

## VISUAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

RON MCCLAMROCK

---

**Abstract:** Ideally, psychological and phenomenological studies of visual experience should be mutually informative. In that spirit, this article outlines parts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view of visual experience as a kind of independently active opaque bodily synthesis, and uses those views to (a) help ground and extend Alva Noë's rejection of the "snapshot" theory of visual experience in favor of a more enactive view of visual content, (b) critique a failing of Noë's account, and (c) show how the assumptions underlying more internalist and Cartesian views of visual experience can illegitimately creep in even when they are being carefully criticized.

Keywords: cognition, consciousness, embodiment, experience, mind, perception, phenomenology, vision.

---

### 1. Introduction

Recent philosophy of mind has been listening to phenomenology; and Alva Noë's *Action in Perception* (Noë 2004) is a good example of this. In what follows, I'll suggest that perhaps we should listen even harder to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's views on visual experience from *The Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Starting with an oversimplified summary of some central themes in Merleau-Ponty's views of perception, I'll say a bit about Noë's attempt to reject the "snapshot" theory of visual experience. I'll show how he falls short of doing that, and say where I think that leaves us.

### 2. The Five-Minute Merleau-Ponty: Two Mistakes, Three Features, One Slogan

Let me now grossly oversimplify a few central ideas of Merleau-Ponty's views about the phenomenology of perception for use here.

### *Two Mistakes*

Merleau-Ponty thinks of perceptual experience as a distinctive phenomenon that should not be mistaken either for *sensation* or for *judgment*. Treating perception as *sensation* (or “empiricism”) is mistaken because perceptual experience is given to us as structured, a unified whole, intentional, and not a context-free function of what is transduced at the surface of the body. Treating perception as *judgment* (or “intellectualism”) is a mistake because it won’t leave enough distance between *how we see things* and *how we take them to be* that will be essential to understanding some central perceptual phenomena, such as the persistence of illusion and gestalt shifts. Perception is neither sensation nor judgment, but a third distinctive kind of activity—like *sensation* in its automaticity and lack of decomposability, and like *judgment* in its intentionality and extrapolation beyond what’s merely transduced by the body.

### *Three Features*

Perception is then taken as having three central features: *independent active synthesis*, *opacity*, and *nonthetic presentation*.

As *independent active synthesis*, perception has its own rules and processes synthesizing the perceptual whole. It’s an automatic, unavoidable activity of my body and brain that I don’t consciously *do*. So, the presentation of the cup on the table *as a cup* is somehow constructed by my body, but not by me *as* conscious act. I don’t actively put together parts, or synthesize objects from the light transduced; perception presents the object as already formed. Likewise with my perception of speech: it comes to me already presented as meaningful utterances of my language.

Perception is *opaque* in that this independent active synthesis is often *invisible* to my consciousness as well. I lack access to those rules or processes by which my body synchronizes with the utterances of others to present them to me as words and assertions, or those by which it synthesizes shapes and objects from the fluctuations of light. Perception takes for granted these opaque activities without providing knowledge of their internal nature.

And perception is *nonthetic presentation* in that it does not present *itself* as an object for experience but presents something else—typically, something like the properties of distal objects. Perceptual states aren’t the intentional objects of perception, but its “invisible” conduits—as Merleau-Ponty says, I “abandon myself and plunge into it” (1962, 214). Perceiving red, or squareness, or a chair, is not phenomenologically experiencing *some state of mine as an experience* of redness, or squareness, or whatever—the experience is not an object for me. What is experienced is something distal *as* red, or square, or whatever.

*One Slogan*

The key slogan in the *Phenomenology of Perception* is surely this: *Analysis does not retrace the path of synthesis*. Most centrally, Merleau-Ponty is warning us away from assuming that what we seem to discover in analyzing perception (like, say, *sensations*) should be taken as a *component* of perceptual experience itself.

