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Body schema dynamics in Merleau-Ponty

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This chapter presents an account of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the body schema as an operative intentionality that is not only opposed to, but also complexly intermingled with, the representation-like grasp of the world and one's own body, or the body image. The chapter reconstructs Merleau-Ponty's position primarily based on his preparatory notes for his 1953 lecture 'The Sensible World and the World of Expression'. Here, Merleau-Ponty elaborates his earlier efforts to show that the body schema is a perceptual ground against which the perceived world stands out as a complex of perceptual figures. The chapter clarifies how Merleau-Ponty's renewed interpretation of the figure-ground structure makes it possible for him to describe the relationship between body schema and perceptual (body) image as a strictly systematic phenomenon. Subsequently, the chapter shows how Merleau-Ponty understands apraxia, sleep, and perceptual orientation as examples of dedifferentiation and subtler differentiation of the body-schematic system. The last section clarifies how such body-schematic differentiating processes give rise to relatively independent superstructures of vision and symbolic cognition which constitute our body image. It, moreover, explains how, according to Merleau-Ponty, the cognitive superstructures always need to be supported by praxic operative intentionality to maintain their full sense, even though, in some cases, they have the power to compensate for praxic deficiencies.

Merleau-Ponty; body schema; body image; perception; language

3.1 Introduction: the concept of body schema in Merleau-Ponty's works

¹The efforts to maintain a distinction between body image and body schema seem to be essentially driven by the objective to defend an operative intentionality (knowing how) from those accounts that view it as reducible to a representational intentionality (knowing what).² In this respect, Merleau-Ponty's works prefigure the more recent enactivist approaches and, interestingly, they are very often similarly defensive. Merleau-Ponty lengthily *disproves* Descartes', Kant's, or Sartre's representationalist accounts and the evidence he presents has frequently the negative form of reasons for which these accounts are *not correct*.

However, once the originality of operative intentionality has been acknowledged and enough attention is being paid to how it differs from a representational intentionality, we are faced with a question of higher order. We need to take into account the various cases in which an explicit awareness of perceptual figures does not only result from, but also impacts back on, the body-schematic activity. For example, an explicit perceptual awareness of one's body has been shown to hinder one's motor performance. At the same time, it can compensate for a corporeal

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² The term 'operative intentionality' was coined by Merleau-Ponty based on Husserl's and Fink's works and should be understood in contrast to a representational 'act intentionality' related to our reflective awareness and volitional decisions (cf., for example, Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. lxxxii, 441; 1968a, pp. 238–239, 244).

impairment. These phenomena call for an explanation of how the operative intentionality of our body schema is not only opposed to, but also complexly intermingled with, the representation-like grasp of one's own body, or the body image, and of the world in general. Taking up this question, my aim in this chapter is twofold—to present key aspects of Merleau-Ponty's works on body schema that go beyond the 'defensive' approach, and to clarify how they contribute to our understanding of the relationship between body schema and body image.

Before examining the notion of body schema, I note that Merleau-Ponty does not use any technical term corresponding to what could be translated into English as 'body image'³. As I will explain in Section 3.3, Merleau-Ponty even has philosophical reasons for privileging the notion of schema over the notion of image. Nevertheless, he occasionally discusses some of the *experiences* targeted by the concept of body image. In particular, he writes about the consciousness of one's body as it is mediated by visual perception and conceptual articulation based on linguistic symbolic systems. More importantly, however, Merleau-Ponty systematically relates his general interpretation of perceptual and linguistic experiences to the body-schematic operative intentionality. Thus, on the one hand, it is essential not to approach Merleau-Ponty's philosophy with a distinction between body schema and body image operated in advance (cf. Saint-Aubert, 2013, p. 43). This would obfuscate

³ When Merleau-Ponty interprets the works of Lhermitte (1939) or Schilder (1935) who employ the formulations *l'image de notre corps* and *the image of the body*, respectively, he consistently employs the term *schéma corporel* (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1964c, p. 117; 2011, pp. 126–162; 2012, p. 101 n5; cf. also Landes, 2012, p. xlix; Gallagher & Meltzoff, 1996, p. 217; Saint-Aubert, 2013, pp. 40–41).

his subtle analyses of how perceptual and linguistic experiences arise from our body-schematic praxis. On the other hand, we can gain insights into the relationship between body image and body schema as they are understood today, by extending Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the relationship between the explicit perceptual and linguistic-conceptual experiences and the body-schematic operative intentionality. My ambition in this chapter is to contribute to an elaboration of this second point.

Regarding the concept of body schema (*schéma corporel*) in Merleau-Ponty, most attention has been dedicated to *Phenomenology of Perception* (see, for example, Casey, 1984; Dillon, 1987; Carman, 1999; Gallagher, 1986; Gallagher & Meltzoff, 1996; Morris, 1999; 2004, pp. 36–52). However, as David Morris points out (2004, p. 35), much of Merleau-Ponty's treatment of the concept in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is implicit. Considerable attention has also been dedicated to Merleau-Ponty's lectures from the Sorbonne (1964c; 2010b; cf., for example, Gallagher & Meltzoff, 1996; Lymer, 2011; Whitney, 2012; 2018). Nevertheless, these lectures were primarily designed to provide students with an overview of recent psychological theories and to teach them the material needed for exams. Merleau-Ponty's main objective here was not to present his own philosophical position. Moreover, the text we have at our disposition consists of students' notes approved by Merleau-Ponty for publication, not of Merleau-Ponty's original writing (cf. Welsh, 2010, pp. ix–x).

Although their scope was limited, these resources were the most important until recently. Some relevant additions to them were Merleau-Ponty's texts written for his candidacy for a Collège de France professorship (1964b; 2000) and several summaries of the lectures from

this institution (1970). Beyond that, the concept of body schema appears in some of the lecture notes published since the late 1990s. It seems to have marginally influenced the lectures on ‘The Problem of Passivity’ (2010a; delivered in 1954–1955) and, to a much greater extent, the third year of Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on ‘Nature’ (2003, pp. 201–283; delivered in 1959–1960). Here, Merleau-Ponty takes up his earlier works on the body schema in order to elaborate a description of the libidinal nature of the body. The concept is also mentioned several times in both the published and unpublished working texts for the *Visible and the Invisible* (1958; 1959; 1968a; cf. also Saint-Aubert’s overview, 2013, pp. 70–74). Merleau-Ponty’s last writings show that his early works allowed him to use the concept of body schema as a self-explanatory tool suitable for a better understanding of other problems.

