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Embodied Meaning in Hegel and Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

In this paper it is argued that the conceptions of embodied meaning and of intuition that Hegel appeals to in the *Aesthetics* anticipate some of Merleau-Ponty's insights concerning the distinctive character of pre-conceptual, sensuous forms of meaning. It is argued that, for Hegel, our aesthetic experience of the beautiful is such that we cannot readily differentiate in it the purportedly distinct roles that sensation and thought play, and so that the account of sensuous intuition operative here differs from the one appealed to in more familiar, 'intellectualist' conceptions that are premised upon our being able to make such a distinction. Some of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights are brought to bear to help support and illuminate some of the implications of Hegel's conception of such sensuously embodied meaning.

For Hegel, the domain of beautiful objects generally, and of artworks in particular, is distinguished by the fact that here meaning is directly embodied in a sensuous form. Our experience of a beautiful object does not, like our theoretical experience, abstract from the sensible particular so as to grasp, in thought, a universal essence or law that explains or otherwise makes sense of all particulars of that type. Rather, Hegel insists that, while we do appreciate something universal in our experience of a beautiful object, and are not simply captivated by an isolated sensuous individual at the expense of all other realities, and while thought must consequently be involved in this experience in some way, the sort of universality at issue here is not ultimately capable of being abstracted or detached from our engagement with the sensible individual in its sensuous appearing (*LFA*: 1.38/1.60).[1] It is a universality or a meaning that resides precisely in the organization or animation of the sensuous individual—an incarnate meaning, as it were—and so can *only* be appreciated by a sensing being in its sensuous engagement with that individual, even if something more than mere sensation—or perhaps some distinctively human or 'spiritual' form of sensation—is required in order to access it.[2]

The notion that there could be a kind of universality or meaning that is not fully distinct or detachable from the sensible particular, and that thus can only be accessed via a sensuous apprehension, is largely foreign to traditional epistemological frameworks that tend to maintain a sharp divide between the sensible and the intelligible, and correspondingly between sensation and the intellect and their respective roles in our experience. Such frameworks are often attributed (rightly or not) to figures like Plato, Descartes and Kant, and the presumption of such a divide has continued to inform dominant strands of contemporary epistemology. However, twentieth-century phenomenology, with its persistent critique of various forms of intellectualism, along with its attempt to bring to the fore pre-predicative, pre-conceptual and 'affective', forms of meaning at play in our lived experience of the world, has done much to make such a notion, along with its implied challenge to the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, a more familiar and viable option for philosophical thought.[3]

Arguably no phenomenologist has gone further in this regard than Merleau-Ponty, whose particular focus on the meaning inherent in the sensuous world has allowed us to get much clearer and more precise about the various issues at stake in recognizing pre-conceptual forms of meaning. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, for instance, Merleau-Ponty attempts to show that those processes that, with Kant, have come to be associated specifically with the understanding and its distinctively conceptual forms of synthesis—for instance, our rendering of the sensuous multiplicity received by intuition into a coherent, unified world of distinct, intelligible objects that are correlated to one another in various intelligible ways—in fact have their roots in a more primitive, pre-intellectual synthesis that is enacted precisely by our lived bodies as they grapple with the promise of a kind of coherence and significance that is appreciated at an immediately sensuous and affective level (see, for instance, *PP*: 31–36/40–46).

My general argument in this paper is that Hegel's aesthetic philosophy anticipates this phenomenological focus on sensibly embodied meaning, and my aim is to use some of the resources and problematics at play in Merleau-Ponty's thought to help orient and focus our attention on the rather novel—but admittedly somewhat implicit and less developed—account of embodied meaning at play in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. While Hegel does not go so far as to develop a full-fledged phenomenology of the sensing body's role in arriving at a 'felt' or 'sensed' meaning (as Merleau-Ponty does), we will see that Hegel's account of beauty, with its frequent appeals to the way nature and artworks reveal themselves to our actual experience, nevertheless implies a recognition of just the sort of distinctively intuitive, phenomenologically-apparent meanings that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of sensuous perception brings to the fore.

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I. Non-intellectualist perception

Despite Hegel's persistent criticisms of what he takes to be a too-rigid opposition between intuition and understanding operative in Kant's philosophy, Hegel has often been taken to uphold some version of the view that there is nevertheless a fundamental distinction to be drawn between the sensible and the intelligible, or between sensation and thought and the distinct contributions they make to our experience.[4] Indeed, if one looks to certain parts of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Spirit*, which is tantamount to an express statement of Hegel's own epistemology and philosophy of mind, what one finds is a rather dualistic-sounding, 'two-sources' account, whereby the activity of the intellect, in contrast to what is taken in by sensation, is ultimately responsible for positing distinct, external objects of experience in the first place (see, for instance, Hegel 1978: §420, §422, §422A). As Houlgate has argued, in the *Philosophy of Spirit* Hegel seems to have a stake in maintaining, along with Kant, that though there are in fact no 'unconceptualized sensations' in our normal experience of the world—for we never, or perhaps only rarely, have the experience of being captivated by a meaningless flux of sounds or colours as such; rather, we inevitably experience the brown *of this tree*, or the sound *of this voice*—sensations and concepts nevertheless make *distinct* and *separable* contributions to our experience (Houlgate 2006). This leads Houlgate to conclude that, for Hegel, 'we do not *see that* things are thus and so; rather, in seeing we *judge* that things are thus and so' (Houlgate 2006: 246; emphasis in the original). As he also puts it, for Hegel, 'we do not actually *see* the tree, if 'seeing' is taken in its precise sense; for all we see are the colours and shapes that we understand to form the tree' (ibid., 250–51; emphasis in the original).

