

## Gestalt Perception and Seeing-As

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‘Normal’ visual experience (i.e., that of an adult human perceiver with no injury or damage to the visual system) immerses the perceiver in a rich, meaningful world. The perceiver sees what appear to be items and features of particular sorts that occupy a surrounding spatial environment. This all-pervasive feature of our experience plays a central role in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. He uses the notion of the *Gestalt* to capture this aspect of human perception, where this is the idea of a meaningful whole that is composed of its parts in such a way that it cannot be reduced to them – ‘it is impossible, as has often been said, to decompose a perception, to make it into a collection of sensations, because in it the whole is prior to the parts’ (1964a: 15). Normal human perception also encompasses a second, very similar phenomenon, illustrated by Jastrow’s (1899, 312) famous duck-rabbit. When a normal human perceiver sees this figure, she does not experience it as a mere collection of colours and shapes; she sees it as having a meaningful form. Indeed, she sees it as either a duck or a rabbit. Typically, the figure will ‘flip’ between the two meanings, so that the perceiver sees it first as a duck, then a rabbit (or vice versa). Let us follow tradition and call this ‘seeing-as’. Note that many discussions of seeing-as use the label to refer to more than just this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> However, I will use it here to refer to the way in which a figure like the duck-rabbit is typically seen. One might, on the face of it, think that Gestalt perception (as understood by Merleau-Ponty), and seeing-as are one and the same. This impression is seemingly confirmed by the fact that the ‘flip’ in perceptual meaning from duck to rabbit (and vice versa) is known as a Gestalt-switch, suggesting that the flip simply involves a change from one Gestalt perception to another.

In this paper, I will investigate these two phenomena from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. I will argue that, contrary to first appearances, they are in fact distinct phenomena, and whilst Merleau-Ponty does not provide a thematic discussion of seeing-as experiences, they are important to his understanding of artwork and images, and so I will show that a rich account of them can be drawn from his work. My investigation will reveal that crucially, Gestalt perceptions are capable of being true and false, whilst seeing-as experiences are not truth-apt. This difference is reflected in the way that Merleau-Ponty takes Gestalt perception to characterise normal human perception in general, whilst he understands seeing-as to be a distinctive sort of imaginative seeing, which underlies the human capacity for certain kinds of creativity and artistic expression.

### Merleau-Ponty and Gestalt perception: the problem of illusion

I want to begin by considering Merleau-Ponty’s solution to the problem of illusion. My reason for focusing on this is because – as will become apparent – it serves to highlight an important difference between Gestalt perception and seeing-as.

Illusions are misperceptions. A distinction is often drawn between illusions and hallucinations. Broadly speaking, illusions are defined as misperceptions of *existing things*, whereas hallucinations are perception-like experiences of *non-existent entities*.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the discussion of Wittgenstein on seeing-as in (Hunter 1981).

They are sometimes treated as being essentially the same sort of state, differing in the degree to which they fail to correctly present the world. However, it is clear from Merleau-Ponty's discussion in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2013) that he takes them to be different in kind. Hallucinations are extraordinary states, often pathological, associated with conditions such as schizophrenia and the ingestion of drugs such as mescaline. Illusions, in contrast, are mistakes made in the ordinary course of perception.<sup>2</sup> My discussion here will focus on his treatment of illusion.

There is more than one way that illusions raise difficulties for accounts of perception. But the problem that concerns Merleau-Ponty can be understood as follows. Like many other theorists, he holds that perception puts the perceiver in contact with the world, and a satisfactory account of perception should capture this fact. One way to do so is to hold that the content of perception just *is* the world. (Or to be more precise, that part of the world currently in the perceiver's visual reach.) This claim seems to go hand-in-hand with a second thesis: the content of perception does not represent or depict the world; it merely presents it. An example may clarify what is being suggested here. Imagine I have an empty picture frame that I hold up in front of me. The frame encloses a 'picture'. However, unlike a painted portrait, the 'picture' is not a depiction or representation of the world; it is not distinct from the chunk of the world it 'shows'. It just *is* the bit of the world enclosed by the frame. The claim that the world itself is the content of perception is the claim that visual experiences simply present a chunk of the world in a roughly analogous way.

The second claim (that visual experiences have no representational content) seems to follow from the first (that the content of perception is the world itself) because it seems that representations must be distinct from the items they represent. For example, the sentence 'Billy is bored' represents my dog Billy being in a state of boredom. But this sentence and my dog are clearly distinct entities – one is a linguistic item, whilst the other is a canine being. Moreover, the bored canine just *is*; he does not represent or depict his being bored. Thus if perceptions represent the world, it seems that they must be distinct from it. If so, then it is natural to conclude that perceptions are 'inner' items, contained within the perceiver's mind, and if they are within the mind, they could exist there irrespective of how things are with the world. In this way, the contact with the world is lost. Thus it seems that to capture the claim that perception puts the subject in contact with the world, we must take the world itself to be the content of experiences of it, which subsequently must be thought of as presenting the world, rather than representing or depicting it.

Illusions pose a significant problem for this view. As stated above, they are *misperceptions*: perceptual experiences that show the world incorrectly. If they show the world incorrectly, then it seems they are *false* – indeed, the latter claim just looks like an alternative way of saying that they are presentations of the world that are incorrect. But to say that something is false necessarily presupposes that it has truth-conditions – it is false in virtue of the fact that these conditions have not been met. To be capable of being false (or true, for that matter) just is to have truth-conditions. By definition, something that has truth-conditions is a representation. It follows that illusions must have representational content and cannot simply present the world to the perceiver. It is then very natural to suppose that perceptions are *veridical* experiences of the world, i.e.,

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss Merleau-Ponty's account of hallucination in Romdenh-Romluc (2009).

experiences whose truth-conditions have been met, which means that they too must be representations. The existence of illusions thus appears to threaten the claim that in perception, the subject is in direct contact with the world.