Nevertheless, the richest source regarding Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the body schema is the recent edition of his preparatory notes for his first Collège de France course (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, delivered in 1953)⁴ in combination with Merleau-Ponty’s summary of the course (1970, pp. 3–11). Of a total of 14 lessons of this course, the last five are dedicated to an extensive, explicit discussion of the body schema (see 2011, pp. 126–162, 199–211). Merleau-Ponty builds here on his reading of Schilder’s expanded English version (1935) of an earlier work. The principal sources from the *Phenomenology of Perception* remain in the background (e.g., Head & Holmes, 1911–12; Lhermitte, 1939;

⁴ This chapter was completed before an official English translation of the course became available (Merleau-Ponty, 2020). Thus, all quotations from the course are my translations.

Schilder, 1923), while other sources are added, sometimes via Schilder (e.g., de Ajuriaguerra & Hécaen, 1949; 1952; Gerstmann, 1927; Lange, 1930; 1933; Mayer-Gross, 1935; 1936; cf. the bibliography of the course, Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 213–217).

The text published in 2011 contains Merleau-Ponty's preparatory notes for his teaching, not the courses actually delivered. Since the notes are fragmentary, frequently allusive, and not always conclusive, this text has so far received considerably less attention from commentators than other Merleau-Ponty's works dealing with the body schema (see, for example, Saint-Aubert, 2011; 2013; Halák, 2016; Kristensen, 2019). Focusing on the principal question of how the body schema is related to intentional experiences referred to as body image, my goal in this chapter is to reconstruct Merleau-Ponty's position in the lecture of 1953 while supporting it with other sources mentioned above. I first summarize what Merleau-Ponty tells us about the original phenomenality of the body schema and how he links it to the figure-ground structural relationship introduced by Gestalt psychology. Subsequently, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the dynamic differentiation of the body schema as a ground of action and perception. This exposition opens the way for Section 3.5, in which I aim to clarify how the body-schematic operative intentionality gives rise to relatively independent superstructures of vision and knowledge.

3.2 The body schema as the background of perceptual figures

Very much in the spirit of recent discussions on the difference between body schema and body image, Merleau-Ponty explicitly claims that the body schema ‘is not perceived’ (2011, p. 143). More precisely, he explains that it usually ‘does not *need* to be expressly perceived’ (p. 142; my emphasis). It is a ‘precognitive function’ that ‘*precedes [avant]* explicit perception’ (p. 143; original emphasis); it ‘adjust[s] my body to objects entirely below the threshold of [*en deçà de*] explicit perception of the body or of the objects’ (2000, p. 18; cf. 1964b, p. 5 and 2012, p. 141). However, the fact that the body schema does not need to be perceived does not mean, for Merleau-Ponty, that it generally belongs to the domain of the ‘non-conscious’, as in Shaun Gallagher’s framework (cf., for example, Gallagher, 2005, pp. 55–56, or Gallagher & Cole, 1995, p. 385).

Merleau-Ponty crucially points out that since the variations of the body schema, such as the changes of muscular tonus, arouse variations of the perceived space, ‘the body schema *is also a certain structure of the perceived world*, and the latter has its roots in the former’ (2011, p. 144; my emphasis; cf., for example, 2012, pp. 145, n115; 213). In other words, the body schema is the ‘relatively imperceived’ background or ground (*fond*) of the perceptual figures targeted by our actions (1970, p. 4; cf., in particular, 2011, pp. 138–139). The body schema equips us with an ‘*implicit* notion of the relation between our body and things’ (1964b, p. 5; my emphasis). Our motor projects, and the perceived objects targeted by them, stand out as explicit figures against this implicit background (2011, p. 131; 2012, p. 105). Structurally, the body schema is a figure (*Gestalt*,

totality superior to the sum of its parts), but it cannot be conceived of only in terms of explicitly perceived or intellectually conceived figures, for figures themselves ‘can neither be conceived nor exist at all without horizons’ or backgrounds (p. 103).

The lecture notes from 1953 bring important clarifications. As a ground, the body schema is ‘not merely confused perception’ or a ‘context’ of upcoming perceptions (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 142, 141). For Merleau-Ponty, there is a *structural* difference, ‘a difference of order’, between an explicit figure and an implicit background (p. 141). The body schema is that *through which* the world is present to our action (p. 141), rather than contents inside the world—it is ‘the mediator of here–there relation’ (p. 142). One’s bodily engagement in and toward the world creates a divergence (*écart*) between the perceiving and the perceived (1968a, p. 197) and thereby distributes perceptual values between ‘indifferent backgrounds’ and ‘privileged figures’, making the latter stand out against the former. For this reason, each figure ‘appears perspectively against the double horizon of external space and bodily space’, which makes the body schema ‘the always implied third term of the figure–background structure’ (2012, p. 103).

The body schema is thus the background, in relation to which all the particular perceptual contents are organized (cf. 2011, p. 141). The consciousness we have *of* it is normally a consciousness of a *divergence from* this background, a consciousness Merleau-Ponty calls ‘indirect’ (cf. p. 139). Certainly, the background can be perceived as a figure by means of a perceptual operation of a superior order such as a philosophical reflection (p. 141). However, such an operation is typically not required for the body schema to be present on the background and available for us.

If, for example, a person needs to actively explore one part of his or her body with the help of other parts to identify its spatial position, this condition signals an impairment on the level of the body schema.

Merleau-Ponty describes the ‘preparatory movements’ of Gelb’s and Goldstein’s patient Schneider precisely as attempts to access his body in terms of perceptual *figures* and to compensate the disintegration of his body as a perceptual ground (2012, p. 110).

By consequence, Merleau-Ponty thinks that to situate the body schema with regard to what we are consciously aware of ultimately ‘requires a revision of our notion of consciousness’ (2011, p. 143). Even more radically, Merleau-Ponty suggests that we ‘abandon’ the notion of consciousness altogether and ‘replace’ it by a description of a mutual ‘expression’ between the body schema (background) and the perceived world (figure) (pp. 51, 53).

