

White Logic and the Constancy of Colourⁱ

Helen A. Fielding

In a series of ten-minute films entitled *Art Make-up*ⁱⁱ made between 1967 and 1968, Bruce Nauman phenomenologically draws the viewer's attention to the inherent relation between colour as hue, colour as skin colour, and colour as symbol in Western cultureⁱⁱⁱ. In each of the four films named after the colour with which he respectively smears his own body, *White*, *Pink*, *Green* and *Black*, Nauman reveals the relations involved in the perception of the body as a lived, moving, sinuous centre of specific capacities, and in the perception of colour as hue, skin colour and symbol. What is revealed are the ways that colour, according to specific lighting, shapes and defines the contours of flesh, and how colour is deeply linked to racialized symbolization in Western culture. The power of these films is that they do not directly state the obvious; rather, they draw the viewer who carries with the films into each film's lighting and spatial level, and thus invite complicity with what the films as a whole reveal. Indeed, what was disturbingly revealed to this viewer was her complicity in the symbolization belonging to the dominant lighting level of Western culture that cuts whites off from their bodies even as it identifies blacks with bodies tied to nature and to an animality that is inherently raced and sexed^{iv}.

What I would like to argue is that in Western culture there is a devaluing of colour that is linked not only to an epochal repression of embodiment, but also to a collapse of difference and multiplicity into sameness and unity. The intensity of colour, moreover, is diffused in our readings of representations that shut out in advance our encounters with otherness, and our openness to creative change. While Merleau-Ponty's observations about colour help to reveal its

participatory and vital aspects, at the same time, they also reveal the propensity to maintain constancy that is inherent to the phenomenal body he describes. This propensity to depend upon an established corporeal schema, and yet, at the same time to see anew, allows us contact with being that is open to creative sedimentation. What, then, is phenomenologically revealed in Nauman=s films is the tenacity of dominant ideological spatial and lighting levels, and the focus on representation to the detriment of our lived corporeal creativity which allows for and is open to otherness as well as to multiple, embodied meanings.

This suppression of lived corporeal creativity under the rubric of the cognitive and its unifying representational activity is an enduring theme for Merleau-Ponty. How does the embodied subject rely on structures that allow her to encounter the world as meaningful even as she remains open to the creative sedimentations of new structures? And how can our thinking become more open to the creative possibilities engendered through our corporeal engagement with the world even as our cognitive systems of meaning help us to make sense of what we see? Both are questions that have also been raised in the context of feminist theorizing where creative change of existing social relations is an abiding goal. In turning to Merleau-Ponty, I want to show how phenomenological description can reveal the invisible operations of the dominant illumination that privileges as neutral white skin as white race in Western culture. These operations allow for a relation between phenomenally perceived colours, their representative values, and the phenomenon whereby the colour white illuminates a field of relations in accordance with its representative values. Not only do things and people appear according to this illumination, but there is also an obscuring of these relations behind a screen of neutrality and normality. This screen prevents Merleau-Ponty from fully realizing the potential of his own

insights into spatial levels and the phenomenal body for he is clearly unaware of the extent to which this screen of supposed neutrality haunts his own work.

If our perceptual capacities provide our opening to the world that indeed allows us to encounter it at all, then it is vision, Merleau-Ponty explains, that allows us to have a sense of a situation, of the relations within a field. The ways we observe objects and people bending into one another, reflecting, deflecting, absorbing, and obscuring are not, for Merleau-Ponty, barriers to objective vision. Rather they reveal a field of relations that challenges conceptual and causal thinking which operates at a level removed from the lived world. Our perception of colour, in particular, defies conceptual thinking since it cannot be reduced to abstract knowledge; it is experienced more in the mode of participation and of mediation (*The Visible and the Invisible* [hereafter V.I.] 132; 174-175^v). And yet colour is so often reduced to representation and linked to specific significations, although in fact, what is particular to colour is that it exceeds the cognitive; it exceeds delineated lines of concrete fact. This is perhaps why Western philosophers have tended to devalue colour, assigning it the status of a secondary quality.

Although reversing the devaluation of the body in Western metaphysics was central to Merleau-Ponty's project, he did not however make the connection between the devaluation of the body and that of the feminine, which is closely associated with the body in Western culture. Significantly, the logic of binary thinking, inherent to metaphysics, that underlies this devaluation also aligns people, whose skin is understood as having colour, with the feminine and with the body, in opposition to white, male and mind. Indeed, the feminist term **Awomen of colour@**, which is meant to denote women whose skin colour is not white, would seem to subtly reenact this devaluation through the connections it makes with these existing equivalences. As

Richard Dyer points out in his book, *White* ([hereafter W.] 207), white people of course have a colour; but in keeping with binary alignments, this colour also "signifies the absence of colour" even as, paradoxically, colour itself is a **A**characteristic of life" and of bodily presence.