There are three central strategies that have been employed in response to this problem. The first is to claim that whilst illusions are subjectively indistinguishable from perceptions, they are, in fact, different sorts of experiential state. A second strategy is to argue that illusions are not experiential states at all, but false judgements or beliefs about what the world is like. Both of these options seemingly allow one to maintain that whilst illusions represent the world as being a certain way, perceptions simply present the perceiver with a chunk of the world and have no representational content. A third strategy is to try and somehow reconceive the content of perception to both retain the contact between perceiver and world, *and* account for illusions as being the same sorts of states as veridical perceptions.

Merleau-Ponty employs the third strategy. He does not consider the first option, but there are *prima facie* reasons for thinking that it is unsatisfactory. When one undergoes an illusion, it is fairly common for only part of one's perceptual experience to be illusory (insofar as illusions are defined as partial misperceptions, this is so as a matter of definition). For example, I may correctly perceive my dog sleeping in his bed next to the radiator, whilst misperceiving the knot of blanket underneath his head as a ball. It seems very odd to claim that for the bulk of this experience, its content is simply a chunk of the world, but the small part that looks to me like a ball is a (false) representation. It is not obvious to me how to make sense of the idea that the content of a single experience can be constituted by both the world itself and representations of it. One could perhaps contend that my perception of my dog sleeping in his bed is not a single experience after all, despite showing a scene that instantaneously occupies my visual field. It is instead a patchwork of smaller experiences, which includes both perceptions and illusions. However, if one takes this line, then it becomes unclear how perceptual experiences should be individuated. Is my experience of my dog's tail a single experience? Or does it consist of two numerically distinct experiences of his white tail tip, and the black part of his tail? Some principled means of deciding is required, but it is unclear what that might be.

Moreover, it is often the case that illusions 'make sense' to the perceiver, in that, once the illusion has been revealed as an illusion (and Merleau-Ponty contends that this is always possible, rejecting as oxymoronic the idea of an illusion that cannot be revealed as such), the perceiver will often recognise why she made the mistake she did. For example, I can see – once my blanket-ball illusion has been corrected – that the knot of blanket *looks like* a ball, and so it makes sense to me that I previously saw it *as* a ball. The illusion thus involves some sort of contact with the world. But the motivation for claiming that illusions and veridical perceptions are different sorts of state is that we want to preserve the idea that there is contact between the perceiver and the world in veridical perception, which seems to be incompatible with the idea that such experiences have representational content. If illusions both represent things being thus-and-so, *and* put the subject in contact of some sort with the world, then the motivation for claiming they are different sorts of state from veridical perceptions is lost. We are instead left with the problem of trying to reconceive the content of perception (and illusion) to both retain the contact between perceiver and world, whilst accommodating the fact that these states have representational content, as per the third strategy.

Whilst these difficulties may not be insurmountable, they provide motivation for rejecting option one if a better solution can be found.

The second option claims that illusions are not experiences at all, but *judgements*. One might initially suppose that this position fares better than the previous one. It can, for example, make sense of the idea that illusions involve some sort of contact with the world. When I 'misperceive' my dog's blanket as a ball, what actually happens is that I perceive his blanket – and so am in contact with the world – but mistakenly *judge* that it is a ball. Moreover, this judgement makes sense, since his blanket bears some resemblance to a ball. However, Merleau-Ponty offers a significant objection to the claim that illusions are really judgements. He argues that a proponent of this view – which he categorises as 'intellectualist' – must say whether or not the judgement is based on perception, but in answering they face a dilemma. If it is based on perception, then the experience must itself be illusory, in which case the judgement plays no explanatory role, and an account of illusion is still required. If it is not, then it is unclear why the perceiver makes the judgement, and – perhaps more importantly – why it seems to her to be connected with her perceptual experience (indeed, it seems to the perceiver that it is a perceptual experience).

Merleau-Ponty's objection applies to even fairly sophisticated contemporary accounts that attempt to retain the claim that the content of perception is the world itself, whilst taking illusions to be judgements. One example is the view offered by Travis (2004). His account is interesting in the present context as he can be read as sharing some of Merleau-Ponty's commitments. Moreover, his explanation of illusions as judgements seems at first to escape Merleau-Ponty's dilemma. However, on closer inspection, Travis' account does, in the end, fall foul of this objection. A grasp of where Travis goes wrong will aid us in understanding Merleau-Ponty's alternative. It is thus to Travis' account that I now turn.

Travis holds that perception is directly of the world, and so cannot have any representational content. He takes illusions to be false judgements about the world, which are based on the subject's perceptual experience but in a way that does not require that experience to be illusory or represent anything. He develops his account by appealing to a distinction between two different senses of the word 'means'. In one sense, talk of what something means is talk about what it conventionally signifies, i.e., its representational content. For example, if I say the French sentence, 'il pluit' means it is raining, I am saying that 'il pluit' represents this state of affairs. But there is another sense of 'means' that is not about representation. This is what Grice (1989) calls 'natural' meaning.<sup>3</sup> One item or event means another in this sense if they are connected such that they generally occur together. For example, the sentence 'smoke means fire' should not be read as claiming that smoke has the representational content 'fire'. Instead, this sentence says that smoke and fire usually occur together. Similarly, 'the presence of this virus in someone's bloodstream means the person has measles' says that a particular virus generally co-occurs with measles. Again, it does not imply that the virus has any representational content. (Indeed, it's not clear that it makes sense to talk of a virus *representing* anything.) I will use 'means' to refer to the former sort of meaning, and 'means-n' to refer to natural meaning. Travis then claims that an illusion is an erroneous judgement about what some perceived item or event means-n. For example, a perceiver