Merleau-Ponty elaborates this idea by describing how the body schema ‘immediately’ gives us positions, distances, or the elapsed duration of time as ‘charged’ with the practical value they have for us. Comparable to a ‘taximeter’ on which the distance travelled is presented as already transformed into the cost of the journey, the body schema presents spatiotemporal contents already ‘in terms of *I can*’ (2010a, p. 242).⁵ In the lecture of 1954–1955, Merleau-Ponty even speaks more broadly of a ‘practical schema’ that (re-)establishes the referential norms of our life ‘by distributing valences to all that is presented’ according to what is inscribed in it from our personal and interpersonal history (2010a,

⁵ Merleau-Ponty is alluding here to Head & Holmes (1911–1912, p. 187) (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 136, 196, 200; 2012, pp. 140–143).

p. 169, n10). This extension is anticipated in the 1953 lecture, where Merleau-Ponty explains that the perceptual consciousness should be conceived of 'as essentially projective' in the Freudian sense, for 'we see *on* things what is manifestly an expression of the subject' (2011, p. 176; original emphasis). Between the body-schematic ground and the figures of the sensible world, there is therefore an 'expressive relation' (p. 63), for the world 'indicates' what is required from our body in terms of our movement, posture, and attitude, while inversely the body opens a field for something to be perceived and 'completes the given' by appropriately adapting itself to it (p. 80). Perception, Merleau-Ponty concludes on these grounds, 'is already expression' (1970, p. 6; similarly, 2011, p. 176).

As the background which is 'expressed' by experienced figures, the body schema is precisely 'invisible' in the sense of the late Merleau-Ponty's notion (1968a). Importantly, Merleau-Ponty explains that the concepts of visible and invisible 'are not contradictory' and one should employ his concept of the 'invisible' as one speaks of the 'immobile' (1964a, p. 21)—the invisible in Merleau-Ponty's sense 'is not foreign' to the domain of visibility; it is rather 'the limit or degree zero of visibility, the opening of a dimension of the visible' (p. 21).

As applied to the body, Merleau-Ponty's concept of invisible combines the Gestalt-psychological idea of perceptual norm and Husserl's interpretation of the body as the 'point-zero' of orientation (see Husserl, 1989, pp. 165–166). All the explicit experiences I have of my body and of the objects 'oscillate around norms' or reference levels that 'are never given' as such but are univocally circumscribed by the way in which those experiences differentiate one from another, and all from the level itself (Merleau-Ponty 2011, pp. 178–179). Thus, the 'invisible' body

schema is not the contrary of what we are conscious of, but precisely the referential level, the ‘degree zero’ in relation to which the figures we are conscious of acquire their maximum of determinacy.

Merleau-Ponty’s use of the figure-on-a-ground conceptual framework brings our attention to the fact that although we are not conscious *of it*, the body schema is a necessary structural dimension of what we are consciously aware of. Although we do not perceive *it*, we perceive *according to* it and *in relation to* it. It is precisely for this reason that Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body schema is ‘never absent in [an] awakened consciousness’ (2011, p. 142). In other words, Merleau-Ponty provides reasons for supporting the view that the relationship between the implicit body-schematic background and the explicit figures (including all body images) should be understood as *systematic*. The body schema is not related to perceptual figures in an arbitrary way; its presence does not unilaterally depend on situations, and it is not just a result of factual processes. A perception, be it a perception of one’s own body (‘body image percept’), is always a figure on a (back)ground, and as such, it is a modality of the indivisible figure-on-a-ground *system*.

In this respect, Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of the body schema marks a significant difference from Shaun Gallagher’s approach, although both approaches could be qualified as non-representationalist. Gallagher explains that, inasmuch as the body schema is essentially a corporeal automatism, it generally remains in the domain of the ‘non-conscious’ (e.g., 2005, p. 38). Beyond that, he adds that his distinction between body schema and body image ‘cuts across’ the distinction of conscious–non-conscious (e.g., p. 18) and that, correspondingly, *some* aspects of the body schema *may* become conscious (e.g., p. 38). Interestingly, Gallagher

himself adopts the idea that the body schema should be conceived of as a background of perceptual figures.⁶ However, considering his definition of the body schema as something that is not related to the conscious domain in a systematic way, the ‘ground’ Gallagher refers to would not have a systematical relationship to the perceptual figures either. Although Gallagher himself points to ‘reciprocal interactions’ between body schema and body image (e.g., p. 35), in his framework, these relationships are described as *situational*. Merleau-Ponty’s view is, on the contrary, that the background of perceptual figures is *systematically* shaping all that is phenomenal for us, and thus constitutes *a structural part* of the consciousness itself. In the Merleau-Pontyan framework, the body schema therefore cannot be called ‘non-conscious’ in the sense of something belonging to a domain that is distinct from what we are conscious of.⁷

In the following sections, I will explain how Merleau-Ponty maintains, but also modifies, this position by taking into consideration

⁶ See Gallagher (2005, p. 36; 2017, p. 191; see also Chapter 6), referring to Goldstein & Scheerer (1964). Merleau-Ponty did not read the latter text, but his interpretations of Goldstein’s earlier works (see, in particular, Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 105–140) emphasize an *interdependence* between the two dimensions of the figure-on-a-ground, much like Goldstein and Scheerer later did (e.g. 1964, p. 8).

⁷ Commentators familiar with Merleau-Ponty’s works sometimes perceive Gallagher’s emphasis on strictly distinguishing body image from body schema as an approach ill-equipped for positively qualifying their relations (see, for example, Saint-Aubert, 2013, pp. 52, 58; Kristensen, 2019, pp. 25, 32–33). The adoption of the figure-on-a-ground model might alleviate this difficulty. However, Merleau-Ponty’s considerations indicate that this may require us to conceive of the schema–image relationship as systematical, not situational.

different processes through which the body schema is transformed into an acquisition, an *object* of perception, and thus ceases to be just its background.

3.3 The unity of the body schema as a task-oriented system

Since *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty has insisted on the originality of the notion of schema and clarifies its meaning by providing a series of negative, contrasting definitions. I will now discuss two groups of these definitions, in which Merleau-Ponty argues against understanding the body schema as a pre-established structure and as a physiological mechanism.

Merleau-Ponty argues that body schema cannot be conceived of in terms of bottom-up processes—it is not a result, or a habitual residue of factually occurring sensations or stimuli (see 2000, p. 18; 2012, pp. 101–102). As a schema, it ‘distributes meaning’ to individual sensations in a top-down fashion, depending on its global unity.⁸ Any particular sensations of one’s body are only perceived depending on a ‘central distribution’ (2011, p. 138). This becomes particularly evident in some pathological cases, such as autotopagnosia, phantom limb, and allesthesia (allochiria).