These devaluations, then, also make life itself subservient to the petrifying demands of a cognitive unity that is produced through the imposition of racial markers on the body, signifying in advance how that body is to be understood and read. Logic is not open to impossibles, to contradictions, to that which exceeds or does not fit into the equation. However, bodily being, as Merleau-Ponty reveals, is open to impossibles, for example, the separate touches of the two hands bound together in one being. But even more importantly, perception allows one to move beyond the self, to be open to otherness. The perspectival representation of depth in Renaissance painting that is mathematically calculated along disappearing lines does not present the world as it is; **A**it refers back, on the contrary, to our own vantage point@ (**A**Eye and Mind@ [hereafter E.M.] 174; 50^{vi}). It does not reveal to the viewer the otherness of that which is viewed.

Accordingly, when we turn to Nauman's films, what becomes apparent is that they displace the subject position of the viewer by opening her gaze to an otherness that goes beyond the assumed logic of representation, challenging existing equivalences. Indeed, what is revealed in the film, *White*, where Nauman first smears his body with white art make-up is that his body is not actually white. As he repeatedly dips his fingers into the paint, in a delicate gesture, and slowly massages the colour white into his skin, the difference between the colour of his skin and the colour white becomes apparent. As he touches the end of his nose with paint, as he slowly brushes his arm, spreading the colour along his body=s sinuous contours, he shows up the enormity of the surface of the skin of his slight body thereby emphasizing its sheer presence as a

body as well. At the same time, the white paint seems to flatten his flesh, reflecting light so that the fleshy curves of his muscles recede. His body almost begins to take on the appearance of a blank page. If, as Dyer proposes, in Western culture **A**it is spirit not body that makes a person white, then where does this leave the white body which is the vehicle for the reproduction of whiteness, of white power and possession, here on earth? (W. 207). How is it that the white body can appear as not appearing while simultaneously confirming the ways in which we see? Nauman's film, in fact, seems to visually challenge the viewer to consider the status of white skin as a bodily lived presence, introducing otherness and challenging cognitive unity.

Dyer argues that the logic of whiteness produces a seemingly neutral, universal position supported by enlightenment thinking. But at second glance, what becomes apparent is that this logic is supported by racially and sexually specific understandings of a mind/body dualism that links mind to a white male inherently rational European model and the body to a feminine, coloured emotional embodiment. Colette Guillaumin points out that although marking bodies to display social or religious status has a long history, for example, the "yarmulke (varying according to regions and period) of the Jews, [or] the yellow cross for the Cathars", the "idea of classifying *according to* somatic/morphological criteria is recent", dating back only to the eighteenth century^{vii}. The marking of colour emerged out of what was then a "circumstantial association between economic relations and physical traits" which was then justified and entrenched through appeal to natural grounds. Hence, the "idea of 'reducing 'the blacks' to slavery' is a modern idea"; before this move, skin colour was not a factor in determining who became slaves. What changed under the rule of Enlightenment thinking was the need to provide rational grounds supported by scientific evidence derived from nature; accordingly, what

emerged as a justification for slavery was the designation of a natural inferiority linked to skin colour and arranged hierarchically in terms of categories of race (Guillaumin, 140-141).

Bolstering this hierarchical arrangement, as Dyer explains, is the decisive but unstable link among white designated as hue, white as skin colour, and white as signification; this link among the three helps to support structurally enforced, although often invisible, concepts of white racial normality and superiority (W. 45-46). For example, white as hue is considered an objective aspect of colour. Still, it shapes how we encounter the other aspects of white.^{viii} Since white as hue is commonly understood to be "no colour because it is all colours", it allows for the representational "slippage between white as a colour and white as colourlessness". This slippage, according to Dyer, contributes to "a habit of perception" and to "a system of thought and affect whereby white people are both particular and nothing in particular, are both something and non-existent" (W. 47). Indeed, this conception of white as being neutral, exemplified by its common absence from paint colour charts, "already suggests its usefulness for designating a social group that is to be taken for the human ordinary" (W. 48). However, the variation and potential for alteration in white skin reveals that whiteness is not so much given as ascribed (W. 50). For example, it is deemed socially acceptable for people with white skin to tan, whereas people with black skin who use skin whiteners are viewed negatively. Although both are harmful to the skin, they carry diverse social meanings. As Dyer points out, these attitudes provide a "terrible warning to black people who try to be various" (W. 49-50). Moreover, white as a category has historically undergone slippage; for example both the Irish and Jews have been considered both white and nonwhite depending upon the social, and political situation of the time and place (W. 52-57). Hence, although white in terms of skin colour "is just as unstable,

unbounded a category as white as a hue, its strength is that, in its instability, it allows white to be presented as an apparently attainable, flexible, varied category even as the criteria according to which who can be included as white continually shifts (W. 57). White and black as symbols, however, do not exhibit such slippage or variation. Embedded in the everyday language we use is a binary understanding of black and white that marks white as good and black as bad: **A** >everything has its darker side=, >it=s just a little white lie= and >that=s a black mark against you=@ (W. 60).