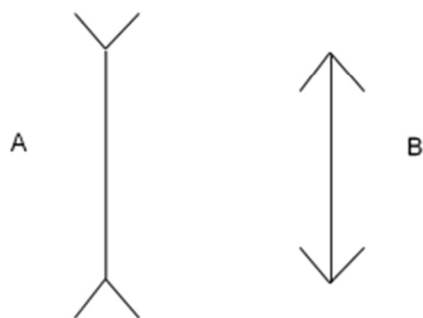
**3. Visual Experience, Snapshots, and Projections**

Alva Noë's *Action in Perception* gives a fascinating "enactive" account of vision as unified with action, which often takes explicit motivation from Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the role of the body in perception. Central to Noë's view is the attempt to move our view of visual *experience* away from a kind of "snapshot" view. As he puts it: "When we think of vision, we tend to suppose that the eye is like a camera and that vision is a quasi-photographic process. To see, we suppose, is to undergo snapshot-like experiences of the scene before us" (Noë 2004, 35).

Noë offers much in the way of critique of this view, emphasizing the ways in which our current knowledge of vision matches the view badly. For example, the eye's blind spot breaks up the continuity of the image picked up, and only the eye's fovea (covering the area of a thumbnail at arm's length) picks up high-resolution and color-saturated information about the scene. These facts seem a bad match to our fuller and richer experience of the visual display. And rapid saccadic eye movements should leave us with jumping and jittery images (if they are even that) rather than the seemingly stable experience we have of objects. (See McClamrock 1995, chapter 9, for a fuller account.) But in spite of all this, Noë fails to honor his own (roughly Merleau-Pontian) ideals and falls prey to a residual of the "snapshot" view of vision.

Like Merleau-Ponty, Noë is concerned to hold onto the phenomenological distinction between how things *look* and how we *judge them to be*. So, as with a standard example of the persistence of illusion like the Müller-Lyer illusion: We need to be able to separate the way it *looks* (i.e., as if one line is longer), from how we *judge it to be* (i.e., of identical length, as I'm well acquainted with the illusion and facts about length it distorts).

But Noë's views of this separation fall into a mistake of just the sort he



The Müller-Lyer Illusion



has warned us about in critiquing the “snapshot” theory. He identifies the experience of the perceptual “looks” of things with the *projection properties* (or *P-properties*), taken to be specified by the projection of light from my vantage point—a projection function that “can be given by precise mathematical laws.” So, concretely, he notes that for the experienced shape of, say, a round dinner plate on the table in front of me, the optical foreshortening of the plate gives it the P-properties of an ellipse: “[F]or a plate to look elliptical from here . . . it is for it . . . to be such as would be perfectly occluded by an elliptical patch on the plane of occlusion” (Noë 2004, 132).

So Noë claims the way the round plate *looks* is elliptical (from here); and that’s because it’s perfectly occludable by a particular elliptical patch. For him, the presentation as elliptical is an essential part of the perceptual consciousness. And likewise for colors or shades: the P-property is specified by the “implicit” color projected here by the light; the visual “look” is a function of that. Here, Noë’s stand-in for occlusion is roughly the idea of “paint chip matching from here.” Projected color, as with shape, is then a function of a kind of “lining it up from here.” So, for example, when looking at a wall, where the illumination varies over a consistently painted surface, “to match the color of different parts of the wall in the varying light, you would need different chips” (Noë 2004, 128).

For Noë, these P-properties aren’t then just available to the organism, they are intrinsically and ineliminably present in how things “look”—in our visual consciousness of them.

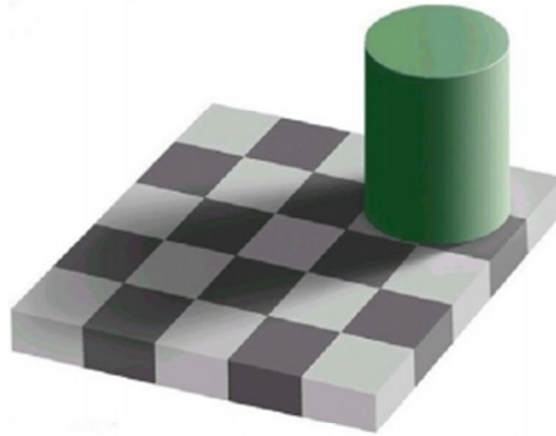
### 3. Examples and Concerns

But these P-properties seem like exactly the sorts of features that apply to what we sometimes call the “picture plane.” In photographs, round objects are foreshortened to ellipses in the plane of the picture, and objects of consistent color show up as different surface properties of the picture due to varying illumination. Wasn’t it just this kind of “snapshot” characterization of visual experience that Noë was intent on rejecting? And worse: there are clear examples that seriously undermine this way of understanding things. Let me briefly consider three of these.