However, the unity of the body schema is not a fixed structure. It always remains ‘open and indefinite’ (2012, p. 242; cf. 2011, pp. 139, 142). More precisely, it is organized and specified in relation to

⁸ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (2011, p. 133; cf. 1964b, p. 5; 2000, p. 18; 2010b, p. 24).

situational praxic tasks, actual or possible (p. 102). Correspondingly, the unity of the body schema is equivalent to its capacity for a synergic action oriented toward these tasks (p. 152).⁹ Instead of being merely a pre-established structure, the body schema must therefore be conceived of as a *unity of praxis dynamically adapting to tasks*.¹⁰

Correspondingly, our consciousness of our body is ‘closely connected to what we *do*’ (2011, p. 131; original emphasis). Thus, to ‘have a body’ or a bodily organ is to know where to find the praxic powers to carry out an action, and to experience a ‘coincidence’ (*Deckung*, as Husserl puts it) between certain aspects of the world as we act upon them, and the body as a starting point for this initiative (pp. 150, 136). When this unity of action is compromised due to an unusual position of the limbs or a pathology, the subject does not experience the body as belonging to him or her, despite the body being objectively present and physiologically available (pp. 135, 150; cf. also below the discussion on Japanese illusion).

In sum, the body schema is a ‘form’ (*Gestalt*) organizing its spatiotemporal environment, but since it is dynamically organized in reference to praxic tasks, it is a form that is content-dependent (2011, p. 104). In other words, the unity of the body schema is centred on the perceptual figures as the targets of its praxis, but this makes these figures play a role in how the body schema is itself organized. As I will explain in more detail below, this relationship has fundamental importance for our

⁹ Cf., in particular, Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 211–212, 243, 330).

¹⁰ See Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 138–139, 140–144), interpreting Schilder (1935, pp. 75–81).

understanding of how the body schema can be structured by a body image.

For now, it is important to clarify how Merleau-Ponty furthermore explains that the body schema is neither a *mechanism* (2000, p. 18) nor an *idea*, an ‘object of knowledge’ (2011, p. 140). On the one hand, the body schema is a ‘non-ideal totality’ (p. 134); it is ‘concrete’, perceptible; it does not need to be ‘interpreted’ in order to be understood (p. 133). Unlike the unity of an idea, the unity of the body schema is a ‘pre-logical unity’ (2012, p. 241), an open unity of a ‘coexistence’ or ‘mutual implication’ of the bodily organs acting in synergy (2011, pp. 140, 133). To have a body schema thus means to have ‘a power to vary certain principle without an explicit knowledge of this principle’ (p. 204). On the other hand, one’s body is neither *perceived* nor *moved* as an object. The perceptual ‘gaps’ involved in my perception of my body are ‘overarched’ by the global unity of the body schema, and the body is therefore not ‘deployed in front of me’ as an object (pp. 128–129, 132). Similarly, I do not move my body instrumentally as I move objects, because I am not aware of the means that I am using in order to attain a praxic goal, such as which physical parts of my body are involved (p. 133).

With respect to the more recent debates on the body schema as a ‘motor program’ providing ‘physiological information’ (e.g., Gallagher & Cole, 1995, p. 369), or even a ‘sensori-motor machinery’ (e.g., Paillard, 1999, p. 212), it is interesting to see how Merleau-Ponty more precisely situates the body schema in relation to the body as a physiological entity. The body-schematic functioning can be viewed as situated at the limits of what falls within my personal control—it is ‘happening’ as a subpersonal ‘performance’ or ‘process’, as Gallagher writes (2005, pp. 29, 32, 17).

Although Merleau-Ponty himself speaks of the body as an anonymous organism (e.g., 2012, p. 86), he also claims that his analysis of perception in terms of the body schema demonstrates an ‘existential layer’ of perception, which is situated ‘beyond the physiological *mechanisms* which have been studied so far’ (2011, p. 200; original emphasis). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty refuses to identify Goldstein’s ‘concrete movement’ with a ‘physiological’ event (2012, pp. 124–126), again referring to an ‘existential’ dimension of perception (pp. 133–137). Even though the body schema could be viewed as a pre-personal automatism, Merleau-Ponty points out that it also accommodates personal history and that ‘the past of my body is present to it like its future’, since the history is ‘enclosed in the *I can*’ of the body as a ‘polarization of its power’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, p. 195, referring to Schilder, 1935). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty notes that he is indifferent to ‘inductive discussions’ related to the body schema, such as whether it is principally postural (Head) or visual (Schilder) (2011, pp. 210–211; cf. 2012, pp. 115–122). In his view, the meaning of a phenomenon cannot be established inductively because it involves a (philosophical) interpretation (2011, p. 211).

Merleau-Ponty even claims that his philosophical interpretation of the body schema as an ‘existential’ function ‘is not subject to a potential refutation’ based on empirical evidence (2011, p. 211). This statement can be clarified by looking more closely at Merleau-Ponty’s explanation of the relationships between physiological conditions of the body and a subject’s intentions.

The ‘existential’ dimension of the body schema, which is irreducible to physiological mechanisms, is already evident on Merleau-

Ponty's emphasis on the spatiotemporal cohesion of the overall activity of the body since, as we have seen, the cohesion does not strictly correlate with objective or physiological conditions. Further precisions can be given with the help of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of spatial orientation—a particular spatial situation can be perceived as both oblique or vertical, depending on how the body anchors its (actual or potential) activity in the perceived space, be it merely through a passive visual observation (2012, pp. 253–265). This happens because the change of the perceptual anchoring displaces the perceptual norm serving as the reference level for the determination of orientation.

In the 1953 course notes, Merleau-Ponty elaborates this interpretation by taking into consideration other aspects of situation, in particular the physiological conditioning of orientation and the active, task-oriented mobility of the body (see 2011, pp. 71–73, 76–79, 177–180). Merleau-Ponty builds here on Schilder's description of variations of muscular tonus, as evidenced on the so-called Kohnstamm's phenomenon.¹¹ A particular muscular tonus establishes a 'normal resting position' which determines the body schema 'as norm, zero of divergence [*écart*], level [*niveau*] or [a] privileged attitude', in which nothing is sensed as a figure (p. 131). Correspondingly, our positions in space are experienced as a 'divergence, anomaly' from the norm (p. 143; cf. p. 139). However, the experience of Kohnstamm's phenomenon furthermore shows that the muscular tonus defining the referential norm for explicit perceptions is variable, always provisory. More precisely, variations of the perceptual norm provide evidence of a 'divergence' of spatial

¹¹ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 131, 139, 142), referring to Schilder (1935, pp. 75–81).