If we phenomenologically investigate colour as hue, however, we learn that what is particular to colour is that it allows us to see the differences between things, to see difference at all. While light is necessary to vision, so too is colour which allows things to become differentiated.^{ix} For where there is pure sensation without background or foreground, there is no sensation (*Phenomenology of Perception* [hereafter P.P.] 5; 10-11)^x. Hence, we can only perceive where there is difference. Yet for Merleau-Ponty, what is important is not only that we perceive colour, but that we perceive objects in the world because inherent to this perception is a certain constancy about the way the objects appear in a range of situations. Paradoxically, this constancy is not caused by the detached objectness of the thing; in fact, objects always appear within a field which means that constancy always emerges in the objects= relations within that field. Significantly, this constancy is linked to colour and to light. He describes an experiment where one looks first through a hole in a box painted black that is illuminated brightly, and then through a hole in a box painted white and only faintly lit; both appear to be grey. But when a piece of white paper is introduced into the black box and a piece of black paper into the white, the two boxes immediately appear as a black box strongly illuminated and a white one faintly

illuminated. He concludes, then, that "for the structure lighting-object lighted to be presented, at least two surfaces of different reflecting power are needed" (P.P. 307; 355). In other words, in order for the lighting itself to become apparent as well as allowing for the appearance of objects, at least two surfaces of different colour, of different reflecting power are needed. Perception, as Luce Irigaray has also argued, requires difference^{xi}. But significantly, what Merleau-Ponty wants to reveal is that the constancy of objects, of colours, appears within the "articulation of the totality of the field, the wealth and subtlety of its structures" (P.P. 308; 355). Thus constancy applies to our apprehension of the book as red under varying shades of illumination. As well, the book's function as a book remains constant because the book always appears within a field, in relation to other objects that provide a structure for our apprehension of the thing as that thing. The red book remains a red book in different lighting levels and our perception of the book in a "neutral" light which is the dominant lighting is the one that carries over into other lighting levels.

In short, lighting and reflection are effective only when they remain in the "background as discrete intermediaries, and *lead* our gaze instead of arresting it". In photographs, for example, lighting takes on an object-like status and hence loses its capacity as intermediary (P.P. 310; 357). While a lighted object confronts our gaze, lighting itself is **A**what we assume, what we take as the norm[©] (P.P. 308; 355). For lighting has its own level; it projects its own logic. When we first switch on an electric light, the yellow lamp casts its yellow glare upon the room. But as the **A**level is laid down, and with it all the colour values dependent upon it[©], as our eyes become used to the new lighting level, the glare recedes and the objects take on their own colour again. We see according to the new lighting level which now appears neutral (P.P. 311; 359).

Moreover, white lighting is favoured since, Merleau-Ponty writes, the constancy of perception **A**is less perfect in coloured lighting, which cancels out the superficial structure of objects, and brings the reflecting potentialities of different surfaces to a common level, than in colourless lighting which leaves these structural differences intact[©] (P.P. 308; 355).

It is not, then, coincidental that thought and enlightenment are connected to metaphors of lighting and to sight. Light, white light in particular, allows us to see. It illuminates. This relation is more than metaphorical; it is also corporeal. As Merleau-Ponty writes,

[t]aking up our abode in a certain setting of colour, with the transposition which it entails, is a bodily operation, and I cannot effect it otherwise than by *entering into* the new atmosphere, because my body is my general power of inhabiting all the environments which the world contains, the key to all those transpositions and equivalences which keep it constant (P.P. 311; 359).

If perception is primary and hence precedes and intertwines with the cognitive, then our bodily ability to move into new lighting levels, new spatial levels has corporeal effects that simultaneously affect and intertwine with the cognitive. For, if we keep in mind Merleau-Ponty's insight into the logic of lighting, as well as Dyer's linking of hue, skin color and signification, then it follows that the light of Western metaphysics sets a particular level by which we see the world according to a seemingly neutral and universal en-light-enment. **A**My gaze **>knows=** the significance of a certain patch of light in a certain context; it understands the logic of lighting[©] and conforms to it (P.P. 326; 377). Hence, a thing is never perceived outside a field of relations, outside of a certain logic that my body understands as a type of synergy; a thing is **A**not actually *given* in perception, it is internally taken up by us, reconstituted and

experienced by us in so far as it is bound up with a world@ (P.P. 326; 377).