For Merleau-Ponty, such a conception of experience would clearly count as a version of the 'intellectualist' sort that he is at pains to criticize, particularly in *PP* (though his focus here is not on Hegel's purported version of it, but rather on what he takes to be Descartes's and Kant's, as well as those of certain contemporary psychologists). Through a complex series of arguments, Merleau-Ponty exposes various problematic implications of the idea that perception is a result of the distinct contributions of sensation and judgement or understanding, and in place of this idea he aims to show, through phenomenological description, that to perceive is 'to apprehend an immanent sense in the sensible before judgement begins' (*PP*: 35/44). In this view, sensuous perception has a meaning and integrity of its own, independent of judgement's intervention; and, indeed, it is only on the condition of there being a kind of 'spontaneous organization' and a pre-predicative, 'perceptual syntax' at work in the sensible field itself—thereby giving rise to a meaning that is apprehended precisely *in seeing*, and not by an

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independent faculty of judgement or understanding—that our judgements concerning the perceived world are specifically motivated, and thus avoid being arbitrary (*PP*: 35–36/44–46).

In illustrating the character of such sensible meaning, Merleau-Ponty discusses, among other things, various optical illusions in which what we immediately see is at odds with what we, in thought, take to be objectively there. For instance, the moon at the zenith clearly looks smaller than the moon on the horizon, though we know they are the same size, and though when we abstract from our wider visual field and look at these respective moons through a cardboard tube, they appear to be of the same size. Merleau-Ponty argues that 'when I look quite freely and naturally, the various parts of the field interact and *motivate* this enormous moon on the horizon' (*PP*: 31/40; emphasis in the original). His point is that, what we actually see, or what is sensuously 'primitive' here, is not merely the positive sense data corresponding to the moon's objective presence—which, thinking of sensation in purely objective terms, should produce an appearance of the same size regardless of the two different positions of the moon—but rather the ways in which the various visible elements of our visual field interact and cue each other, thereby giving rise to a coherent overall vision.[5] On his view, the complex, bodily process of seeing is itself at work in resolving the multiplicity of visual factors into a coherent visual field, and it is motivated to do this according to the various visual cues that it encounters. These cues, along with what the eyes finally resolve upon, are in that sense *meaningful*, and there is something like a 'bodily intelligence' at play in 'interpreting' the visual field (or, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the process of seeing itself involves a kind of bodily intentionality, and is thus not the straightforward, passive result of causal forces that make us see what we do; see *PP*: Pt. 1, Ch.1). But their meaning is specific to the visual itself, and so can be appreciated only *in and by seeing itself*; we do not *understand* this meaning in any clearly discursive or conceptual manner.[6] Judgements of the form 'the moon is enormous' are thus not *constituents* of our perception, as the intellectualist might hold, but rather grow out of and register a complex operation that had already been taking place at a pre-predicative level.

If we insist on calling all apprehension of meaning 'thought', then we must acknowledge, in the case of such visual meaning, a kind of thinking that is so inextricably wedded to the sensible that it does not possess the sort of self-transparency and autonomy that we normally associate with our grasp of concepts and judgements, or with our self-conscious working out of their logical implications. Likewise, our notion of seeing or of sensation must be redefined, so that it is no longer to be conceived as a merely passive reception of sensuous qualities, into which thought must inject meaning, but rather *itself* involves a basic kind of intentionality and an active, quasi-interpretative (though non-conceptual) movement. On this view, even the most primitive forms of sensing we can

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imagine (such as of a coloured patch, for instance) must be understood as operating in terms of an appreciation of such minimal meaningful differences as 'figure' and 'background', differences which, as Merleau-Ponty argues, are basic to any sensuous discrimination whatsoever (*PP*: 4/10). On Merleau-Ponty's view, the idea that there must be a layer of meaningless sensuous impressions at work as a distinct and separable ingredient in every perception is itself the product of a certain sort of reflective attempt to *explain* experience, rather than something issuing from an examination of the nature of experience itself. And for Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological reflection, which seeks to stay true to experience as we actually live it, ends up revealing to us the artificiality of such theoretical constructs.

Putting aside the question of the adequacy of the intellectualist reading of the *Philosophy of Spirit* I mentioned above, I propose to show that in the *Aesthetics* Hegel conceives of the distinctive sort of *aesthetic* experience at stake in our appreciation of beauty (Hegel considers it a species of 'sensuous intuition' [*sinnliche Anschauung*]) as one in which sensation and thought are so thoroughly united or interpenetrating, that one cannot ultimately distinguish them from one another and separate out their respective contributions. As Hegel proposes, what is called for here is to exploit the double meaning of the German word *Sinn*, which signifies both the organ of immediate apprehension, as well as the meaning, the thought, the universal at play; and as Hegel says, the sort of sensuous apprehension involved in beauty 'does not cut the two sides apart at all'.[7] In the next two sections I will be suggesting that Hegel recognizes a form of pre-predicative, but nevertheless meaning-apprehending, sensuous intuition that is comparable to the richer notion of sensation we find in Merleau-Ponty's account.

II. Sensuous intimations of meaning

For a basic illustration of what is at stake in distinguishing between a meaning as it exists in and for pure thought, and a sensuously intuited meaning, I turn first to Hegel's treatment of our experience of natural beauty and, in particular, to what he considers to be the peak of natural beauty, namely, the living bodies of animals. As is well known, Hegel regards all natural beauty as inferior to the beauty that art is capable of, and we will see that this inferiority is related in part to the deficient way in which natural beauty makes meaning manifest to sensuous intuition, a deficiency that artistic beauty claims to overcome. However, seeing exactly how Hegel construes this deficiency within natural beauty will help us to highlight what Hegel takes the sensuous intuiting of meaning to involve.

First, a preliminary word about the sort of meaning or 'content' that Hegel takes to be at issue in beautiful objects is in order. It is certainly not a content that concerns this or that object in its empirical specificity. Instead, it concerns an

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object's overall way of being—something about the object's basic ontology, we might say. The beautiful sculpture of a human being, for instance, tells us not so much about the particular body or psychology of the particular individual depicted. Nor does it tell us about human bodies or human psychology generally. Indeed, in its beauty it does not 'tell' us anything, if this means something like 'giving empirical information' about something in the world. Rather, through some particular expression or gesture, the sculpture attunes us to an aspect of the overall way of inhabiting the world that subjectivity is distinctively capable of. Thus Hegel suggests that what we are most alive to in our experience of the beauty of certain classical sculptures of the gods is the serenity and imperturbability that comes specifically with the distinctive sort of ontological independence and autonomy that subjectivity possesses (*LFA*: 2.710–13/2.362–66). For such sculptures make manifest and palpable to us subjectivity's distinctive capacity not to be opposed and challenged by what is other to it, but rather to find itself already reflected in that otherness. It is this ultimate, ontological level of meaning—what Hegel associates with what he calls the 'concept' in its ongoing self-realization, which is for him the most basic movement of self-identity-in-and-through-otherness that characterizes reality in its ultimate truth—that is made manifest to us in a sensuous form, and its being manifest in such a form is precisely what beauty consists in.[8]