localization of the body ‘in the direction of the effort’ (p. 142; cf. 1970, p. 7). As the background of action and the spatiotemporal locality from where action proceeds, the body schema is therefore ‘not only retrospective: it is prospective’ (2011, p. 142). Consequently, it cannot be defined merely as an actual perception of an object—‘it is a *project*’ (p. 142; original emphasis).¹² For this reason, ‘the body schema and the body are situated not where they are objectively, but where we are prepared to place them’ (2011, p. 139). In sum, the body-schematic spatial localization transcends the objective emplacement of the body and its physiology, because the starting positions for our activity, and thus all the explicit figures perceived as targets of this activity, are systematically shaped by our intentions and projects.¹³

A further analysis of the perception of spatial orientation helps elaborate this interpretation in even more detail. As Merleau-Ponty observes, the perception of movement and rest depends on the vestibular system, which is itself one of the physiological aspects of the body schema (2011, p. 200). Similarly, Merleau-Ponty notes that a change in the labyrinth provokes a variation of the perceived world (p. 144) and can thus ‘displace’ the vertical axis (p. 140; 2010a, p. 242). The vertical orientation, however, is not *given* by one sense such as the labyrinth, and not even by the *sum* of the sense data (2011, p. 178), for a disorder of the labyrinth, for instance, can be ‘masked’ by visual orientation (pp. 148, 158). The sense of verticality is neither an interoceptive experience of the

¹² On the ‘prospective’ activity of the body, see also Merleau-Ponty (2012, in particular pp. 241, 249).

¹³ Merleau-Ponty later develops this idea with the help of a psychoanalytical understanding of desire. This topic is thoroughly discussed by Saint-Aubert (2013).

subject, nor is it given exteroceptively on the basis of what is perceived in space (p. 178). Rather, it is given on the basis of the relation established between all the experiential dimensions (p. 177). The senses provide the vertical axis only ‘as all joined together’, which means that they ‘all indicate divergences from the vertical [axis], without being able to provide [it]’ in isolation (p. 179). The norm of verticality is not given as a particular content of experience; it is ‘invisible’ as the ground toward which all the sensed aspects are oriented and around which they ‘oscillate’ throughout their variations (p. 178; cf. above in Section 3.2). Spatial orientation is thus established and maintained only through our active ‘engagement’ in the world (*montage envers, engagement*), without which the body becomes enclosed in itself and is reduced to a condition of an object (2011, p. 179; 2012, p. 265, n26).

The body schema is a norm which is open to empirical events, precisely a ‘register’ into which these events are continually inscribed (1970, p. 7; cf. 2010b, p. 200). However, Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of task orientation and spatial orientation shows that this cannot lead us to the conclusion that the body schema is ‘a *product of development*’ (Gallagher & Meltzoff, 1996, p. 213; my emphasis; cf. Saint-Aubert 2013, p. 52). The body schema accommodates *both* physiological (objective, empirical, ontogenetic, pre-personal) and subjective (prospective, projective, libidinal, personal history-related) changes of situation. Perceptual values are determined not just on the basis of various sense data, but because the body and the surrounding space ‘form a system’ oscillating around norms that are maintained only through our active engagement in the world (2011, pp. 177–178).

3.4 Differentiations of the body-schematic system

Perceptual meaning is based on how the figure-ground system concretely organizes the relation between the body schema and the perceptual environment, which potentially includes perceptions of one's own body. By insisting on the originality of the notion of schema, Merleau-Ponty already reinforced the idea that the body schema is itself a *system*.¹⁴ In the 1953 lectures, Merleau-Ponty elaborates this idea by qualifying the body schema as a '*diacritical system*' (2011, p. 174; my emphasis). As we will see, this step enables Merleau-Ponty to further clarify how perceptual figures, including the perceptual aspects of our body image, relate to the perceptual background of the body schema.

As stated above, the body schema opens us to divergences (*écarts*) from perceptual levels. This means for Merleau-Ponty that it only gives us 'differences without terms' (2011, p. 203). Perception, as such, must therefore be understood as a 'diacritical, relative, oppositional system' (1968a, p. 217; cf. 2011, pp. 203–204). Individual 'cardinal points' of the body-schematic system (2012, p. 328), in particular the active limbs, are synergically integrated into one unity; yet inasmuch as they are synergized, they also work one *in opposition* to another, and thus provide us with 'the possibility for discrimination, for the use of the diacritical' (1968a, p. 213; cf. p. 233).

Merleau-Ponty's discovery of Saussure in 1947 and his adoption of some elements of the structuralist conceptual framework have at least two fundamental implications for the interpretation of the body schema

¹⁴ See Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 100; cf., in particular, 1964c, p. 117; 2010b, p. 247; 2011, p. 133; 2012, pp. 108, 145 n115, 154, 191, 242, 243).

and its relation to perceptual and conceptual aspects of body image. On the one hand, it helps Merleau-Ponty to identify an ‘interrelation’ between ‘the conception of neurological pathology in terms of dedifferentiation and the Saussurian notion of the diacritical sign’ (1970, p. 23; 1954, p. 84v). On the other hand, it helps Merleau-Ponty connect the body schema and perception as its correlate to language and other cultural diacritical systems that similarly only involve ‘differences without positive terms’.¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty thereby formulates a theoretical framework in which the flexible diacritical activity of the body schema is geared into comparatively more solid diacritical systems of perceptual figures and language, which have their specific capacity to provide us with, among other things, perceptual and conceptual experiences of our own body. I first briefly outline how Merleau-Ponty uses the structuralist framework to account for several types of transformations of the body-schematic capacity for diacritical action. The second point related to explicit visual and linguistic experiences of our own body will be more closely analysed in Section 3.5.

We have seen how the Gestalt-psychological conceptual framework already allows Merleau-Ponty to explain how a perceptual norm can be shifted, re-established. The fact that the open system of the body schema has the capacity to be ‘mobilized’ and ‘specified through action’ oriented towards praxic situational tasks (2011, pp. 142, 139) means, in short, that the body-schematic ground always *accommodates* a perceptual figure by organizing itself around it. Now, Merleau-Ponty’s

¹⁵ For example, Merleau-Ponty (1973, p. 31); quoting Saussure (1959, p. 172); cf. also Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 117–118, 143, 203–204).

elaboration of the Gestalt-psychological framework from a structuralist perspective helps him to describe this accommodation in a much more detailed way.