The logic of lighting is one, then, that we come to understand, that helps to confirm the world in which we live. Hence, it **A**always tends to become **>neutral=** for us@ (P.P. 311; 359). Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible* that a colour, yellow, for instance, can take on an ontological function when it ceases to be a specific colour and instead becomes the **A**color of the illumination, the dominant color of the field@ (V.I. 217; 271). Indeed, as the yellow light assumes **A**the function of lighting, [it] tends to become anterior to any colour, [it] tends towards *absence of colour,*@ [my italics] (P.P. 311; 359). Correspondingly, **A**objects distribute the colours of the spectrum among themselves according to the degree and mode of their resistance to this new atmosphere@ (P.P. 311; 359). Each of our senses is in itself a world which is **A**absolutely incommunicable for the other senses@. Still, each sense opens or encroaches upon the same world shared by the other senses, a world that is itself **A**Sensoriality@. Hence, the colour yellow, when it illuminates the field, takes on an ontological function because it imposes its particularity of yellow upon the whole field even as it **A**ceases to be visible as particular@ (V.I. 217-218; 270). Each sense opens onto this yellow world, the colour yellow becoming a dimension of being through which **A**every possible being@ is expressed. A sensible object can then be **A**representative of the whole@, although not in terms of a **A**sign-signification@ relation. This means that the laying down of a spatial and bodily level whereby the cognitive or mind is privileged over the body is perceptually taken up, paradoxically not in terms of representation, but rather in terms of privileging the representational itself as a bodily level.

Like the colour yellow, which can set up a level or a horizon, a concept too can set up a level which is itself invisible. For example, a concept like humanity (*Menschheit*) can itself be

taken up as a **A**horizontal generality, a generality of style@ (V.I. 237; 290) which affects the ways that things appear^{xii}. Since perception is primary, even the most abstract concepts in some way relate back to the world we have seen, heard, touched, tasted, and in which we have moved. Just as the sensible is invisible, a concept, like humanity, has a style or a horizon of being that precedes its conceptual formulation. Every concept must in some way be preceded by a style or generality of being that hence overlaps with the cognitive in its formulation as a concept^{xiii}. Moreover, because the colour yellow can become an ideality, an essence, or a style of being, it exceeds signification and representation. Hence, merely focussing only on how racism is perpetuated through representation and signification will not lead us to inquire into the ontological foundations that dictate how things and people appear according to a racist and sexist lighting level.

For example, according to a white lighting level which has taken on the atmosphere of neutrality and normality, white is associated with purity and disembodiment. These equivalences that accompany white logic can affect how victim and accused appear according to the classic rape script. Although according to the Enlightenment lighting level to which the justice system belongs, the courtroom should be the exemplary site of neutral judgement, Sherene Razak, quoting Kristin Bumiller, describes how the classic rape trial, which emphasizes the **A**victim=**s** purity@, reinforces the **A**>presumption that punishing violent men is justified to the extent that women are worthy of trust and protection=**@**^{xiv}. As Razak points out, this means that aboriginal women and **A**women of colour@ are **A**considered inherently less innocent and less worthy than white women...[since] the classic rape in legal discourse is the rape of a white woman.@ White women, in this light, are distanced from their bodies and hence their sexuality and desire; this

distancing is necessary to uphold their purity as having been violated, even as this purity itself stands as a racial symbol. However, the rape of Black women either by Black men or white men is taken less seriously (Razak, 69). As Patricia Hill Collins points out, in light of the history of slavery, black women are seen, according to this script, as sexual and animal-like because they have been closely associated with nature, the body, and sexuality as a justification for the violent exploitation of their sexuality and labour under slavery (1990). According to the lighting level of eighteenth century Enlightenment thinking that justified slavery according to an assumed hierarchy of nature, black women were not raped for they were not subjects who could be raped. In extending Razak's analysis, then, we can begin to see how, according to the logic of a white lighting level, people and objects appear in a field of relations, and according to a certain constancy which spills over from one situation to the next.

Merleau-Ponty's intuitions, then, help to reveal how racism, sexism and heterosexism, as examples, can become levels, invisible in and of themselves. These levels cast rays of illumination and shift the ways that things and people appear within a field of relations. They also help to reveal how white logic can set up certain equivalences that contribute to a level that is in itself invisible, and yet casts its seemingly neutral light upon the field of relations of all possible skin colours. For example, Dyer reveals in his study of film and lighting that the norm for cinema lighting is that which is produced according to the appearance of white skin colour. Accordingly, in shots that include both black and white actors, black skin is almost always under lit (W. 89-103). White is considered the colour of neutrality and universality that does not show itself, but illuminates the field. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's own work demonstrates that despite or perhaps even because of his meticulous phenomenological descriptions, he himself could not see

beyond the cultural level of a euro-centred heterosexual male perspective. This claim is exemplified in Judith Butler's early critique of Merleau-Ponty's chapter on sexuality in the *Phenomenology of Perception* which assumes a normal subject who is European, heterosexual, and male^{xv}.