Thus, in the case of the beauty of animals, Hegel likewise focuses on the various ways in which our experiences of animals can serve to attune us to something ontologically basic about the overall way of being of animals, rather than to the specific traits of particular animals. She who finds beauty in the animal is attuned to the basic, ontological movement whereby the animal maintains its very identity and unity *qua* living being in the face of its possible dissolution into otherness and multiplicity (see *LFA*: 1.120/1.162–63). For instance, she is alive to the fact that, unlike an inanimate thing, the living body is not merely passive in relation to the world around it, but takes it up on its own terms, and realizes itself precisely in and through this cancellation of the other (for instance, in the activity of eating) (*LFA*: 1.123/1.166). Or, she is alive to the fact that the living body's organs are autonomously self-articulating, rather than simply being shaped from without, as is the case for instance with a rock's various parts (*LFA*: 1.130/1.175). Thus it is such 'ultimate contents' as ontological independence and self-determination (contents that are not peculiar to animals alone) that are at issue in our apprehension of animal beauty. So, the sensible intuitions at stake in this case are not simply of the sort by which we experience some object in terms of its particular essence (as in the 'this is a tree' case), but rather involve some sort of attention to ultimate matters concerning the nature of reality itself, the sorts of matters that are also addressed by religion and metaphysical philosophy.

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Since such ontological notions as 'independence', 'self-determination', 'self-identity' and 'otherness' are also *categories* that, as such, are graspable by pure thinking, the question naturally arises as to the difference between the *thinking* of such categories and the *sensuous intuiting* of their meaning. Clearly Hegel regards even the ontology of life as something that can be worked out in purely conceptual terms, without express reference to any actual sensuous encounter with individual living things. This is just what Hegel himself does in the final section of the *Science of Logic*, for instance, where he works out the implications of the distinctive logical structure of the concept of life (Hegel 2010: 676–88). Now, of course, we do not need to have thought through, for ourselves and in a rigorous philosophical manner, the precise logical structure of life in order to experience the beauty of living things. Nevertheless, such an experience does involve our having a sense of what it means to be a self-determining, independent organic body (in contrast to a dependent, other-determined body, say)—even if this 'having a sense' is somewhat indeterminate and does not itself imply a capacity to single out and define clearly what is thus at stake. So questions arise concerning the nature of this vaguer, intuitive, form of appreciation, and concerning how it relates to what we actually see when we are confronted with a living being: is there something distinctive at play in the way a living being makes itself visible to us that specifically attunes us to such ontological distinctness; or, is such distinctness available to us only through some sort of independently formed, *a priori* thought, such that we must somehow *apply* such ontological categories to a visual domain that is, in itself, inherently neutral or undifferentiating with respect to such meanings?

Hegel's response here is complicated by his conception of the deficient character of natural beauty: on the one hand, he clearly indicates that he is open to the possibility that such distinctness *could be* manifest in a specifically sensuous manner, but, on the other hand, he thinks that, as a matter of fact, living beings fall short of making their ontological meaning thus manifest, and so in their case some sort of clear division of roles between sensation and intellect is applicable. Let's take a closer look at this response.

Hegel argues that, ontologically, one of the most distinctive features of animal bodies is that their various organs, though patently distinct from one another in appearance, location, and function, are nevertheless fundamentally unified and integrated, in that none of them would be as they are in separation from the other organs and from the living whole which they jointly constitute. Thus Hegel elaborates on Aristotle's idea (Aristotle 1984: 726b21–23) that a hand, if severed from the body, 'does not remain what it was in the organism; its mobility, agility, shape, colour, etc. are changed; indeed it decomposes and perishes altogether' (*LPA*: 1.121/1.164). So the hand, though clearly distinct from the rest of the body in having its own appearance, function and location, is

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distinct only insofar as its distinctness is at once 'overcome' or 'idealized' by its being the expression of the same one living reality that is at work in all the other organs. For Hegel, the animal body is in this respect exemplary of the movement of the Concept, in that its reality consists of an ongoing movement of both 'putting itself out' into a multiplicity of distinct organs, while at once 'returning to itself' from this multiplicity—that is, restoring its unified identity amidst this multiplicity by affirming itself, precisely in and through its multiple organs, as the one being, the one soul, that animates them all.

Now the core question, with respect to beauty and its status as sensuous intuition, is whether and how animal bodies make this basic ontological movement of the Concept *sensibly manifest* to us. In this regard, Hegel focuses on the issue of whether there is a *visually apparent coherence* or *harmony* between the animal's organs, such that this multiplicity of different forms resolves into some sort of perceptible unity (in a manner analogous, perhaps, to the way in which, from an appropriate distance, the multiple daubs of paint in an impressionist painting resolve into a coherent landscape). Of course, such a harmony would be more complex than that which the eyes detect in the case of seeing a uniformly repeated pattern, as for instance in a series of windows in a building (see *LFA*: 1.125/1.169 and 1.115/1.156). For, what is striking about the organism is the extent to which its organs differ from each other, each in effect declaring its independent character and distinctive functioning: the aesthetic issue here is how organs as different as claws, eyes and teeth—each perhaps with its own distinct colours, materiality and function—can nevertheless come to strike us as harmonious with one another so as to announce from themselves that the same one being is realizing itself in and through them. It is precisely because animal bodies are so richly differentiated that they promise a higher aesthetic reward than the sort provided by simple repetitive patterns. For, Hegel argues, the lack of difference and independent presence between the reiterated elements in such a pattern presents us with merely *external* relations between the elements (i.e., looking at the elements themselves there is no *internal* reason why these elements should appear together) and the spectacle of subservience to a single rule, which, ontologically (and aesthetically) speaking, we cannot but find lifeless and somewhat dull.[9] It is precisely in witnessing a movement of overcoming difference and opposition, whereby each organ, despite—or, indeed, precisely in virtue of—its thorough difference, nevertheless announces its harmony with the others, that we come to feel that we are in the presence of something alive. What is at stake in animal beauty, then, is the sensible manifestation of animation as such.