An analysis of sleep and compensatory movements in apraxic conditions in terms of diacritical operations shows how the body schema and perceptual figures are dynamically ‘geared’ one into another (*engrenage*, e.g., 2011, p. 178). Sleep deprives us of our mobility as our ‘means of articulation of a universe’ into figure-ground structures (1970, p. 9)¹⁶ and thus leads to a disarticulation of perceptual figures. Similarly, the events of falling asleep and waking up must be understood as provisional dedifferentiation and subsequent restoration of the structure of the body schema as a dynamic diacritical system articulating our environment.¹⁷ To fall asleep is to ‘return to the inarticulated’ (1970, p. 47), and inversely, the first movements upon waking up and our effort to reconstitute the body ‘as an active totality facing a situation’ (2011, p. 142) enable us to ‘restore our diacritical and oppositional systems’ based on the minimum of contacts with the world maintained during sleep (1970, p. 9).

A condition similar to sleep can be found in Schneider, who uses additional exploratory movements to ‘reactivate’ ‘the amorphous mass’ of his ‘slumbering’ body schema and to produce an increased articulation of perceptual figures (2012, p. 112; 2011, p. 142). Here, the additional structuration brought by an increased mobility compensates or

¹⁶ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 151, 164); referring to Mayer (1937).

¹⁷ Cf. Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 142, 151, 162–163, 174, 207–208; 1970, pp. 9, 46–48; 2010a, pp. 145–148).

substitutes¹⁸ the presence of the body schema on the background as it is present in non-pathological perception. The examples of sleep and Schneider's compensatory movements show that between the 'degrees of articulation of our body schema' (cf. 2011, pp. 151, 163), our movements articulating a perceptual target, and the degree of articulation of the perceptual figure, there is a correlation and dynamic structural interdependence.¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty, moreover, observes that sleep apraxia leads to 'sleep aphasia' or the inability to articulate linguistic meanings (2011, p. 151). Sleep disintegrates the 'system of speech' as the latter is 'a particularly fragile superstructure of the body schema' (p. 164; cf. 1970, p. 9). The free 'association' of images, which is typical for sleep and dreaming, or the paraphasia of those who are not fully awake, would result from a lack of precise speech articulation and, consequently, the fact that, for a sleeping subject, the meanings of language signs do not adhere to their conventional significations. Merleau-Ponty thus views the linguistic system of phonetic and, correspondingly, conceptual oppositions as another complex of 'figures' that need to be taken up by our body schema in order to maintain their meaning. This view also well corresponds with other Merleau-Ponty's observations, according to which the body schema is articulated not only in relation to present perceptual

¹⁸ In the 1953 lecture, Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 94, 142, 158) repeatedly uses Goldstein's term *Ersatzleistung*. On the compensatory activity, see also Merleau-Ponty (1963, p. 40; 2012, p. 80; referring to Goldstein, 1934).

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty also notes that the body schema always tends to become 'indistinct' in immobility, even though it never ceases to exist completely (2011, pp. 139, 142; 2012, p. 110).

figures, but also by a virtual, imaginary, or verbally presented situation (cf. 2012, pp. 110–111).

Merleau-Ponty's examples of dynamic processes of (de)differentiation of our experience have fundamental importance for our understanding of how an element of body image can affect the body schema. They more specifically show not only how the articulation of perceptual, and even linguistic, figures is a culmination of our body-schematic mobility, but also how the figures dynamically intervene in the organization of the body schema.

3.5 *Praxis* and *gnosis* as levels of differentiation

The interpretation of our body-schematic *praxis* in terms of diacritical activity anticipates Merleau-Ponty's discussion of its relation to the *gnosis* or 'contemplative, notional knowledge' linked to vision and our use of symbolic systems such as language (2011, p. 151).

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that motor experience offers us a way of reaching the world that 'must be recognized as original, and perhaps as originary' (2012, p. 141). The question of *originality*, however, is a negative one and can be summed up as the contention that 'motor experience is not a particular case of knowledge' (p. 141). Similarly, in the 1953 lectures, Merleau-Ponty dedicates most of his efforts to defend the 'originality of *praxis*' or mobility (cf. 2011, pp. 151, 154, 158). However, the course notes also carefully discuss the more interesting, and the more challenging, question of whether our mobility is *originary* to meaning. The 'originary notion of movement', Merleau-Ponty claims, 'exceeds by far' the idea of a simple

‘change of location’—it is one’s ‘gesture’, ‘a means of articulation of a universe’ and one’s ‘position among things’ (pp. 151–152). The question is, now, whether the *knowledge itself* is a case of mobility and, if yes, to what extent.

Although Merleau-Ponty often does not provide a clear conclusion in his discussions, he clearly explains that his emphasis on the role of *praxis* or mobility should not be understood as a defence of an ‘anti-intellectualist’ or ‘irrationalist’ philosophical position (2011, p. 52). Far from that, he aims to introduce a ‘new type of analysis that applies to the intellect [*entendement*] itself’ (p. 173). Several of his texts from the same period clarify that between perception-mobility, on the one hand, and our ‘experience of truth’ in intellectual understanding and cultural knowledge on the other, there is a *continuity*, but also a qualitative *difference* (cf., for example, 1964b, pp. 6–7; 1973, p. 121). Thus, the ‘theoretical’ attitude (*theoria*) linked to our use of language and other symbolic systems must be conceived of as a ‘second-level *praxis*’ (2011, p. 127), but it is impossible to *reduce* it to the practical-motor performance of the body as the agent of perception (p. 199; cf. 1973, p. 129). Such a reduction is not what Merleau-Ponty strives for (2011, pp. 54, 199; cf. 2000, p. 29). Now, we need to understand more precisely how knowledge (*gnosis*, *theoria*) transcends, transforms, transfigures, or sublimates perception-mobility (*praxis*).²⁰

Merleau-Ponty proceeds by confronting contrasting examples. To clarify the relationships between *praxis* (originary mobility), *gnosis* (knowing), and in part also *phasis* (speaking), he analyses empirical cases

²⁰ Cf., in particular, Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 7; 2011, pp. 55, 65, 162).

of apraxia and agnosia (eventually aphasia). On Merleau-Ponty's reading of Schilder (1935), apraxia should be described as a condition in which the subject 'knows what' she is supposed to do (*sait ce que*, *gnosis*) and is able to describe it in speech (*phasis*), but the 'intellectually defined task' is not transformed into the praxic organization required for the accomplishment of the task (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, pp. 144, 154–155; cf. 2012, p. 142). The praxic difficulty is not notional (*notionnel*), because the normal subject herself does not know (*ne sait pas*) which part of her body accomplishes specific parts of the task (2011, p. 155). Although there are different types of apraxia, among which only some are manifestly associated with gnosic difficulties, they are never simply equivalent to a pure incapacity to move a limb or to understand (*concevoir*) the task or to formulate it in speech. Such a condition would lead to paralysis or dementia, not to apraxia (p. 155). Crucially, as Merleau-Ponty points out, scientists themselves are faced with an 'impossibility to absolutely eliminate two [of the] factors to demonstrate the causal role of the third' (p. 153). In other words, it is impossible to *explain* one type of disorder exclusively based on the other (pp. 145, 158; cf. 2012, pp. 115–122).