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<sup>3</sup> Travis himself does not make the connection with Grice's work. But the second notion of meaning he identifies is clearly the one that Grice calls natural meaning.

sees smoke. Knowing that smoke is generally accompanied by fire, she judges, 'this smoke means-n there is a fire'. However, smoke does not always co-occur with fire. Instead, smoke can be produced by a smoke machine or by a group of people enjoying cigars. If the smoke the perceiver sees is accompanied by either of the latter, rather than by a fire, her judgement will be false. Travis claims that in this case, the perceiver undergoes an illusion. His account seems to sidestep Merleau-Ponty's dilemma in the following way. The first horn of Merleau-Ponty's dilemma holds that if the judgement is based on the subject's perceptual experience, then the experience must itself be illusory. The second horn states that if the experience is not illusory, then the judgement has no basis in experience. But on Travis' account, as the smoke example above makes clear, there is nothing illusory about the subject's experience. It simply presents her with a chunk of the world. Yet the erroneous judgement that constitutes the illusion is based on the subject's perceptual experience – it is a judgement about what usually co-occurs with the perceived item or event. Thus Travis' account seemingly allows him to hold on to the idea that the content of perception is the world itself and does not represent anything, whilst providing a connection between the perception and the erroneous judgement that constitutes the illusion.

However, as it stands, this is inadequate as an account of perceptual illusion. Perceptual illusions surely involve error about something that is currently seen. But at least some judgements about what things mean-n concern things that are not currently in view. Suppose, for example, that I see Fred eating a lot of mangoes and judge it means-n that he will feel ill later tonight. On Travis' account as I have expounded it so far, I will have undergone a perceptual illusion when I saw Fred eating a lot of mangoes if Fred does not feel ill later. But it is deeply counterintuitive to suppose that what does or does not happen to Fred later determines whether or not my earlier experience was illusory. In fact, Travis does not claim that *all* false judgements about what something means-n count as illusions. It is instead only a subset of such judgements – those that are motivated by the 'look' of what one sees, i.e., the way that it appears. Thus it is judgements such as 'this "look" means-n p' that are candidates for perceptual illusions.

But this restriction is still not sufficient; some judgements about what a 'look' means-n will still concern things that are not perceived. Thus some false judgements about what a particular 'look' means-n will not count as perceptual illusions. I might, for example, judge 'this "Fred-eating-a-lot-of-mangoes look" means-n that Fred will feel ill later tonight'. Intuitively, the failure of Fred to feel ill later does not render my current experience illusory. To deal with this problem, the subset of candidate judgements needs to be further restricted. They must be judgements about what a 'look' is of. An example is 'this "look" means-n that there is a cow in front of me' where this can be paraphrased as 'this "look" is that of a cow'. On Travis' analysis, this judgement states that a particular cow-ish 'look' is accompanied by the presence of a cow in the same way that 'this smoke means-n fire' states that a particular instance of smoke is accompanied by the presence of fire. The claim is that given analysis of judgements about what a 'look' means or is of, allows us to hold that 'looks' have no representational content. Just as smoke does not represent anything, neither do 'looks'.

However, now Travis' account faces a problem. It's not at all obvious that 'looks' do not represent things as being thus-and-so. On the contrary, to identify an appropriate subset of judgements as candidates for perceptual illusions, Travis has to appeal to what a 'look' is of, and to say that a 'look' is of something is surely to say that it depicts things

as being a certain way. Moreover, Travis' analysis of judgements that are motivated by 'looks' as judgements about what a 'look' means-n does not rule out this possibility, because we can make such judgements about things that have representational content. Suppose, for example, that I watch a documentary about the Vietnam War and judge that its content means-n that Kissinger bribed the producer. My judgement is based on my belief that documentaries with such content tend to co-occur with instances of producer-bribing by Kissinger. It is thus analogous to my judgement that the smoke I see means-n there is a fire in the vicinity. But unlike the smoke, the documentary has representational content – it depicts events relating to the Vietnam War – and it may be true or false. Thus even if Travis is correct in claiming that the judgement 'this "look" means-n there is a cow in front of me' is analogous to 'this smoke means-n fire', there is still scope for arguing that 'looks' have representational content. Travis must rule out this possibility to defend his thesis that perception does not represent the world as being thus-and-so.

Travis offers the following argument to establish that 'looks' do not represent. People can and do have perceptual illusions about all sorts of things. These illusions consist in false judgements about what a certain 'look' is of. One judges that a particular 'look' is accompanied by the presence of object a, when in fact – on this occasion – it is accompanied by the presence of object b. Why might someone make a false judgement of this sort? It must be, according to Travis, because the particular 'look' in question is sometimes accompanied by the presence of b. Thus what this mistake reveals is that just as smoke can mean-n either the presence of fire or the presence of a dry ice machine, so too, the same 'look' can be of/mean-n either a or b. Since a great variety of perceptual illusions are possible, it seems that the same 'look' can be of/mean-n an indefinite number of things. But it is essential to a representation that it shows one particular way the world might be. It follows that a 'look', which can be of an indefinite number of things, cannot represent things as being thus-and-so. Suppose, for example, that I misperceive a cement mixer as the back of a horse. On Travis' account, my illusion consists in the following false judgement 'this "look" is of (means-n the presence of) a horse'. I make this false judgement because the same 'look' can be accompanied by either cement mixers or horses. To put the matter more simply: a cement mixer – in a certain light, from a certain angle, etc. – looks indistinguishable from a horse. Moreover, since one may misperceive the cement mixer as a good many other things – a cow, the back of a sheep, the front of a tractor, and so on – the same 'look' can be of/means-n a cement mixer, a horse, a cow, the back of a sheep, the front of a tractor, and so on indefinitely. The 'look' thus has no determinate content. It does not represent anything.