Hegel's ultimate verdict here, however, is that animal bodies fall short of providing us with a complete and stable vision of such animation—and so fall short of full-fledged beauty—for, in the end, the visible differences between

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organs prove too great to resolve into an apparent unity. It is as though Hegel is suggesting that our vision finds it too easy to get lost in the visually distinct character of animal organs, such that we lose touch with the ways these organs are integrated with the other organs; the 'internal' relations between them are not always apparent.[10] Hegel acknowledges that we might get habituated to associating certain organs with one another, such that when we are faced with one organ we immediately come to think of the others. But he clearly means to distinguish such external, or 'subjective', associations with the sort of *internal* manner in which a particular thing itself makes manifest, in its very appearance, its essential belongingness to other things (*LFA*: 1.126–27/1.171). As an example of such internal relations, we might think of the way the notes of a melody immediately call for other notes to 'complete' or 'resolve' the quite *audible* tensions they themselves set up. It would seem that, in the case of animals, it is only because we know, via thought and judgement, that such internal integration between organs must exist, that we can come to posit an animating unity at work in the bodies we encounter.

Hegel acknowledges that having certain concepts before the mind can in fact help us to appreciate certain affinities between organs that otherwise appear quite distinct. He suggests, for instance, that an understanding of the concept 'carnivorous' and what it entails can help us to learn to recognize the 'unity of configuration' between a carnivorous animal's teeth, jawbone, and claws (*LFA*: 1.128/1.172); for, such a concept enables us to appreciate how these distinct organs fit together harmoniously into a single purpose (capturing and ingesting prey), and so in that sense overrides their mere multiplicity, but nevertheless not downplaying their crucial differences. However, Hegel is careful to note that this is not strictly a case of *intuiting* such a unity, but of *thinking* it. As Hegel says, 'Nevertheless it is not *intuition* which prevails in this method but a universal guiding *thought* [*Gedanke*]' (*LFA*: 1.128/1.172). Clearly the implication here is that such a rich unity-in-multiplicity *can, in principle, be sensuously intuited* (though not in this case), and that such intuition must involve something other than seeing in terms of a concept.

Interestingly, Hegel admits we might still regard the sort of 'conceived unity' just considered as having a kind of beauty, but he says that in this case we should ascribe the beauty to the subjective activity of reflection (*Betrachtung*), *not* the living body itself (*LFA*: 1.128/172). Though Hegel does not mention it, one wonders whether he here has in mind his critique of Kant's conception of reflective judgement, for according to this critique Kant's view implies that we are not justified in ascribing beauty (or notions of purposiveness and organic self-organization, for that matter) to actual objects, but only to the internal subjective processes or to the inherently subjective contents that those objects occasion.[11] In any case, it seems that, for Hegel, only a genuine sensuous intuition of such an

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animating unity *would* allow us to rightfully attribute beauty to the living body itself, and so it seems that in this case part of what makes intuition distinct from conceptual thought is that intuition in some sense *finds* its unity in the object, rather than actively *positing it there*.[12] If there is a kind of thought at work in aesthetic intuition, it would seem to be a thought that is specifically such as to somehow *receive* or *behold* a meaning that is manifestly there in the world (that is to say, there is a certain passivity at work here), rather than to actively grasp and thereby possess it in a purely ideal, internal manner that is detachable from its sensuous encounter with the world.

It is worth noting that, though Hegel takes natural bodies to offer only an incomplete or deficient sensible manifestation of the animating harmony that unifies them, and thus takes them to be deficient in beauty compared to artworks, he nevertheless argues that these bodies do sensibly intimate or offer a presentiment (*Ahnung*) of their animating unity (*LFA*: 10.128–29/1.173–74). While some natural bodies—say, a pile of dirt or an unshapely stone—present to intuition merely their utter self-externality, or announce their utter indifference to the form they take, the animal body is distinguished in that it somehow presents itself to the eye *as striving for* a higher sort of integration. Even if such a higher unity is only hinted at, and thus only made present in an indeterminate, inchoate manner, to *sense* such a body is nevertheless to be oriented towards such 'higher' unities, and so even here the conceptual thought that would bring a clearer, more determinate unity to our experience would not arrive completely unheralded, as from a totally distinct and independent source—say, a spontaneous act of understanding—but is directly *motivated* by the sensuous itself. Here the sensuous itself, far from involving a merely passive uptake of bare sensuous qualities, actively strives for meaningful articulation and unity, and though, in this case, it only ultimately attains to such meaning with the help of concepts that transcend it—that is, this sought-after unity is not here something brought into resolution *for sight itself*—sight is nevertheless primitively alive to, is pregnant with, such meaning on its own terms. For Hegel, it is only on this condition that we are justified in ascribing beauty—rather than just a rational, purely intellectual unity—to living nature in the first place.

III. Sensing animation

Where nature falls short, art succeeds, on Hegel's account. It should be the case, then, that art on his account *does* afford us the sort of sensuously apparent unities that nature only intimates. In this regard, it is instructive to consider some of the particular aesthetic judgements Hegel makes in connection to Classical Greek sculpture.