#### *The Adelson Checkerboard*

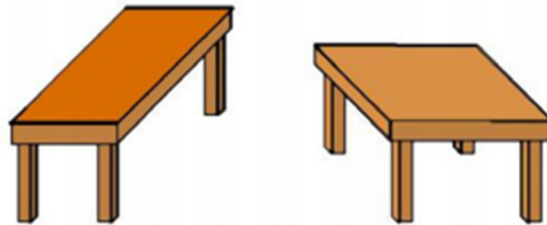
Consider the accompanying picture, apparently of a checkerboard surface with a cylinder standing on it and casting a shadow. The square second from the top left and the one in the middle look very different—one *looks* dark, the other *looks* light, but in shadow. But the surface properties of the picture—the light coming from those squares—is exactly the same. In the picture plane, we would need the same “paint chip” to match them. But they don’t *look* the same at all. If *looks* are a function of local “paint

chip” matching, these squares should match *different* chips. But they aren’t just *judged* as different; they *look* different. They project the same P-property; but we don’t seem to have any perceptual access to the sameness of that P-property at all. (Or at least, not without changing the scene and experience significantly—for example, by drawing a connecting bar between the two squares.)



#### *Shepard's Tables*

Here’s a similar case for shape. The two pictured table tops *look* very different in shape and dimensions to us. The left table looks long and narrow; the right table looks fatter and squarer.



But again, the P-properties will be the same: they will be occluded by exactly the same parallelogram from here (or if you prefer, in the picture plane). By the “match/occlude from here” rule, they should look the same; but they don’t. As before, it seems we have no experience of them as “looking the same shape” at all.

In each of the above cases, the P-properties are the same, but the colors and shapes *look* different. The sameness of the P-properties seems to be unavailable to our visual consciousness. So the idea that P-properties specify the phenomenological “look” in perceptual acts seems seriously undermined.

#### **4. Conclusions and Speculations**

So “projection” properties are often not phenomenologically salient in perception. Noë’s view that they *are* seems in conflict with these examples, as well as with his own resistance to the “snapshot” account of visual experience.

None of this is surprising given Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual appearances as constituted by independently active opaque synthesis. There is no reason to expect that visual appearance should depend only on what's projected in the light of the local picture space at all. The "knowledge machine" of perception presents its objects nonthetically as objects with shapes located in three-dimensional space around us. The mechanism by which it does that uses much information about shape, light, and shading that is quite opaque to our consciousness.

There is no reason to think that phenomenological appearance should collapse together information about object color and illumination—or three-dimensional shape and the two-dimensional projections of it—the way a photograph does. To assume it does is to violate the heart of Merleau-Ponty's denial that perception is sensation, to forget that perceptual appearance is opaque and nonthetic independently active synthesis, and to be sucked into thinking that our analysis must have retraced the path of synthesis.

Merleau-Ponty's views on perception help illuminate these continuing errors concerning visual experience. I believe his further view that these errors are clearest when they encourage reifying sensations (or qualia) as constituents of consciousness will allow us to see these as (like two-dimensional projection) artifacts of analysis. Doing this may provide a powerful lever against the widespread "explanatory gap" arguments in the philosophy of mind that rely on claims about qualia. But that argument will have to wait for another time.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University at Albany, SUNY*  
*Albany, NY 12222*  
*USA*  
*ron@albany.edu*

## References

- McClamrock, Ron. 1995. *Existential Cognition: Computational Minds in the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Noë, Alva. 2004. *Action in Perception*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.