It should now be clear that Travis has not escaped Merleau-Ponty's dilemma. The claim that 'looks' have no determinate content means that the way things look in no way determines for the perceiver what it is she perceives. In fact, Travis' account of 'looks' as indeterminate entails that things *do not look a certain way to the perceiver* – they look no way at all. It follows that the perceiver's judgement that a certain 'look' is of object a rather than object b receives no support from the way that things look. (Indeed, it is not clear that she could even pick out a certain 'look' in order to make this judgement in the first place.) Rather than being based on perception, judgements of this sort are wild stabs in the dark. It is thus unclear why the perceiver makes the judgement, and why it seems to her to have any connection with her perceptual experience. This is not a satisfactory account of illusion. More generally, Travis' theory of perception, which

claims that how things look in no way determines for the perceiver what it is she perceives, is inadequate as an account of perception.

Merleau-Ponty's solution to the problem of illusion can be usefully set against the failures of Travis' account. Our discussion of Travis helps bring home the point that illusions cannot be explained away as false *judgements* about perception. They are false (or non-veridical) perceptual experiences, which means that they must have representational content. Moreover, since, according to Merleau-Ponty, perceptions and illusions are not different types of experience, it follows that perceptions in general must have representational content. As we saw above, it is tempting to think that once perception is claimed to have representational content, a link with the world is lost. The challenge Merleau-Ponty thus faces is to conceive of perception's representational content in such a way as to maintain the contact between the perceiver and the world. Merleau-Ponty does this by using the notion of the *Gestalt*.

Typically, human visual experience is not a disorganised mass, but is arranged into meaningful wholes: *Gestalten*, or what Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls 'physiognomies'. Merleau-Ponty holds that experience has a Gestalt structure 'all the way down'. Even the simplest visual experience has a physiognomy. Consider, for example, my current visual perception. The scene as a whole has a certain form. I am presented with a room. But if I focus on just one part of the room, such as the stool in front of me, that too has a form. Similarly, if I focus on just one part of the stool, such as its leg, that also has a form. If I focus on just one part of the stool leg, my visual experience is again meaningfully structured so that I am presented with a textured surface, and so on. At no stage will I reach an element of experience that is unstructured.

*Gestalten* have, for Merleau-Ponty, the following important feature: they are composed of their parts in such a way that they are nothing over and above the sum of their parts, yet they are not reducible to them. We can gain a better grasp of this claim by considering the experience that Merleau-Ponty describes in the following passage:

If I am walking on a beach towards a boat that has run aground, and if the funnel or the mast merges with the forest that borders the dune, then there will be a moment in which these details suddenly reunite with the boat and become welded to it... I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change... The spectacle was suddenly reorganized, satisfying my vague expectation' (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 17—18).

Here, Merleau-Ponty describes what is known as a Gestalt switch. He first has a perception characterised by a trees-Gestalt, i.e., he is presented with what appear to be trees. His perception then abruptly changes so that he is presented with what appear to be a ship's masts, i.e., his perception takes on a ship's-masts-Gestalt. Notice that the components of what is seen do not alter with the change in perceptual meaning – he continues to see the same arrangement of vertical elements. Since the same elements can be unified as different *Gestalten*, the scene's physiognomy as either trees or ship's masts cannot be simply reduced to those elements. Nevertheless, the scene's physiognomy as trees or ship's masts is not something extra to the elements of the scene. No trees or masts remain if the vertical structures are taken away. Thus the Gestalt is nothing over and above its parts, but it is composed of them in such a way that it cannot be reduced to them.

Merleau-Ponty accounts for these two features of *Gestalten* – that they are nothing over and above their parts; but that they cannot be reduced to them – in the

following way. He argues that they are uniquely perceptual phenomena, brought about when consciousness makes perceptual contact with the world. They are the forms the world takes on in perception. They do not exist in the world-in-itself, as he makes clear in remarks such as this - 'form is not a physical reality, but an object of perception... form cannot be defined in terms of reality' (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 143). Gestalten are nothing over and above their parts because they must be realised in some sensuous matter. The perceived form does not exist without this matter because it just *is* the form taken on by the matter in perception. 'It is the notion of an order of meaning which does not result from the application of spiritual activity to an external matter. It is, rather... an earthy and aboriginal sense, which constitutes itself by an organization of the so-called elements' (1964b: 77). Merleau-Ponty holds that Gestalten are realised in the matter of the world itself. They are not, however, reducible to this matter because Gestalten are not something the world possesses independently of consciousness. The vertical structures in Merleau-Ponty's example remain constant throughout the switch in perceptual form from trees to ship's masts. What changes is the way the perceiver sees the structures. Yet the perceiver does not 'add' Gestalten to worldly matter from nothing. Instead, she picks out or discerns a pattern or form in it. Think about, by way of analogy, seeing pictures in the clouds. One may look up at the sky and see rabbits in the clouds. The clouds-in-themselves are not arranged as a rabbit. They simply occupy a certain spatial location in the atmosphere above the earth. They only have this physiognomy when someone looks at them. But the person looking does not create the rabbit *ex nihilo*; she finds it in the configuration of the clouds.