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Hegel regularly appeals to the notions of vitality and animation in his assessment of Greek sculpture, and, though it may seem strange, Hegel clearly means to suggest that, at least in the case of its greatest surviving instances, these utterly immobile, stone sculptures are more successful in making the animating soul of the living body sensuously manifest to us than are the actual living bodies of animals around us (actual human bodies included). As Hegel writes about the idealized bodies presented in such sculpture,

> This breath of life, this soul of material forms, rests entirely on the fact that each part is completely there independently and in its own particular character, while, at the same time, owing to the fullest richness of the transitions, it remains in firm connection not only with its immediate neighbor but with the whole. Consequently, the shape is perfectly animated at every point… everything has its own particular character, its own difference, its own distinguishing mark, and yet it remains in continual flux, counts and lives only in the whole. The result is that the whole can be recognized in fragments, and such a separated part affords the contemplation [*Anschauung*] and enjoyment of the unbroken whole (*LFA*: 2.725–26/2.380–81)

The sorts of transitions Hegel has in mind here have to do with the continuous way the eyes are drawn from one part of the body to another, without getting 'stuck' in any one part, as though this part somehow drew attention to itself at the expense of the whole, such that the eyes would have to make a deliberate and abrupt shift from it to other parts. Thus Hegel says the sculptors tended to avoid any rigid geometrical lines or curves (*LFA*: 2.756/2.420), which unavoidably create boundaries that interrupt what Hegel at one point describes as the 'beautiful organic undulations' of the body (*LFA*: 2.746/2.407).[13] It seems to be implied here that, akin to the case of the moon on the horizon in Merleau-Ponty's example, we do not simply see discrete sensible qualities or parts side by side, but we also *see* their harmony, we see the ways these parts as it were visibly refer to and interact with one another seamlessly—much as the notes in a melody present themselves, not as discrete qualities, complete in themselves, but audibly call for the notes to come. Though Hegel says in this context that the eye cannot at first glance make out all the nuances at play amongst the parts of the sculpture, he clearly does not mean to suggest that we must be given certain concepts to guide our seeing, so as to be able to appreciate this nuance or its significance (that is, the sense of animation). Rather, it is precisely by focusing our eyes more closely and attentively that we come to see, in the fully sensuous meaning of this word, the sorts of transitions and harmonies that the otherwise distinct parts participate in, and that, in itself, *is* the core of the experience of lively animation that he is after here.

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IV. Intuiting sensuous expression

Beyond its capacity to present natural bodies, and in particular human bodies, in such a lively and animated (though admittedly non-natural, idealized) manner, art is also essentially concerned with what Hegel calls spiritual immediacy: namely, the human body's distinctively spiritual capacity for *self-expression*, its capacity to make subjectivity's distinctive relation to itself and to its environment apparent in a sensible manifestation. Whether this takes the form of facial expressions, gestures, significant postures, tone of voice, or of actions and overt linguistic utterances, what is at issue in each case is not merely the body itself taken merely as one sort of sensible, natural thing *within* the world among other such things, but rather this body's distinctive capacity to *encounter,* and thus *meaningfully relate itself to,* both itself and the natural world around it, and, at once, this body's distinctive capacity *to embody this subjectively meaningful process of encountering as such*. Rather than taking place exclusively 'in the mind'—in its thoughts, introspections, feelings, perceptions, intentions—the self's meaningful ways of relating to itself and to the world take place, just as much, as certain bodily expressions, gestures, demeanours, actions, etc.[14] And to *see* such bodily expressions *as expressive* is, at once, to *see something of the meaning*—that is, the subjectivity—that takes place there.

For a preliminary illustration of what it is like to experience such expressions, we can turn again to Merleau-Ponty, for his whole phenomenological enterprise is arguably characterized by an attempt to make sense of the logic of expression in particular.[15] In relation to linguistic utterances, for instance, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are from a phenomenological perspective compelled to say that the sensible dimension of speech 'secret[es] *its own* meaning' (*PP*: 179/209; my emphasis), for when we are in the presence of another's utterance what we actually *hear*, first and foremost, is not the sounds of the words *as such*, but we are rather immediately wrapped up in *what is being said*, in the *meaning* of the utterance. Indeed, it is actually quite difficult, if not impossible, to hear the sounds *merely* in their sonorous character, as meaningless qualities, so immediately do they group themselves into significant unities. It is as though, in doing so, the sounds efface themselves in their discrete separation from one another, and thereby allow something other than mere sound—namely, a significance—to be heard in and through them. In such a case, meaning and sensuous appearance seem to penetrate one another and become inseparable in our experience, and it is precisely such thoroughgoing interpenetration and inseparability that, as I will discuss below, stands at the heart of Hegel's approach to grasping the aesthetic relevance of expression.[16]

Now, phenomena such as facial expressions, gestures and perhaps most especially spoken utterances, would seem to bring us into a more complex

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experiential terrain than appreciating basic resonances between visual elements, or visually apparent harmonies or continuities between bodily organs. For, in general, it seems easier to distinguish meaning from sensible manifestation in the former cases, and so it seems more plausible to conceive of intellect and sensation as having distinct and separable roles to play within our intuitions. For we can easily imagine, for instance from a child's point of view, or that of someone from a culture very different than our own, that certain expressions or bodily gestures would, though fully accessible to sensation, not be as immediately meaningful as they are to us, or might mean something different altogether. And, despite the fact that we cannot hear a spoken utterance in our own language except as meaningful, if this utterance were in an unfamiliar language that is very different from our own, our perception would clearly approach that of meaningless, fragmented sensuous qualities awaiting some further act of understanding to bring meaning to them.

If we speak of 'hearing' an utterance's meaning, then, this would seem technically inaccurate, for, despite the immediacy of our access to this meaning phenomenologically, it seems to be the case that what I am hearing is really just sounds (the same sounds a baby or a person who does not know the language hears), and that I, as someone capable of understanding them, grasp or reconstruct their meaning, ultimately through the activity of my own intellect, and then somehow 'posit' this meaning as being 'out there'. On this account, then, the meaning is clearly *in the mind*, and not really at work in the sensible configuration of the world as such. Presumably the same could hold for gestures, facial expressions, tones of voice, and all other forms of bodily self-expression.

Hegel openly recognizes that, in the case of the aesthetic appreciation of poetry in particular, the sensible form of the words themselves is expressly downgraded to the status of an external and contingent 'sign'. For, though such distinctively sensuous dimensions of poetry as beat, rhythm and euphony can come to be expressive of the poem's meaning, he regards them as being at bottom accidental to the essentially 'ideal' meaning at work in a poem, a meaning he thinks can be translated into other languages without significant loss (*LFA*: 2.964/3.964–65). But, rather than take this high degree of separability between meaning and its sensible manifestation to be the general rule when it comes to artworks and, more broadly, to the human body's various forms of expression, it seems clear that, in fact, Hegel regards it as the exception. Indeed, Hegel maintains that since poetry is characterized by this separability more than any other art form, it is thereby *deficient qua* beautiful (though he does regard poetry as superior to other art forms in other, non-aesthetic respects) (*LFA*: 2.968–69/3.235–36). The meaning (and beauty) of a poem is, on this account, less 'in' the sensible words themselves than in the minds of both author and listener.

