

PHIL 475 – Topics in Contemporary European Philosophy  
Mon & Wed 1:05-2:25  
BIRKS 203

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Office hours: LEA 923, Wed 3:00-4:00 p.m.

### **Course topic and objectives**

This course is an overview of the thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, through the lens of his writings on painting. Merleau-Ponty wrote about art at every stage of his career. His relatively short essays on the subject are, therefore, an excellent way to get a sense of the movement of his thought. Merleau-Ponty does the phenomenology of art because he believes that the painter is, first and foremost, a philosopher. In *Eye and mind* he says “art, especially painting, draws upon [the] fabric of brute meaning [ . . . ]. Art and only art does so in full innocence. From the writer and the philosopher, in contrast, we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended” (123). The question we will address throughout the semester is: why does Merleau-Ponty defend the claim that the painter is a philosopher? More specifically, how is it that painting reveals the structure of perception and its dependence on the body in a way that language, perhaps, cannot?

In the first half of the course, students will be introduced to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodied perception in his most seminal work, *Phenomenology of perception (PhP)*. *PhP* lays the groundwork for Merleau-Ponty’s life-long interrogation of painting. In the second half of the semester, students will read Merleau-Ponty’s three famous essays on art: “Cézanne’s Doubt”, “Indirect language and the voices of silence”, and *Eye and mind*, the last essay he completed before he died. Students who successfully complete this course will become familiar with the major concepts and trends in Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre, namely, the bodily schema, the argument against dualism, the phenomenological reduction, synaesthesia, co-constitution, style, expression, and dimension.

### **Pre-requisites**

PHIL 375 or equivalent

### **Evaluation**

Students in this course will be evaluated in terms of class participation, a small presentation, and two written assignments.

#### *Participation (15%)*

Students are expected to attend class regularly and to participate in discussion by asking questions and raising problems.

#### *Discussion questions (15%)*

Each student will be assigned the task of preparing one discussion question during the semester. Depending on the size of the class, one or two students will be assigned discussion questions per session. Discussion questions should be related directly to the reading assigned for the day of the presentation. Questions ought to be philosophical and critical (i.e. they

ought to be *motivated* by a philosophical problem rather than simply a desire for clarification). Questions should be approximately 150 words in length and designed to be presented briefly in class (a copy of the discussion question should be sent to the instructor by email on the day of the mini presentation).

### *Written work*

Midterm paper (30%): 5 pages, double spaced, times new roman font (12 pt).

**Due Date: Wed. Oct 28 in class**

In the midterm paper, students are expected to show that they grasp the crux of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'bodily schema' in *Phenomenology of perception*. The goal of the paper is, therefore, first and foremost exegetical. All papers should address the question: what does Merleau-Ponty mean by the notion of the 'bodily schema' and how does one of the examples he gives in the text illustrate his argument?

Final paper (40%): 10-12 pages, double spaced, times new roman font (12 pt).

**Due date: December 7 at midnight**

The final paper, should be an argumentative paper that addresses the question that frames the course: why does Merleau-Ponty think that the painter is a philosopher?

Students are encouraged to meet with the course instructor to discuss their thesis statements and the structures of their essays before they begin writing.

### *Late policy*

Late papers will be penalized by a half-grade per day that the paper is late. In the event of an emergency, students may contact the instructor and obtain permission to submit their papers late as long as they can provide a doctor's note or other official written excuse.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (for more information see: [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)).

In accordance with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit all written work in English or in French.

### **Required reading**

Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of perception*. Trans. Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.

*The Merleau-Ponty aesthetics reader*. Ed. Galen A. Johnson. Trans. Michael B. Smith. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern UP, 1993.

Required readings will be available at the McGill bookstore at the beginning of term.

## Suggested reading

- Bernard, Emile. "Memories of Paul Cézanne." Trans. Cochran, Julie Lawrence. *Conversations with Cézanne*. Ed. Doran, Michael. Berkley: U of California P, 2001. 59-79.
- Byrne, David. *How Music Works*. San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2012.
- Descartes, René. "Optics." Trans. Olscamp, Paul J. *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meterology*. Cambridge: Hackett, 2001. 65-173.
- de Waelhens, Alphonse. "Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting." *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Ed. Johnson, Galen. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993. 174-91.
- De Warren, Nicolas. "Flesh Made Paint." *Journal of the British society for phenomenology*.44 (2013): 78-104.
- Goldstein, Kurt. *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology*. New York: Schocken Books, 1940.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Trans. Hardy, Lee. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The World of Perception*. Trans. Davis, Oliver. New York: Routledge, 2004.

## **Class/reading schedule**

### **Week 1**

Sept 4: Introduction

### **Week 2**

Reading: Zahavi, Dan. *Husserl's Phenomenology*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003. 7-42.

**N.B.** The instructor will provide students with the short readings from the Zahavi text (and will also put the book on reserve in the library).

Sept 9: Introduction to Husserlian phenomenology

### **Week 3**

Reading: Zahavi, Dan. *Husserl's Phenomenology*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003. 43-78.

Sept 14: Introduction to Husserlian phenomenology

Sept 16: Introduction to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology (suggested reading: introduction to *Phenomenology of perception*)

### **Week 4**

Reading: *PhP*, 114-144

Sept 21: The spatiality of the body (1)

Sept 23: The spatiality of the body (2)

### **Week 5**

Reading: *PhP*, 145-172

Sept 28: The spatiality of the body (3)

Sept 30: The spatiality of the body (4)

### **Week 6**

Reading: *PhP*, 240-266

Oct 5: Sensation

Oct 7: **Class cancelled**

### **Week 7**

Reading: *PhP*, 266-280

Oct 12: **Thanksgiving. Class cancelled**

Oct 14: Sensation (3)

### **Week 8**

Reading: *PhP*, 345-366

Oct 19: The thing and the natural world (1)

Oct 21: The thing and the natural world (2)

### **Week 9**

Reading: *PhP*, 367-385

Oct 26: The thing and the natural world (2)

Oct 28: The thing and the natural world (3)

**Midterm paper due Wed. Oct 28 in class**

**Week 10**

Reading: "Cézanne's doubt": 59-75

Nov 2: Cézanne's doubt (1)

Nov 4: Cézanne's doubt (2)

**Week 11**

Reading: "Indirect language and the voices of silence", 76-92

Nov 9: Indirect language (1)

Nov 11: Indirect language (2)

**Week 12**

Reading: "Indirect language" 92-113

Nov 16: Indirect language (3)

Nov 18: Indirect language (4)

**Week 13**

Reading: *Eye and mind*, 121-130

Nov 23: *Eye and mind* (1)

Nov 25: *Eye and mind* (2)

**Week 14**

Reading: *Eye and mind*, 130-139

Nov 30: *Eye and mind* (3)

Dec 2: *Eye and mind* (4)

**Week 15**

Reading: *Eye and mind*, 139-149

Dec 7: *Eye and mind* (5)

**Final paper due Dec 7 by midnight**