Importantly, whiteness is a status that is precarious, that is always in danger of being lost, as exemplified by Dyer's description of the slippage of the category of white skin colour to both include and exclude the Jews and the Irish at different historical and geographical junctures (W. 52-57). At the same time, it has a certain constancy that has little to do with literal whiteness and everything to do with **A**racial^o signification as exemplified by the effects of skin tanning and skin bleaching; despite the actual changing of skin colour, one remains respectively black or white. Marlon Riggs shows, in his last film, **A***Black is...Black Ain't*^{xvi}, completed after his death from AIDS, how this logic of constancy can so effectively operate. African Americans, he argues, have in some sense been necessarily made complicit in a white logic that has, in the past, made them appear according to the logic of white naming. Although, as he argues, reversing this logic through self-naming was crucial to the civil rights movement and to black identity, the tendency to identify with white logic persists under the banner of an exclusionary identity that rigidly demarcates who counts as black. Riggs' own bodily status in the film as a black, gay man dying of AIDS is a reminder of how bodies, and some bodies in particular, have been devalued in the light of Western culture. Thus crucial in this film is a challenge to homophobia and sexism as destructive to black community. This film, as an exploration of the colour **>**black⁼ as a category used to justify suppression, violation and exclusion, is offered by Riggs as a plea for an expansive community rather than a unity based on the inherited violence

of exclusion, a unity, I would argue, that is only logical according to a white lighting level where colour status is determined in advance from within a field of relations.

Merleau-Ponty explains how colour constancy can be upheld despite apparent discrepancies, for constancy, inheres in the objects themselves. Colour persists even when it is not visually apparent, as in the case of, for example, his black fountain-pen which he still sees as black **A**under the sun=s rays. But this blackness [he writes] is less the sensible quality of blackness than a sombre power which radiates from the object, even when it is overlaid with reflected light, and is visible only in the sense in which *moral blackness* is visible [my italics]. The real colour persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of-quality, but through a non-sensory presence@ (P.P. 305; 352). Similarly, then, despite tanning, skin bleaching or other such superficial attempts to alter skin colour, as Dyer argues, in this white lighting level the **A**real colour@ of skin persists since it is not, in fact, so much about colour as about its equivalences within a particular spatial level. These equivalences, he notes, are linked to a dualistic system that sees black as the opposite of white within a colour system where no two other colours are seen as having opposites (W. 48). As Merleau-Ponty himself writes,

We now begin to see a deeper meaning in the organization of a field: it is not only colours, but also geometrical forms, all sense-data and the significance of objects which go to form a system. Our perception in its entirety is animated by a logic which assigns to each object its determinate features in virtue of those of the rest, and which '*cancel out*' as *unreal all stray data* [my italics]; it is entirely sustained by the certainty of the world (P.P. 313; 362).

Thus stray data which do not conform to the logic of lighting are cancelled out by the certainty of a world that exists; it is not merely the other side of the visible, but is that which does not even appear as absence according to this particular lighting level.

As Merleau-Ponty explains it, each sense opens out onto the same world providing a unity of the senses. Indeed, Cézanne **A**declared that a picture contains within itself even the smell of the landscape...[A] thing would not have this colour had it not also this shape, these tactile properties, this resonance, this odour...**@** (P.P. 318-319; 368). The question is whether this unity is one that erases differences to maintain the whole, or whether it allows for a co-existence of differences. If we expect that which we hear to confirm that which we see, and that which is not confirmed appears as a stray datum because it does not fit into the unity, then this unity is open to exclusion. According to Merleau-Ponty, it would seem that the **A**true significance of perceptual constancies... is grounded in the primordial constancy of the world as the horizon of all our experiences**@** (P.P. 313; 362). A picture hanging in an art gallery must be viewed from the appropriate distance so that a horizon of significance allows us to determine both the internal lighting level of the picture itself as well as the representative values of the daubs of colour. If one stands too close, isolating a **A**part of the field, then the colour itself changes, and this green, which was meadow green, when taken out of its context, loses its thickness and its colour...**@** The representative values are disturbed as is the internal logic of the lighting of the painting (P.P. .313; 361).

Black is...Black Ain=t opens with blurred images of Riggs running naked through a forest. These images, his voice-over later narrates, are his attempt to search through the clutter, through the attempts to confine him to some space where he is not seen for the **A**naked truth**@** of

who he is. Indeed, it would seem that the blurring of the images is integral to this attempt to unanchor established spatial and lighting levels, and to unhinge representational thinking that categorizes and shapes our encounters with others. Riggs connects these images to the images that hold together his own self-identity, **A**images of the woods, the rivers, the steamboats, the shacks[Ⓜ] of his own living memory. This living memory is not, however, representational; rather it is a gathering of that which has affected him, of that which is meaningful to his sense of self. It is about living life intensely even as he was himself dying in hospital as the film was being completed.