It is usual to think that a visual perception is correct insofar as its content faithfully copies or reproduces the part of the world that is perceived, and incorrect insofar as it does not. Since the Gestalten that characterise visual experiences are not mind-independent features of the world, Merleau-Ponty cannot account for the correctness or incorrectness of visual experience in this way. He offers the following alternative. The Gestalten that characterise perceptual experience refer to the perceiver's abilities to act. The entities I come across in the world are each correlated with a certain set of possibilities for action that serve to define them as the sorts of entities they are. A football, for example, allows for a particular range of kicking, holding, throwing, slipping out of hands when wet, deflating, inflating, and bursting actions (there are also many other things one might do with a football). The actions I can perform when I encounter some entity on a particular occasion are further circumscribed by the location of that entity within the environment, and its relations to other objects in the surrounding world. A football coming towards me from a certain direction offers me opportunities to perform a range of kicking actions, a diving-on-the-ground-to-stop-it action, and so on. Thus, when someone perceives the world, she experiences it as inviting her to interact with it in various ways.

Merleau-Ponty then claims that a perception is correct if the opportunities for action it offers to the subject are ones that she can really, in principle, take up. The perceiver's experience of the football is correct if it really could be kicked. A perception is incorrect if the opportunities for action it offers the perceiver could not be taken up. Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of seeing what is in fact a patch of sunlight as a stone, lying in one's path. One's perception presents the stone as something that one could walk on, pick up and skim across the water, kick against a nearby tree trunk, and so on. 'I see the illusory stone in the sense that my entire perceptual and motor field gives

to the light patch the sense of a “stone on the lane”. And I already prepare to sense this smooth and solid surface beneath my foot’ (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 310). However, as one gets closer, one realises that the ‘stone’ turns out to be a patch of sunlight. The possibilities for action are not ones the perceiver can really take up, and so the experience of the stone is an illusion.

We are now in a position to see how Merleau-Ponty solves the problem of illusion. Illusions are misperceptions, i.e., they are incorrect experiences. For them to be incorrect, they must have truth conditions, and if they have truth conditions, then they are representations. Conversely, veridical experiences are correct experiences. For them to be correct, they must have truth conditions, and so they must also be representations. The problem is that if visual perceptions are representations, then it seems we can no longer hold on to the idea that perception puts the perceiver in direct contact with the world. This is because it seems that representations must be distinct from what they represent. Just as a sentence that represents my dog being bored is a separate linguistic entity, which is distinct from my dog and his boredom, so too it seems that a visual representation of some scene is distinct from that scene. It is then natural to suppose that visual perceptions are representations that are contained within the mind. Merleau-Ponty aims to solve this problem by conceptualising the content of perception in such a way that it can be right or wrong (and so have representational content) whilst maintaining the direct connection with the world. He does this by employing the notion of the Gestalt. As we have seen, he holds that visual experiences have a Gestalt form. The form is one that offers the perceiver opportunities to act. An experience is veridical if she can really take up these opportunities, and illusory if she cannot. The forms taken on by the world in perception are the result of the perceiver discerning patterns or Gestalten in worldly matter. The Gestalten are realised in the matter of the world itself, and cannot exist without being so realised. In this way, visual experiences – whether they are veridical or illusory – are essentially world-involving. Their content is the sensuous matter of the world, characterised as having a certain form. The perceiver is thus still in direct contact with the world when she undergoes an illusion. Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘[A] mescaline intoxication can give animal appearances to objects and *make* an owl out of a clock without any hallucinatory image whatsoever’ (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 168).

### Seeing-as experiences

For Merleau-Ponty, normal human perception always has a Gestalt form. The perceiver is presented with a rich world of meaningful things and places, rather than a disorganised mass of sense-data. Normal human perception also encompasses another phenomenon that I refer to here as seeing-as. These are experiences typified by a normal perception of Jastrow’s duck-rabbit, which – as the name suggests – appears to the perceiver as either a duck or a rabbit, and tends to ‘flip’ between the two meanings or Gestalt forms. One might initially suppose that seeing-as just *is* Gestalt perception. Both Gestalt perceptions and seeing-as experiences have a physiognomy or meaningful form – in neither case is the subject presented with a disorganised collection of impressions. Moreover, the ‘flip’ in meaning that one typically experiences when looking at something like the duck-rabbit is known as a Gestalt switch, which suggests that the flip simply involves a change from one Gestalt perception to another. Finally, Merleau-Ponty appeals to Gestalt switches when discussing how visual illusions are corrected in experience. In the example given above, Merleau-Ponty experiences a Gestalt switch from the illusion of the ship’s masts

as trees, to the veridical perception of them as masts. The 'flip' in perceptual meaning seems to be exactly the same sort of abrupt change one experiences when the look of Jastrow's figure alters from a duck to a rabbit.

However, whilst Gestalt perception and seeing-as clearly share some features, there also seems to be an important respect in which they differ. Gestalt perceptions are capable of being true or false. As we saw above, this plays a pivotal role in Merleau-Ponty's solution to the problem of illusion. The peculiar nature of Gestalten allows him to account for perceptual experiences as having representational content, whilst maintaining the idea that they put the subject in direct contact with the world. In contrast, it does not seem that seeing-as experiences can be true or false. There is something odd about claiming that someone's experience of the duck-rabbit as a duck (or rabbit) is veridical, or that her perception of it as a rabbit (or duck) is illusory. One might respond by claiming that this is because the duck-rabbit is precisely an ambiguous figure that admits of two perceptual meanings. To see it under just one meaning is thus not entirely correct, but neither is it exactly an illusion. Yet this does not quite get at the oddness of claiming that a perception of the duck-rabbit as either a duck or a rabbit is veridical or illusory. The strangeness of this claim can be further illustrated by noting that whilst most people can see the duck-rabbit as either a duck or a rabbit, and they can see the meaning of the figure as switching between these alternatives, we would not say of someone who failed to see the figure in this way that their experience was incorrect or illusory.

Suppose we accept this intuition, and take Gestalt perception and seeing-as to share some features, but differ in this one important respect. How should we explain their similarities whilst accommodating the difference between them? More specifically, how might we do this from within Merleau-Ponty's framework?