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But the clear implication seems to be that in other art forms—particularly in Classical sculpture, though also in painting and music, each of which can be regarded as a distinct, non-linguistic, form of human self-expression in its own right—there is, in fact, a more intimate and ultimately *non-contingent* relation between meaning and sensible form. That is, in these cases we seem to be dealing with meanings that cannot be fully separated from their sensible manifestation. And, conversely, we seem to be dealing with sensible forms whose very nature it is to express meaning—that is, sensible forms that cannot ultimately be reduced to mere, meaningless clusters of sensible qualities, but which are themselves inherently organized into sensibly meaningful unities.[17] For, again, if the meanings did not reside in the sensible forms themselves, and if we did not in some sense *receive* them from the world through intuition, it is not clear that we would be able to ascribe beauty to the artworks themselves—which Hegel is clearly committed to—rather than treating these artworks as merely occasioning a subjective experience of beauty that exists ultimately within us.

Hegel here appeals to the human body's spontaneous capacity for self-expression, and in particular to what he regards as the most expressive part of the human body—namely, the eyes—as a kind of model for conceiving what is at stake in our appreciation of the expressive beauty of artworks: as he famously claims, the artwork should ideally be like a thousand-eyed Argus, in that all of its various aspects or parts should be as directly expressive of the 'soul' or meaning that is at issue in it, as a person's eyes are directly expressive of the spiritual orientation or demeanour of the person as a whole (*LFA*: 1.152–53/1.203–4). And, throughout his particular descriptions of specific artworks, Hegel regularly appeals to the ways that various bodily postures, facial expressions and gestures depicted in artworks immediately embody various meaningful orientations, suggesting that we cannot but be alive to these meanings upon our sensuous apprehension of them. The suggestion seems to be that, unlike other natural objects, and unlike other animal bodies—which, as Hegel says, only *intimate* the inner meanings that are in fact at work in them—human bodies are expressive *in their very natures*. This is not to say that human bodies are infallible in their expressiveness, or that they, like other animal bodies, do not often conceal the meanings that are work in them, or that human bodies are adequate to expressing the whole range of spiritual meaning that we as humans are engaged with. But it does suggest there are at least some cases in which at least certain sorts of meanings are *successfully* and *adequately* expressed by the human body, and that in such cases this body in effect transcends its merely natural status as a concrete, physical thing, wholly determined by its finitude and its dependency within the natural world, so as to literally become an embodiment of spirit. Beautiful artworks, in Hegel's mind, draw upon and as it were perfect and idealize this indigenous expressive capacity of the human body.[18]

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V. Coming to see

In this concluding section I address what might be seen as a lingering problem concerning the account of the interpenetration between meaning and its sensible expression. The problem is this: the sort of contingency between meaning and sensible manifestation that Hegel recognizes in the case of language does seem to apply in at least some other forms of bodily self-expression (for instance, smiles do not mean the same thing in all cultures, despite the fact that we cannot but experience them as embodying joy; see *PP*: 189/218), and so what is to stop us from thinking that such a contingency infects all forms, in which case there does seem to be reason to think that sensation and intellect (or whatever accounts for our appreciation of meaning) make distinct and separable inputs in our experience of such bodily self-expressions, including artistic expressions? For though the non-initiated do not find the expression meaningful—in an extreme case we might even say that they do not experience it as an expression at all, but merely as an arbitrary grouping of sensible qualities—they nevertheless *sense* it.

In sketching a possible response to this problem, I turn to Merleau-Ponty's account of how the expressive body *develops* in the course of its engagement with the world. Now, though it is fairly clear that Hegel conceives of the human body as distinctly self-expressive and 'spiritualized'—and so as a special site for understanding the sort of unity between meaning and sensible manifestation that is at play in beauty—it is perhaps not as clear that he regards the body, as Merleau-Ponty does, as self-developing and self-transcending. One may get the sense, for instance, that for Hegel the capacity to express and realize spirit—as, for instance, in the case of the body's basic capacity to express a kind of serenity and self-satisfied repose through its gestures and posture, a capacity that Hegel regards as making possible our aesthetic intuition of the sublime serenity and indifference of the anthropomorphized gods of Greek sculpture—is simply ingrained in the human body, and so there is no question here of the body's needing to develop its 'expressive' organs, as it were. Moreover, there is little explicit acknowledgement of a culturally specific tradition of bodily self-development, such that certain forms of bodily expressions (including artworks) would be immediately and intuitively meaningful for those within this tradition, while leaving others cold.[19] For Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, the expressive human body is not merely fixed and determined once and for all, but is constantly developing new ways for itself to inhabit the world, and is, in that sense, literally transforming itself, literally developing its own organs—including its own sense organs—in an attempt to realize new meanings and articulations in response to its ongoing engagements with the world. There is, however, reason to think that

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such an account of the body is at least consistent with Hegel's thinking (if not implicitly at work in it),[20] and I will draw from Merleau-Ponty's account in the spirit of suggesting that it can in fact help to support Hegel's conception of embodied meaning.

One of Merleau-Ponty's strategies in addressing the sort of worry I outlined above is to argue that the sort of sensing that is operative in the case of the uninitiated perspective is not the same as the sensing operative in the case of the person who is able to 'read' the bodily expression, and so who finds it meaningful. For, what happens when we go from an uninitiated perspective to an initiated perspective is that the body itself learns *how to see*, that the body itself finds a way of settling into a coherent grasp of the relevant expression, and so there is no need to appeal to an independent intellectual faculty that enters into the picture and imposes a meaning or structure onto an otherwise meaningless array of sensations.[21] On Merleau-Ponty's account, we must recognize that the sensible itself motivates the sensing body to take it up in certain ways, and until the body develops the ability to do this there is an important sense in which what we experience is really a kind of vague, inchoate intimation, not a determinate, settled sensuous perception in its own right—certainly not one which 'sees all there is to see' and that remains selfsame as a sort of underlying material content even once an experience of the expression's meaning takes shape. Phenomenological description is well suited to illustrating this notion that sensing itself develops, so let me turn to a brief phenomenological description of learning to hear music, borrowing from some of Merleau-Ponty's insights.