Although it would seem paradoxical that Riggs connects blurred images with the **A**naked truth[Ⓜ] of who he is, this connection does not seem so strange in light of Merleau-Ponty's intuition into the constancy of lived perception that establishes representational values from within a horizon that takes its field of meaning from preestablished equivalences. If we return to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the experiments with screens, what becomes evident is that the perceiver perceives from within a field. For, when the subject "looks through the window of a screen, [she] can no longer 'dominate' (*übershauen*) the relationships introduced by lighting..." (P.P. 308; 355). The subject cannot perceive objects in relation to one another from within the structures with which she is familiar. The screen unanchors the field establishing a **A**fictional plane[Ⓜ] which does not support objects but rather detached colour patches (P.P. 307; 354). The screen dislocates the structures of the viewer's perception. Merleau-Ponty writes, if one half-closes one's eyes, then one no longer perceives determinate things--their object status is suspended, colours are liberated, and anything is possible. He concludes that "the phenomenon of constancy[Ⓜ] seems to occur **A**only in things and not [for example] in the diffuse space of after-

images" (P.P. 308; 356). Accordingly, it would seem that the blurred images of himself that Riggs tells his unseen colleague he hopes she will use in abundance, provide this unanchoring from set spatial and lighting levels. They unanchor our preconceived representations of who he is and what we expect of him because they unanchor his image from the expected field of relations.

The paradox of phenomenal perception, then, is that we perceive objects and people from within the horizon of a **A**certain atmosphere[®], which sets out in advance how things and people will appear in relation to one another and in relation to the perceiver, even as it is perception that opens us to otherness as well (P.P. 305; 352). Each perceiving subject brings with her the sedimented levels that shape the way she encounters each new situation. There is, then, an inherent conservatism to perception that denies the appearance of stray data^{xvii}. At the same time, however, our corporeal ability to move into new situations and to take them up still leaves us open to creative sedimentation, to seeing anew. It is, Merleau-Ponty tells us, the **A**instability of levels [that] produces not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our contingency, and the horror with which it fills us[®] (P.P. 254; 294).

Merleau-Ponty, as a phenomenologist, reveals our contact with the things themselves, challenging Cartesian certainty, the belief that we can only be certain of that which we represent to ourselves. Still, Merleau-Ponty's own descriptions reveal the extent to which we apply previously sedimented representations and significations to the world we encounter, and which we can then encounter with certainty since we have encountered the same world before. If we return to his example of the picture in the art gallery, the picture, seen at an ideal distance,

It confers upon each patch of colours not only its colour value, but also a certain representative value (P.P. 313; 361). These representative values allow us to make sense of the world we encounter. The prejudices arising from Cartesian thinking, however, obscure the recognition that perception is a communication, or a communion of our body with things (P.P. 320; 370). That is to say, Cartesian thinking reduces the world to objects in themselves and subjects to pure consciousnesses, denying the links which unite the thing and the embodied subject, leaving only sensible qualities to make up our world. Visual qualities, in particular, lend themselves to this way of thinking since these qualities give the impression of being autonomous, and ... less directly linked to our body. Visual qualities appear to present us with an object rather than introducing us into an atmosphere (P.P. 320; 370). But what Merleau-Ponty phenomenally describes is that when we do, in fact, engage with the world and with others, this object-like status of colour recedes. For Merleau-Ponty, this indicates that perception goes straight to the things by-passing colour as a representative value, "just as it is able to fasten upon the expression of a gaze without noting the colour of the eyes" (P.P. 305; 352). What this means is that phenomenologically to go straight to the thing itself is exactly to perceive the thing from within an atmosphere which confers specific equivalences.

However, in Bruce Nauman's films, to which I want to return, it is impossible to go straight to the thing, to a humanist notion of the artist himself, bypassing the colour of his skin, since the films are about the encolouring of his body and the significations these colours confer. Importantly, these meditations on the repetitive gestures of the body do not hold the gaze. Viewers wander by each film but few linger; for the repetitive habitual gestures that gather an identity are presented in these works spread out over time just as they are in the mundaneness of

daily existence, or the temporal process of creating an artwork. What is, then, revealed is precisely that the mundaneness of these corporeal gestures enacts a process of signification-- in colour and at the surface-- and that this repetitive process that maintains a certain constancy is that which is at stake. Still, we do learn something about the artist, not in the humanistic terms of an interior subject, but rather phenomenally in terms of what is perceived at the surface which outlines the artist's commitment to challenge the viewer to question how she sees herself in relation to everything and everyone else around her.

In challenging existing equivalences, a phenomenological encounter with these films also reveals how colour exceeds representation. The second and third films, *Pink* and *Green*, named after the colours which are painted consecutively over the white, reveal the fleshiness of Nauman's body in contrast to its receding in white. Emerging in pink, his muscles and his face seem more alive; the shapes and contours of his muscles and bone structure emerge in the light. Painted pink, the very fleshiness of his body seems to undulate, to come alive, and the movements of his hands seem somehow more sensuous. The body is revealed as subject. But it is in the film *Green* where his gaze, which was previously always directed beyond the camera, perhaps toward a mirror, suddenly looks directly into the lens of the camera. This happens twice and only in *Green*. These moments are powerful because they expose the viewer's complicity, my complicity, in the system as a disengaged on-looker. For, in being recognized as a viewer, I must simultaneously recognize my own engagement. I become aware of wanting him to look again, to acknowledge my look; the previous absence of his recognition is an absence I had not even noticed until that moment.