To see this, we need to know more about his account of perception. We saw above that he takes perceptual experience to be characterised by Gestalt forms that refer to the perceiver's capacities for action. In other words, the perceiver is presented with a world that offers her opportunities to engage with it in various ways. A tree may be perceived as for-climbing, a bicycle as for-riding, a cliff edge as for-avoiding, and so on. Each object is correlated with a particular set of possibilities for action that it offers to human perceivers. These serve to define it as being an entity of a particular type.

Merleau-Ponty – as is well known – argues that experience has this character due to the connection between perception and the perceiver's motor skills. He tends to call the latter, 'habits' (Merleau-Ponty 2013). Motor skills are developed by practising the activity in question, which allows the body to become familiar with the behaviour. During the initial phases of learning a new skill, the bodily movements required to exercise it will typically feel alien and awkward, and one's attempts to perform them are likely to be clumsy and involve greater effort. But as one practices, the movements will feel more and more familiar; one's performance of them will become more graceful and fluid; and exercising the skill will require less effort. Imagine learning to play a drum kit. At first, one will be unused to the bodily position one must take up to hold the drumsticks, and to reach the pedal for the bass drum. One will find it difficult to keep time on the bass drum whilst playing a more complicated rhythm on the snare and cymbals. The movements required to strike the drums with the sticks will feel awkward, and one may hit them with varying amounts of force, rather than playing evenly. But through practice, one's body will start to find the activity familiar. The position and movements will feel less awkward.

It will become easier to co-ordinate one's limbs in the manner required to play the different parts of the kit. One's playing will become fluent.

Motor skills or habits do not just involve patterns of bodily movement; to acquire a motor habit is also to gain a new way of perceiving the world. To exercise any skill, one must be in the right sort of worldly place. I can only exercise my skill at playing volleyball, for example, if I am in an environment that contains a ball, a net, a suitable surface, and a partner. I cannot engage in this activity if I am seated in a theatre. Furthermore, in order to exercise a skill, I must also know how to move my body to perform the relevant actions. To return the volley ball over the net, I must know which movements are needed for my fists to make contact with the ball, and strike it at the right angle and with sufficient force to send it back to my partner (there may be a number of different movements that will achieve this objective). It follows that, for any motor skill, someone who possesses it will have the ability to pick out environments where it can be exercised, and the capacity to select the bodily movements needed to exercise the skill in those environments. On Merleau-Ponty's account, these abilities are manifest in the perception of the appropriate parts of the surrounding world as offering an opportunity to exercise a particular skill by executing a particular set of bodily movements. I see the volley ball coming towards me over the net, as requiring me to run to *this* particular spot, hold at my arms at *this* angle, and hit it upwards with *this* amount of force and in *this* direction to return it over the net.

On Merleau-Ponty's account, the subject's motor skills mean that her body is attuned to certain possibilities for action – those offered by environments in which she can exercise her skills. When she enters such an environment, it 'suggests' to her body how she might interact with it. These 'suggestions' are then taken up in perception, so that she *perceives* it as inviting her to act in those ways.

Gestalt perception aims to faithfully track the contours of the world. For Merleau-Ponty, this means responding to the world's 'suggestions' by picking out Gestalten in the world's matter that present the perceiver with opportunities for action that she could really take up. However, the normal human perceiver can also pick out Gestalt forms in an imaginative or playful way, where this activity does not aim to reveal the world's nature. Imagine, for example, gazing at a richly patterned carpet. A particular collection of swirling ornaments may take on, for the perceiver, the form of a horse. This imaginative seeing is seeing-as. Although seeing-as does not aim to faithfully track the world's nature, it nevertheless involves finding or picking out a Gestalt form in the world, rather than simply creating one from nothing. Just as the large equine being in the field down the road 'suggests' a horse Gestalt to me (or more properly, to my body), so that I perceive him as a horse, so too, the patterns in the carpet 'suggest' a horse-ish form to me so that I see a horse in the swirling ornaments. However, the 'prompt' from the world in seeing-as is more indeterminate and ambiguous than in Gestalt perception. Creativity is thus required to take up the world's 'suggestion', and the resulting experience will have more to do with the subject and how she has responded, than with the nature of the world.<sup>4</sup>

The subject's motor skills also play a very similar role in seeing-as to the one they play in Gestalt perception. As we saw above, the subject's skill at doing x attunes her

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<sup>4</sup> There are other sorts of actions that are relevant here, e.g., 'mental' actions such as categorising the imaginatively seen form in certain ways alongside other horse-ish forms. I leave these aside here as there is insufficient space to discuss this adequately.

body to places in the world where x can be done. When she enters such an environment, the world 'suggests' to her body that this skill can be exercised there. The subject takes up this suggestion and perceives that environment as offering an opportunity to do x. In seeing-as, the world makes an ambiguous suggestion that the subject's body finds somehow reminiscent of, or to resonate with, promptings connected with doing x. She – or her bodily self – responds by taking up this indeterminate suggestion to yield an experience of seeing-as x. For example, the subject's skill at riding a motorbike sensitizes her to places in which this skill can be exercised – say, those containing a motorbike and an open road. The same skill also attunes her to promptings from the world that are reminiscent of places that are appropriate for the exercise of that skill. The curve of an abstract doodle may be reminiscent of the curve of a motorbike wheel, and so she sees the doodle as a motorbike wheel, i.e., part of a machine that is for-riding. The way in which the body finds the world's promptings similar or alike cannot be further analysed. Indeed, it pertains to what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the enigma of the body' (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 164).