Merleau-Ponty appeals to music as an expressive phenomenon in which the particular sort of meaning at issue cannot ultimately be extricated from the sensuous play of the sounds themselves: the *only* way to get access to the emotional or spiritual meaning of a musical piece is to hear it for oneself.[22] But, of course, we are often not in a position to immediately appreciate the musical meaning of a piece from another culture or time period. That is, we do not immediately recognize the music *in its expressivity*, and so what we sense initially can *sound* alien, arbitrary, and lacking in any significant coherence or integrity. But prolonged and attentive listening, along perhaps with listening to other music of the same genre and from previous historical periods to which this music was a response, can bring us to the point of actually *hearing* the piece's distinctive musical meaning for ourselves. That is, music can as it were 'teach itself' to us—without any need for independent, conceptual mediation—in the sense that the sounds themselves gradually come to group themselves into unified phrases, significant pauses, and various kinds of tensions and resolutions. It seems appropriate in this case to say that the *sound* of the music comes to reveal itself to us more fully in such a process, as though we were *not really hearing it* initially—or rather as though we had no distinct and determinate experience of hearing

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initially, but were immersed in a kind of palpable indeterminacy in which we could get no reliable aural bearings. Indeed, once the shift happens, and we come to find the music compelling, we are no longer able to access our former, alienating experience of the music; and this tells against the notion that there is some sort of basic layer of clear and 'pure' sensation that remains constant throughout the transformation, and 'on top of' which something 'in us' came to add meaning. Rather, it seems truer to say that our initial experience was of an unsettled soundscape that was *itself* gropingly trying to group itself in various ways, sounds whose various meaning-vectors and references to other sounds were already at play, but indeterminately and not yet 'settled' for our hearing into a coherent form.[23] As in Hegel's account of the way that an animal's different organs intimate a dynamic unification that they themselves do not make apparent, and so continue to appear as external to one another despite the vague unity they intimate, here too the otherwise meaningless and contingent-seeming notes sound external to one another, but nevertheless palpably strive for a kind of expressive, audible coherence—one which here, unlike in the case of the visual appearance of animal bodies in Hegel's account, is clearly attainable.

In the course of this learning process, then, what in effect happens is that we learn to *hear* differently, as though what were at stake here were a transformation or refinement of our body's own sensing capacity. While it is of course true to say that the change we undergo in such a case happens *in us*, rather than in the musical piece itself, and though we might even say it involves a change in our listening *activity* or in our body's *way of attuning itself*, clearly we are also in the essentially *passive* position here of having to *wait* for this musical meaning, already at work in the music itself, to *reveal or pronounce itself* to us sensuously. The meaning here is not something that we come to impose upon sounds that are, at bottom, merely meaningless, contingent signs—as seems to be the case for words, in Hegel's account[24]—but is rather something that inheres in the sounds themselves, in the way they audibly hang together.

Hegel's account of the inextricability of meaning and sensible form in human expression could thus be strengthened by appeal to such a phenomenological account of the way sensing autonomously develops itself. I have been maintaining more generally that whatever Hegel's account of sensation and intellection might be in other contexts, his account of the aesthetic intuition of beauty, along with his claim that, in beauty, there is a unity of meaning and sensible individuals, implies an account of sensuously manifest meaning, and so an account of a kind of sensation that is itself sensitive to such meaning. With the help of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights, I have attempted to highlight some aspects of Hegel's account of beauty that strongly suggest that he himself recognizes something of this richer form of sensation and that, in this respect, we

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can see Hegel as offering a distinctive response to certain traditional, dualistic conceptions of intellect and sensation, a response that anticipates some of the directions taken by later phenomenological thought.

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Notes

[1] Abbreviations used:
LFA = Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975)/*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* (I–III), *Werke* 13–15 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). Volume and pages of the English edition will be given, followed by the volume and pages of the German edition.
PP = Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1962)/*Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

[2] As Hegel puts it, the work of art 'stands in the *middle* between immediate sensuousness and ideal thought. It is *not yet* pure thought, but, despite its sensuousness, is *no longer* a purely material existent either, like stones, plants, and organic life; on the contrary, the sensuous in the work of art is itself something ideal, but which, not being ideal as thought is ideal, is still at the same time there externally as a thing' (*LFA*: 1.38/1.60).

[3] For a helpful outline of Husserl's contributions in this regard, with some attention to contemporary analytic epistemology, see Dahlstrom 2007.

[4] For an argument for why Hegel should be understood as maintaining a version of this Kantian distinction, though in his own 'organic' way, see Pippin 2005. Sedgwick's organic rendering of the distinction is similar; Sedgwick 2012. It is worth noting, however (and Pippin's article helps to bring this out), that Kant's view is arguably not as straightforwardly 'dualistic' as Hegel sometimes portrays it.

[5] See also *PP*: 191–92/223, where Merleau-Ponty endorses Cassirer's notion that our immediate sensuous experience involves '"circles" or "vortices" within which each element is representative of all others and carries, as it were, "vectors" which link it to them'. Merleau-Ponty argues that such vectors, which are always already at play in the very way visual elements immediately present themselves to us, precede and make possible our ability to consciously single out certain sorts of relations on the basis of some determinate concept.

[6] In truth we should say that, for Merleau-Ponty, the visual meaning at issue here is ultimately a kind of existential meaning that is 'performed' by the whole body in the form of practical modifications to its general orientation towards the world; see, for instance, his discussion of how we perceive colours only insofar as our bodies become practically oriented in certain ways

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(*PP*: 208–12/241–46). As I have argued elsewhere (Ciavatta 2009: 139–42), Hegel himself recognizes something very similar to such an existential, bodily significance in his own accounts of sensation and feeling.

[7] *LFA*: 1.128–29/1.173–74. Hegel is speaking here specifically of natural beauty, though I will argue below that this characterization applies just as much to the sort of intuition by which we appreciate beautiful artworks.

[8] For a representative discussion of the relation between beauty and the Concept, see, for instance, *LFA*: 1.114–15/1.156–57.