It is in the last film, *Black*, however, that the full implications of the symbolization of

colour that invade or intertwine with our phenomenal perception emerge. As Nauman paints his body black, the colour seems to absorb light under the particular lighting used for this film; his body seems fleshy and larger than it did when painted white. In this film, he wraps his arms around his body, a seemingly protective gesture. As a viewer, I find myself again wanting his eyes to recognize me, to gaze at the camera, to complete the circuit. They do not. It would seem that he has simultaneously reminded the viewer of interiority even as he refuses to engage with it. But the disturbing realization of the extent of Western colour signification and my own complicity in this system, in particular as someone who is white, is revealed by his simple gestures of opening his mouth, blowing out his cheeks and showing his teeth. His face seems suddenly, disturbingly, >baboon-like=. It is a gesture that can only become significant and significantly disturbing from within the long historical chain of representation with which I am complicit, that connects black skin with animality, and that is simultaneously reactivated and broken open in these last simple gestures of the film series.

These films are an exploration of the surface, of the habitual, phenomenal, corporeal surface that is never exactly what it seems. Nauman himself is quoted as saying that **A**make-up is not necessarily anonymous but it=s distorted in some way, it=s something to hide behind. It=s not quite giving, not quite exposingYou=re not going to get what you=re not getting^{xviii}. There is then a revealing through a concealing, through the application of art make-up. What is revealed is not the inner qualities of the artist but rather the reversibility between the viewer and the surface viewed. This surface reflects the viewer back to herself allowing for an uncomfortable self-recognition that implicates the viewer in the epochal systems of representation even as it shows what it means to break them up. For it is important that Nauman

chose to make four separate films, each one preceding from the level of the last, the level provided by the colour painted on his body. Apparently, it was Nauman's intention that these films were to be projected simultaneously on four walls in life size proportions^{xix}. Although this is not how I viewed them myself, one could imagine that the effect of asserting four levels at once would be effectively disconcerting, drawing attention to the existence of the level itself. Importantly, while these films show up the sensuality of colour as it exceeds representation, they simultaneously reveal the tenacity of the dominant level of Western lighting which representationally reveals white bodies and black bodies according to its equivalences and significations.

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty criticizes Descartes for understanding colour as mere ornament, since colour too presents us with things, forests, storms--in short the world (E.M. 172; 43). And yet Merleau-Ponty remains critical of abstract art which he sees as a move toward multiplying the systems of equivalences, (by)...severing their adherence to the envelope of things. Although he maintains that this effort might involve creating new materials or new means of expression, he still questions why it could not be attained through reexamining and reinvesting those which existed already (E.M. 183; 71-71). In making this claim, he thus reveals this tension in his own work, and in the phenomenal body itself, between thinking creatively and adhering to sedimented structures. Merleau-Ponty's critique of abstract art exhibits his unwillingness to sever our connection to the world of objects which appear within a horizon of meaning and a logic of lighting, to sever the representational structure that gives form and contour to the phenomenal world. I would suggest, moreover, that he did not fully realize the implications of his own intuitions about the strength and tenacity of the spatial and lighting

levels that bind us to a world of equivalences. The question then remains whether a new system of equivalences, of new meanings, could be created if the lighting level itself is not shifted or challenged in itself as a unifying power. What is needed, it seems, is an opening for the existence of multiple lighting and spatial levels to coexist, thereby showing up the contingency of the level itself, a contingency we tend to avoid for the instability and the nausea that can accompany the experience of it (P.P. 254; 294). For what the shifting of levels itself reveals is that these levels are not neutral or universal even as the belief that they are tends to adhere to the level itself. It is just that which Nauman accomplishes in his films; he reveals the contingency of the level itself through exposing his viewers to different lighting and colour levels; as contingent they are open to change.

Marlon Riggs= film **A***Black is Black ain=it@* similarly challenges the existence of a singular lighting level. Just as Nauman=s films demand that the viewer reflect upon her complicity with what is viewed, Riggs= film tries to unsettle the equivalences themselves by exposing the relation among hue, skin colour and symbol that Dyer outlines. These relations, Riggs shows, provide a shaky foundation upon which to build a community, which could only be one of exclusion. Just as Dyer reveals the slippage incurred in the designation of white skin colour, Riggs similarly exposes the colour black to shifts according to historical and geographical circumstance. Near the start of the film, the actor protagonists chant **A**Black is blue, black is red, black is high, black is low@, at once exposing the viewer to her preconceptions of the meaning of black even as they begin to multiply the possibilities for the creation of meaning and structuring equivalences. Riggs= aim, however, to reveal the naked truth of who he is, I take to be the attempt to release his own sense of self from the net of significations imposed upon him

and to open this sense to his own creative remembering. In recounting his experience of hospitalization with AIDS, he remarks that at first he kept track of his T-cell counts to help take stock of the state of his health. As these counts dipped to dangerously low levels, he stopped counting, and instead began to attend to how he felt. It is not that Riggs wants to sever the bonds of community that link us together. Rather, he wants to multiply the possibilities of what counts as community, of how we understand ourselves. He draws upon his mother's gumbo as a helpful metaphor for a community of inclusion; for gumbo includes everything you could imagine along with the secret ingredients that make it his mother's gumbo. But were the gumbo to be made too thick, the ingredients would lose their individual flavours and the taste of the gumbo itself would be diminished.