In both Gestalt perceptions and seeing-as experiences, the subject's motor skills attune her to the world, so that she is sensitive to its promptings. She responds to these by perceiving the world as offering her opportunities to exercise her skills. However, the two differ in an important respect: Gestalt perceptions are capable of being true or false, whereas seeing-as experiences are not. This is, of course, connected to the fact that Gestalt perceptions aim to track the contours of the world in terms of its value for one's actions, whilst seeing-as experiences do not. This is not to say that seeing-as experiences are completely divorced from the nature of the world, since – as stated above – they are undergone in response to the world's promptings. Where an experience aims to track the world's nature in terms of its possibilities for action, the subject is committed to things being as they appear. Conversely, where an experience does not have this aim, the subject is not thus committed. It is because one is committed in the case of Gestalt perception that one's perceptual experience is capable of being veridical or illusory. In being committed to things being F, one has taken some sort of stance concerning the nature of the world, and one can be either right or wrong about its being that way. Conversely, the lack of commitment in cases of seeing-as explains why seeing-as is not capable of being either veridical or illusory.

But whilst there is something right about this thought, cases of known illusion present a problem for this way of putting things. These are cases that we classify as illusions, which means they are capable of being true or false. Yet it does not seem that the perceiver is committed to the content of her experience's being the case, because she knows that her experience is illusory. For example, the Müller-Lyer lines are classed as an optical illusion because one sees what are in fact equal lines as being unequal in length. Nevertheless, one may know that they are really equal, and so one is not committed to the lines being unequal lengths.

However, Merleau-Ponty's framework offers a way to deal with this problem. The objection above understands being committed to p as knowing that p. It is plausible to think that the sort of knowledge at stake is propositional knowledge, which is constituted by true *beliefs* (formed in the appropriate ways, or with adequate justification). The perceiver is thus committed to p in virtue of her mental states. Let us call this sort of commitment, 'cognitive commitment'. Merleau-Ponty's framework allows us to identify another form of commitment, which we can call 'bodily commitment'.

Bodily commitment to  $p$  consists in the body's responding as if  $p$  were true. This can include emotional responses, bodily expectations about the sort of actions that can be performed that are constituted by the body's readying itself for action, and actually acting in ways that are appropriate to  $p$ 's being the case. On Merleau-Ponty's picture, our cognitive and bodily commitments can influence each other, and in many cases they are in line, so that one acts, responds emotionally, readies oneself for action, etc. in ways that are consonant with how one believes the world to be. However, one's cognitive and bodily commitments need not line up in every case. Certain experiments conducted by Rozin and colleagues (1986) nicely illustrate this point. They showed that subjects are reluctant to eat a piece of fudge shaped like dog faeces, even when they know it is fudge and therefore perfectly safe to eat. In this case, the subjects are cognitively committed to the item's being fudge. But they are bodily committed to its being excrement. This bodily commitment manifests in disgust, shrinking away from the item as it approaches one's mouth, shuddering as one places it near one's lips, etc.

The notion of bodily commitment allows us to distinguish between Gestalt perception and seeing-as in terms of being committed. It explains why seeing-as cases are not illusory, whilst accommodating known illusions. We can say that a Gestalt perception involves *bodily* commitment to  $p$ , and it is this that means it is capable of being veridical or illusory. When I see my dog in front of me, I am bodily committed to his really being there. My bodily responses constitute my taking a stance on the nature of the world in front of me, and this opens up the possibility of my stance being either right or wrong. Seeing-as, in contrast, does not involve bodily commitment. The lack of bodily commitment means that the subject's experience is not of the right sort to be either illusory or veridical. When I see the duck-rabbit as a duck, I am not bodily committed to its being a duck. Since I do not take a stance on this issue, there is no possibility of my stance being either right or wrong. My experience is thus incapable of being either veridical or illusory. In cases of known illusion, the perceiver's bodily and cognitive commitments come apart. She knows that what she sees is an illusion, and so lacks cognitive commitment to it, whilst nevertheless being bodily committed to what she sees. In a case where the perceiver sees the Müller-Lyer lines as unequal whilst knowing that they are in fact the same length, the perceiver is not cognitively committed to their being unequal, but she is bodily committed to this state of affairs, and so her experience can be classed as an illusion.

The difference in commitment between Gestalt perceptions and seeing-as experiences also shows up in their phenomenology. We have already noted that both experiences are similar insofar as they both have a Gestalt structure – the subject is presented with something (or some things) that have a particular form, rather than with a disorganised mass of impressions. Gestalten, on Merleau-Ponty's view, refer to the perceiver's capacities for action. As noted above, Merleau-Ponty takes each entity that one might encounter to correspond to a cluster of possibilities for action, which serve to define entities of that particular sort. To see something as having a particular Gestalt form is thus to see it as offering one (some of) the possibilities for action that are typical for such objects. This is true for both Gestalt perception and seeing-as experiences. However, these possibilities are experienced differently in each case. In Gestalt perception, one experiences the world as really having the form it takes in one's perception of it. One experiences the possibilities for action it offers as being such that one could really take them up. But in seeing-as, one experiences the Gestalt form as 'laid

over' what one perceives to be the real nature of the world. For example, when I see a horse standing in a field (Gestalt perception), my experience presents the world as really being such that there is an equine being in front of me. In contrast, when I see the carpet ornaments *as* a horse, I continue to perceive the carpet as really being a carpet (I continue to have a Gestalt perception of it as a carpet).

