resurrection: Searching out Transcendence after Merleau-Ponty
Jessica Wiskus, Duquesne University

This paper takes as its inspiration the following quotation from *The Visible and the Invisible*: "The invisible is there without being an object, it is pure transcendence, without an ontic mask." It explores the nature of this transcendence through synaesthesia (Rimbaud), recollection (Plato), and resurrection (Proust), as these three offer parallel experiences with respect to their orientation toward the "unseen" and "unknown." Yet, while recollection and resurrection claim recovery of the past, it is significant that synaesthesia does not depend upon a temporal dimension. What Merleau-Ponty shows us, therefore, is that recollection and resurrection can best be understood not as possession of a fixed past (as object) but according to a rhythm of the past and present in relation - a certain "union of impossibles." Thinking through this rhythm - this proportion - this "union of impossibles" - as that which is "unseen" and "unknown" can elucidate the emphasis, for both Plato and Proust, upon the soul, while also tracing a connection between recollection, resurrection, and synaesthesia as the opening to a world of expression.