This, then, is the heart of the paradox which Merleau-Ponty presents to us: how to achieve creative expression and new meanings from our contact with a world that has an established lighting level. If the world appears within a particular logic to which the phenomenal body responds, how can this logic be revealed in a way that opens up the potential of the body for dismantling structures, for creating new ways of relating and meaning? For the strength of phenomenological description is that it shows us where we are and hence how to proceed^{xx}. Indeed, if we become phenomenologically aware of the ways that things and people appear according to a particular lighting level or way of thinking, even as we begin to recognize the inherent contingency of the level itself, the possibilities for changing what previously seemed neutral and universal begin to multiply. I would maintain that creations such as Nauman's and Riggs' have this capacity to reveal and perhaps to break open the tendency towards a unity of our senses, to make the lighting level visible in a way that allows for new equivalences, that

allows for that which has been canceled out to appear as absence or, more importantly, as that which breaks open a unitary logic.

Notes

ⁱThis paper was read at the *Merleau-Ponty Circle* conference held in Washington, D.C., Sept. 13, 2000. I am indebted to the philosophical challenge offered by Dorothea Olkowski to think Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology against itself. See, Olkowski, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); I am also indebted to Grace Jantzen for guiding my work on colour in this direction and to the *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* for financial support.

ⁱⁱBruce Nauman, *Art Make-Up, No. 1: White* (1967); *Art Make-Up, No. 2 Pink* (1967-8); *Art Make-Up No. 3, Green* (1967-8); *Art Make-Up, No. 4, Black* (1967-68). 16mm, colour, silent.

ⁱⁱⁱSee Richard Dyer, *White* (hereafter W.) (London: Routledge, 1997), 45-46.

^{iv}See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman Inc., 1990) for further discussion.

^vMaurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (hereafter V.I.), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); *Le visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). The page numbers given refer to these editions, the second one given to the French.

^{vi}Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* (hereafter E.M.), in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans.

Carleton Dallery (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); *L=oeil et l=esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). The first page number given refers to the English edition and the second one to the French.

^{vii} Colette Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 139-140.

^{viii} Evan Thompson points out that for Newton, **A>**whiteness is the usual color of light[@], since **A**no ray ever exhibits this colour, and it requires proportions of all the primary colours[@]. *Colour Vision: A study in cognitive science and the philosophy of perception* (London: Routledge, 1995), 11.

^{ix}See Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Trangred (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 174-5.

^xMerleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (hereafter P.P.), trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962); *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). The first page number given refers to the English edition and the second one to the French.

^{xi}See for example, Luce Irigaray, **A**Flesh Colors[@], in *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); originally published as **A**Les couleurs de la chair⁼, in *Sexes et parentés* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1987).

^{xii}See Samuel B. Mallin, *Art Line Thought*. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996), 284-290, for further discussion.

^{xiii} I explore this transposition between the perceptual world and ideality more thoroughly in my article **A**>The Sum of What She is Saying=**=**: Bringing Essentials Back to the Body**@**, in ed. Dorothea Olkowski, *Resistance Flight Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

^{xiv} Kristin Bumiller, >Fallen Angels: The Representation of Violence against Women in Legal Culture,**=** in eds. M.A. Fineman and N.S. Thomadsen, *At the Boundaries of Law* (New York: Routledge 1991), 97. Quoted in Sherene H. Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 68.

^{xv} Judith Butler, **A**Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty=**s** *Phenomenology of Perception*,**@** in eds. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young, *The Thinking Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1989).

^{xvi} Marlon T. Riggs (with Nicole Atkinson, Christiane Badgley and Bob Paris), *Black Is...Black Ain=**t**: a personal journey through black identity* (San Francisco, Ca.: California Newsreel, 1995).

^{xvii} See Olkowski, 59-88, for a detailed critique of Merleau-Ponty=**s** intuition of spacial levels. Olkowski clearly demonstrates how Merleau-Ponty does not recognize the inherent conservatism apparent in his own phenomenological descriptions .

^{xviii} Coosje van Bruggen, Bruce Nauman (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1988), 196.

^{xix}Jane Livingston, **A**Bruce Nauman**@**, in *Bruce Nauman: Work from 1965 to 1972* (New York: Praeger Publishers), 27.

^{xx}Indeed, this questioning of **>how to proceed=**, indeed even **A**how to proceed correctly**@** has been attributed to Nauman. See Heinz Peter Schwerfel, *Make Me Think: Bruce Nauman* (Artcore Production for the Arts Council of England, 1997).