However, the case of the so-called Japanese illusion, which Merleau-Ponty describes as an 'experimental apraxia' (2011, p. 127), shows more specifically that 'a partial disorganization of the body schema and corporeal space can have an effect on *gnosis*' (p. 147).²¹ Due to an unnatural position of the hands and fingers in the experiment, the visual body is no more accessible to the subject as the starting point for an

²¹ Merleau-Ponty builds on Schilder (1935, pp. 23–24, 52–56).

action, even though it remains accessible for it as tactile (even based on verbal command, *phasis*; p. 150). This dissociation leads Merleau-Ponty to conclude that the experimental position produces an alienated, dissociated, external body, a body-object, and shows how ‘human *praxis* sediments in vision’ (pp. 148–149).

As it is evident, Merleau-Ponty interprets visual perception of one’s body *as a part of the body schema*, not just as a body image which would be distinct from it. In the case of the Japanese illusion, a disorientation on the visual level results in a temporary disorganization of the body-schematic diacritical system, that is, a perceptual figure disintegrates the body-schematic ground. As both Schilder and Merleau-Ponty point out, the disorienting effect of the visual figure can be overcome by repeated attempts to mobilize appropriate parts of the body, that is, by gradually readjusting the body-schematic ground to the unusual figure.²² This means, inversely, that in normal conditions, my (external) perception of my own, and even other people’s, body is mapped onto my body’s (internal) pragmatic-motor possibilities and ‘speaks to’ them, as Merleau-Ponty himself writes (2011, pp. 130, 150; cf. Kristensen, 2019, p. 33). However, this mapping of a body image onto the body schema is only one particular implication of Merleau-Ponty’s general account of the figure-ground relationship as constituting one system, as I have already described them above. From a Merleau-Pontyan perspective, the body-schematic ground of perception opens a field for some figures to appear

²² Cf. the analogical case of the so-called Aristotle’s illusion, which Merleau-Ponty explicitly describes as ‘a disturbance of the body schema’ (2012, pp. 211–212). See Morris (2004, pp. 39–40) for a detailed discussion on the illusion and how it can be overcome.

in it, but one's 'body image' systematically maps itself on the body schema because *all* perceived, or even linguistically articulated, figures call for an accommodation of the body-schematic background.

By consequence, the 'construction of a visual body schema' (*schéma corporel visuel*) can 'compensate for' or 'mask' a deficiency of a more vital order, such as a disorder of the labyrinth (Merleau-Ponty 2011, pp. 158, 148).²³ Similarly, Schneider is able to *recognize* an 'abstract' movement when it is happening, even though he is not able to carry it out spontaneously (cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 112–113). These cases of dissociation of gnostic body (target of vision or pointing) from praxic body (the starting point or 'ground' for action) attest the possibility for a 'stocking of practical intentionality' (*stockage de l'intentionnalité pratique*) or a 'cumulative history' of *praxis* (2011, p. 199). This means that 'the results acquired on one level remain acquired even if the same function is disintegrated on other levels' (p. 157). Using a Husserlian terminology, Merleau-Ponty also repeatedly contends that the system of gnostic superstructures should be understood as a *sedimentation* of praxic infrastructures.²⁴ By sedimenting, the figure-ground diacritical system of perception becomes a system of differentiation based on 'traces of human *praxis*' (*trace, tracé*, p. 156). Correspondingly, Merleau-Ponty dedicates a large part of the 1953 course to the study of such traces on both perceptual and cultural levels, and to the way in which they 'express' and 'call for' a specific act of a body-schematic taking up (cf., in particular,

²³ In my understanding, this would also apply to Ian Waterman's case described by Gallagher & Cole (1995).

²⁴ See Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 148, 151, 157, 201; cf. also the terms *acquis* and *acquisition*: pp. 141, 157, 161).

2011, pp. 70–126, 165–170). For Merleau-Ponty, a visual ‘trace’ is an ‘inscription’ of a temporal movement into a spatial figure, and therefore ‘a beginning of sedimentation’ (p. 189; cf. pp. 113, 119).

Merleau-Ponty also claims that the sedimentation eventually culminates in the creation of linguistic signs, which are ‘arbitrary’ or ‘conventional’ (Saussure) and thus guarantee a ‘radical transcendence of the signified with regard to the signifier’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2011, p. 162). The conventional character of signs accomplishes the process of dissociation of meaning from its praxic context and creates what Merleau-Ponty calls an ‘intelligence institutionalized in language’ (pp. 157–158; cf. 1968b, pp. 38–39). The question of language, however, is intentionally excluded from the 1953 lecture as Merleau-Ponty believes that the linguistic type of sedimentation requires a dedicated inquiry (cf. 2011, p. 66). Merleau-Ponty addresses language in his other works from the same period (e.g., 1973; 1964b; 2000), in the course from the following year (1954), and beyond.

In the 1953 lecture, Merleau-Ponty therefore clarifies that all of our relationships to objects constitute *one system*, even though this system is stratified into different levels of figure-ground dynamics. This is evident on the fact that the disruptions of this system manifest themselves predominantly on its gnostic (visual-symbolic) or praxic (corporeal) pole—apraxia and agnosia are ‘relatively independent’, even though there is often a ‘predominance’ of one type of disorder.²⁵

²⁵ See Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 146, 157); referring to de Ajuriaguerra & Hécean (1952).