We can understand this experience of a form being 'laid over' the world's real nature as follows. The subject perceives a part of her environment as offering her conflicting possibilities for action. Her experience presents her with opportunities to act that correspond with the real nature of the world. But it also presents her with conflicting opportunities that constitute the Gestalt form that is 'laid over' the world's real nature. In our example, the carpet invites the perceiver to walk on it, to lie on it, to ruffle her toes in its pile. At the same time, the horse that she imaginatively sees in its ornaments invites her to stroke its nose. The imaginatively seen possibilities for action (i.e., those that constitute the seeing-as experience) are far less numerous than those she perceives to be real. She experiences the horse imaginatively seen in the carpet's ornaments as offering her far fewer possibilities for action than a real horse – she does not experience it as something that can be ridden or fed. In contrast, she experiences the carpet as offering her a sizeable number of the possibilities for action typically associated with carpets. An imaginatively seen entity thus lacks the fullness of an object presented in a Gestalt perception, which is why the subject is not bodily committed to its presence.<sup>5</sup> In this way, imaginatively seen entities are presented as overlaying the world's real nature, rather than being a real part of it. Merleau-Ponty writes, '[t]hey are not there in the same way as [things presented in Gestalt perception]. But they are not *elsewhere*... I do not look at [an imaginatively seen entity] as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place' (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 164).

Finally, the capacity to see-as underlies, for Merleau-Ponty, the human ability for certain kinds of artistic expression. Some works of art present their audience with recognisable entities. These may be real – as in the case of a portrait of Merleau-Ponty. Or they may be merely imaginary – like a picture of a frog painted with no particular frog in mind. We can say that works of art like this are *of* things. They are images of them. The relation between a work of art and what it is of, where the artwork is an *image* of some entity or entities, is peculiarly intimate. Unlike the relation between, say, me and my name, which is largely arbitrary (I could have been given a great many other names), works of art that are of things are *likenesses* of them. Not any old likeness of an entity can be classed as a work of art, or an image of it. For one thing, art works must clearly be produced by humans or other similar creatures. An accidental likeness of something, such a patch of lichen that resembles a face, will not count as a work of art. Neither are images mere replicas or clones of the things they depict. One white coffee mug is a replica or clone of a second – qualitatively identical – mug. But it is not an image of it, much less an art work that is *of* it. Instead, art works that are of things somehow *translate* them into different media. For example, a still-life of a French *gîte* translates the dwelling into paper and ink. Since this is so, an artwork cannot be a likeness of its object in virtue of sharing a number of its properties. Whilst the two will have some qualities in common, the fact that the former is a translation of the latter means that they will not share enough properties for this to be what it is for one to be a likeness of the other. The

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<sup>5</sup> We might say that the imaginatively seen form is *grasped* by the body, but the body is not committed to its presence.

still-life of the French gîte is flat, rendered in shades of grey and black, and made from paper and ink. But the gîte itself is a multi-hued home built from wood and brick. It is not flat, but takes up a volume of space. It has an inside where people may live, and secret crevices where insects and small mammals may make their homes. Merleau-Ponty holds that those art works that are of things are likenesses of them in that perceivers will see them *as* being of their objects.

The account of seeing-as presented above explains what this means. A perceiver is able to see an artwork *as* being of a particular object because she possesses motor skills that could be used to interact with objects of that sort. Those skills attune her body to 'prompts' from the world that it immediately finds reminiscent of 'prompts' from those situations in which the skills in question could be exercised. The 'prompts' are taken up in perception, so that the perceiver sees the world as having a particular Gestalt form (one that is constituted by a particular cluster of possibilities for action). However, she does not see the world as *really* being that way. Instead, she sees the form as 'overlying' the world's real nature. Someone looking at the picture of the French gîte sees the form of a dwelling 'laid over' paper and ink. Merleau-Ponty also uses his analysis to explain what the artist does when she creates an image. The artist rearranges some part of the world so that others can see it *as* something. Sometimes, the artist will first have a seeing-as experience, then emphasise the relevant features of the world so that others can see it *as* she does. Arguably, this is the case for (certain aspects of) the cave paintings at Lascaux. Merleau-Ponty talks of them as 'using the wall's mass' (1964c, 164), and looking at the paintings makes it clear what he is referring to here. Real features of the wall are incorporated into the designs so that a bulbous mass of rock becomes the clouds above the animals' heads, and strata lines in the rock below the figures are emphasised to become the ground beneath their hooves. One can imagine the artists first *seeing* those elements *as* sky and ground, then emphasising them with paint so that we can see them *as* such too. In other cases, the artist's work will not begin with a seeing-as experience. She will instead, begin to alter the world from nothing, as it were, so that something that she and others can see *as* an object, gradually takes shape. This is so when the artist produces a sketch, which begins as a blank sheet of paper, which she alters with pencil marks so that it can be *seen as* something.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I examine two related phenomena – Gestalt perception and seeing-as – and explained how Merleau-Ponty analyses them. Both types of seeing involve the use of the perceiver's motor skills, which she uses to respond to 'prompts' from the world. In the case of Gestalt perception, these 'prompts' are taken up in perception to yield an experience of the world as really having a certain form. The perceiver is committed to the world's being the way it is presented. In other words, she – or more properly, her bodily self – takes a stance on things being a certain way, and so the experience may be veridical or illusory. Nevertheless, in both cases, the perceiver is still in direct contact with the world. Merleau-Ponty accounts for this by holding that a Gestalt perception – whether veridical or illusory – is constituted by a stretch of the world, perceived in a certain way. The perceiver discerns or picks out a Gestalt form in the matter of the world. Seeing-as experiences, in contrast, do not present the world as really having the seen-as form. Instead, the perceiver experiences a Gestalt form as 'laid over' the world's real nature. She is not committed to the world's being this way, and so seeing-as experiences

are not capable of being true or false. Merleau-Ponty takes the capacity to see-as to be what underlies the creation and appreciation of art works that are images of their objects. The artist alters the world so that others can see it *as* exhibiting a particular form.

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