[9] Hegel calls such 'lifeless' forms (such as regularity and conformity to a rule) 'abstract forms' of beauty; see *LFA*: 1.133–40/1.178–87.

[10] Another factor at play here for Hegel is that many animals have 'plant-like' coverings (such as fur or feathers or shells) that are not themselves obviously alive, and that in effect hide the organs and their dynamic relations (see *LFA*: 1.145–46/193–94). For Hegel, human skin, though it too is an external covering serving the merely natural end of self-preservation, is at least more expressive of the inner soul (as, for instance, in blushing or turning pale in fright). Hegel does acknowledge that when animals express their emotions we can sometimes see ephemeral glimmers of organic unity amongst an animal's otherwise distinct organs (we might think, for instance, of the way joy seems to take over the whole of a dog's body, making itself manifest just as much in the wagging tail as in the loose posture and in the dropped ears).

[11] Hegel describes Kant's position along these lines at *LFA*: 1.57–58/1.85. As Hegel argues, Kant seems to recognize that 'the natural, the sensuous, the heart, etc., have *in themselves* proportion, purpose, and harmony; and intuition and feeling are elevated to spiritual universality', but this reconciliation is 'still supposed by Kant at the last to be only subjective in respect of the judgement and the production, and not itself to be absolutely true and actual' (*LFA*: 1.60/1.88–89; my emphasis).

[12] On Houlgate's account, pure, *a priori* thought would be within its rights in *positing* purposiveness and animation as being at work in the living things it encounters in perception, for such thought is in some strong sense identical with being for Hegel, and so Hegel need have no account of *receiving* such meaning in any immediate, intuitive way from the world itself (Houlgate 2006). However, on my reading, such a conception could not adequately account for our intuition of beauty, and that in itself is one reason to suspect that Hegel's fuller account of intuition is more complex than Houlgate admits.

[13] See Houlgate 2007 for a good discussion of these and other of Hegel's particular observations on sculpture.

[14] See Taylor 2010 for a classic discussion of Hegel's philosophies of mind and action in terms of the issue of whether there can be any ontological separation between outward, bodily event and its inner background or meaning. I defend a version of Taylor's expressivist account in Ciavatta (forthcoming).

[15] For a recent book that argues for just this thesis, see Landes 2013.

[16] Pippin helpfully gives the example, from Proust, of being able to directly *see* the lie in someone's face, and as he notes our grasp of the lie (i.e., the meaning) is not inferential, but is

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'in some literal sense "seen"' (Pippin 2014: 50). In my view, however, Pippin is too quick to regard such experience as conceptually-mediated, and so attempts to reaffirm the distinct roles that sensation and intellection play in perception in a way that runs against the grain of what I take both Merleau-Ponty and Hegel (at least in relation to aesthetic intuition) to be affirming. I suggest a response to Pippin's sort of approach below. That our experiences of others' meaningful bodily expressions is directly perceived, and not inferred, is one of the central themes of Part 2, Chapter 4 of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*; see also *PP*: 184/215 where Merleau-Ponty writes that 'The gesture [i.e., a body's threatening attitude] *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger itself' (emphasis in original).

[17] See *LFA*: 1.431/2.19, where in the context of introducing Classical art Hegel argues that the meaning at issue in genuinely beautiful works 'must have the principle of its externality in itself' (that is, it is just the sort of meaning that cannot but be externalized into a sensible form); and, correspondingly, that the sensible manifestation of such beautiful expressions 'exists no longer as purely natural objectivity but, without independence of its own, is *only* the expression of spirit' (my emphasis). Of course, with effort or tools of abstraction (comparable to the cardboard tube mentioned in the case of the moon on the horizon), one *can* see the sculpture as mere, meaningless stone; but this is precisely an abstraction and reduction of what the stone itself makes manifest to the eyes.

[18] It seems to me that Pippin has a stake in denying that sensible expressions can ever embody spiritual meanings in any immediate, fully adequate way, for he needs there to be a gap between the body's immediate appearance and the meaning it expresses in order to make room for a (conceptually-mediated) interrogation of such expressions. Thus, in his reading, Hegel's likening of art to a thousand-eyed Argus is meant to draw attention to how we *cannot* immediately detect a person's subjective orientation simply from her eyes, but are always left in the position of needing to interpret what the eyes mean (Pippin 2014: 49). This helps to set up Pippin's reading of modern art as distinctively characterized by such a gap, but it seems to me to give up on Hegel's core way of conceiving aesthetic intuition—where at least certain spiritual meanings *are* successfully manifest in a sensuous form—and, for instance, on Hegel's thesis concerning the 'perfect fit' between meaning and sensible manifestation at work in Classical art.

[19] Hegel does acknowledge that Classical sculpture can leave us moderns somewhat cold (see, for instance, *LFA*: 1.520–21/130–32), but not because the gestures or stances conveyed in it are meaningless to us, but because the meanings we *do* grasp in them are at odds with our broader cultural experiences of subjectivity.

[20] Russon 1997 makes a compelling case for this stronger view. See also Russon 1993 for an extended discussion of the expressive or 'gestural' character of the body implied in Hegel's master/slave dialectic.

[21] See Bredlau 2006 for a good account of Merleau-Ponty's notion that the body develops itself in learning how to see.

[22] As Merleau-Ponty writes, 'During the performance, the notes are not only the 'signs' of the sonata, but it is there through them, it enters into them. In the same way the actress becomes

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invisible, and it is Phaedra who appears'. He continues, in words that could very well be Hegel's, 'Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all' (*PP*: 183/213).

[23] Compare Merleau-Ponty's much-discussed example of how the perception of a ship's mast emerges from what had been an essentially unsettled, indeterminate visual field (*PP*: 17/24–25). Merleau-Ponty here describes the way the as yet unresolved perception involves a vague feeling of uneasiness and a 'foreshadowing of an imminent order'.

[24] I cannot develop it here, but I should mention that Merleau-Ponty would take issue with Hegel's account that words are contingent signs, for in his view they too embody an 'affective meaning' that is an integral part of the sense of every linguistic expression; see *PP:* Pt. 1, Ch. 6.

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