However, cases of constructive apraxia show more precisely that there can be a gnostic difficulty rooted in the impossibility for the subject to ‘motorically take up’ (*reprise motrice*) the perception of a figure or trace ‘as incarnating a motor project’ or as its equivalent (2011, p. 156; cf. 2012, p. 142). Similarly, on Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Schilder, every agnosia involves an incapacity to manipulate with some aspects of the structure of the object and, inversely, every apraxia ‘erases a layer of signification’ from our knowledge (*connaissance*) of the object or at least from its practical presence for us (2011, p. 157). Thus, in general, we need to conceive of *gnosis* as a second-level *praxis* or as its sublimation, a mobility of another level, because gnostic recognition and praxic manipulation are intermingled and ‘any impairment at one level has repercussions at other levels’ (p. 158). Following the idea of de Ajuriaguerra and Hécean (1949), Merleau-Ponty ultimately decides to conceive of *praxis* and *gnosis* (and *phasis*) not as distinct faculties, but as ‘poles’ or ‘levels’ of ‘one fundamental activity’ or function, which is our mobility or *praxis* (2011, pp. 145, 157; original emphasis).²⁶

Thus, on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that since gnostic superstructures can compensate for a disintegration on the level of praxic infrastructures,²⁷ the former ‘acquire a relative independence’ from the latter (2011, p. 148). On the other hand, however, he points out that this independence ‘is not absolute’ (p. 148), and if the infrastructure is ‘weakened’ in some way, the superstructure is negatively affected by this fact in the long run (p. 151).

²⁶ Cf. also Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 154, 158; 2012, pp. 119, 121, 139).

²⁷ See Merleau-Ponty (2011, pp. 148, 157–158, 202; cf., for example, 2012, p. 139).

In order to illustrate this point, Merleau-Ponty returns once more to the case of Schneider, who uses his ‘external verbal knowledge’ (2011, p. 157) to mask his praxic deficiencies. The possibility of such a compensation shows that ‘language is a symbolism that succeeds in masking its own ruins’ (p. 202). However, the superstructures of language and knowledge have ‘lost their productivity’ in Schneider’s case (p. 148) and therefore have become ‘fundamentally different’ from what they are in normal subjects (p. 157). They became a *mere* mask of the praxic deficiencies rather than fully *replacing* their function (p. 148; also see above: *Ersatzleistung*). Schneider was still able to use language and had conserved arithmetical skills to a certain degree, but he had problems to understand analogy, formulate new metaphors, act spontaneously, or improvise in speech. In short, ‘the “life” of language is altered’ in him (2012, p. 201; cf. pp. 129–130); the integrity of language ‘is only apparent’ in his case (2011, p. 157).

In sum, Merleau-Ponty maintains that a full integrity of gnostic superstructures presupposes the integrity of the ‘power of construction’, and thereby the integrity of praxic infrastructures (2011, pp. 148, 157). The sedimentation only remains ‘alive’ (*vivante*) as a ground for some meaningful figures if our body-schematic capacity for diacritical activity continues to support it and carry it further. Thus, even on the gnostic level, the incarnation ‘may be reduced, but not eliminated’ (p. 201)—if the gnostic superstructure is to conserve its integrity and its full sense, it must remain connected to the praxic infrastructure of the structuring activity of the body schema.

3.6 Conclusion

According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is correlative to mobility and thus to the body schema as the ‘register’ in which the motor possibilities are continually inscribed and from which they radiate into the environment. Correspondingly, we are usually not aware *of* the body schema, because it is not one of the experiential contents of the world, but rather a standard or a Gestalt-psychological ‘norm’ of our *relation to* the world.

Correspondingly, all perceptions, including those which we have of our own body (body image percept), are figures-on-a-ground. As figures-on-a-ground, perceptions are not merely our intentional counterpoles, but provisorily acquired norms in reference to which the body-schematic operational intentionality continues its diacritical activity. Figures are not simply representations, but affordances and way-points for our exploration. This is how a body image percept can both compensate for a lack on the level of the body schema and inversely hinder its activity—visual perception of one’s body is not only a *result* of body-schematic activity, but also a provisorily established referential norm with regard to which such activity continues to evolve. As it is evident, a fundamental implication of Merleau-Ponty’s decision to include the ‘ground’ of the figure-ground structure into the phenomenal domain is that it informs us about how the body image percept co-organizes the body schema.

However, Merleau-Ponty tells us much more than that. The mobility rooted in our provisorily acquired norms inaugurates what Merleau-Ponty calls ‘a dialectics of expression’ through which the

mobility is ‘transformed into expression’ (2011, pp. 151, 158, 164). The ‘expressive’ gesture of pointing, for example, is still of the perceptual order; it is a refinement, a more specific differentiation of the perceptual structure itself, and thus the ‘assumption’ of the full sense of the perceived (*assomption*, p. 65). Gesture is thus not a representational act relying on an ‘abstract’ attitude (cf. 2012, pp. 122–123), but a diacritical superstructure refining our perceptual norms. It is a figure that accommodates articulations that would remain in the (back)ground in a merely receptive attitude. As such, a gesture is a superstructure of the body schema. In this way, Merleau-Ponty outlines a description of a process through which the body-schematic *praxis* sediments in perceptual superstructures or ‘expressions’, which appeal to our body schema and require to be ‘taken up’ (*reprise*) on ‘higher levels’ of *praxis* such as co-perception and gestural communication.

Perceptual norms are therefore not only incessantly renewed through movement; they are also more specifically structured by diacritical norms of superior orders, progressively more ‘sedimented’ diacritical systems such as visual figures, gestures, and, ultimately, language. Body-schematic operative intentionality (*praxis*) thus not only serves as an infrastructure for the consciousness of various types of explicit intentional correlates (*gnosis*), but also ‘incorporates’ them in itself and is modified by them (cf. 2011, pp. 141, 151, 158). Thus, even though Merleau-Ponty maintains that our mobility is originary with respect to meaning, his philosophy is not an anti-intellectualism. Perception founded in mobility does not *exclude* quasi-representational experiences of sedimented meanings as we observe them in vision or linguistic articulation. On the contrary, body-schematic activity is co-

organized by perceptual figures, including our body image percepts, and eventually cultural diacritical systems that include body image concepts. These are the grounds that Merleau-Ponty builds on when he occasionally speaks of an ‘institutional or cultural element of all perception’ (p. 177) and claims that perception is ‘informed’ or ‘fashioned by culture’ (1968a, p. 212).

Beyond that, we have also seen that although the gnostic superstructures become relatively independent of praxic mobility and impose their sedimented structures on it, they also necessarily involve some type of *praxis* or activity. Disconnected from a subject capable of the ‘higher level *praxis*’ of speech, language is reduced to a mere ‘mask’ or ‘ruin’ of language; it is ‘petrified’ and ‘emptied of its meaning’ (2011, p. 201; 1970, pp. 119–120). The diacritical symbolic system of language needs to be taken up in speech, which is the agent of a supra-perceptual body-schematic *praxis*—a superstructure of the body schema. Taking into account how various body images both stem from a body-schematic context and acquire a relative independence on it, Merleau-Ponty provides an account of experience that maintains a priority of operative intentionality on all of its levels.

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