

## ***The Architecture of Time: time-of-the-object/time-of-the-subject***

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One of the challenges in engaging the work of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the topic of time and temporality is the difficulty of locating precisely where to begin. Despite the substantial – and seemingly ever-growing – secondary scholarship on his philosophy very few of these sources focus directly on the specific theme of time. Even the recent (and otherwise very informative) *Merleau-Ponty Dictionary* [1] contains no individual entry on either of these two terms. The index to this volume does, however, contain 24 separate page references to the theme of “time/temporality”, scattered more or less evenly throughout the book. There is therefore plenty of evidence to confirm that these topics were much more important to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project than first impressions might suggest.

“We conceive of being through time, because it is through the relations between subject-time and object-time that we can understand the relations between the subject and the world.” [2]

The central part of the presentation begins with a brief summation of the broad arc of Merleau-Ponty’s career as a philosopher, through what can usefully be seen as three distinct phases of development. These are characterized by three modes or models of human subjectivity, what I will call – for the sake of brevity – the ‘body-subject’; the ‘linguistic-subject’; and, finally, the ‘emergent-subject’. In the early work (especially the *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945) Merleau-Ponty seems somewhat trapped within a ‘received language’ of binary opposition between a pre-given independent subject and an external objective world with which it attempts to ‘interact’. In the later work, by contrast, there is a concerted effort to recognise the extent to which the process of ‘subjectification’ should be seen as an externally rather than an internally determined project, subject to the forces exerted by a socially, culturally and linguistically structured context. This effort culminates in Merleau-Ponty’s final, unfinished, and posthumously published work *The Visible and the Invisible* [3] in which he coined the term ‘the flesh of the world’ to describe a primordial mode of being – crudely, a pre-given ‘unity’ of subject and object – from which these two (conceptual) categories have been derived.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the self as an ongoing “project of the world” [4] already referred to in the final chapters of *Phenomenology of Perception*, invites speculation on the extent to which the designed world – i.e. architecture – has, and must, contribute(d) to the process by which the human self as a fundamentally developmental project *constructs itself*, and, at the same time, constructs its world, and how this process should also be seen as actively *producing* time, as opposed to simply happening ‘in’ it. This notion prompts a further brief exploration of the links between more recent research on the topic of ‘embodied cognition’ – and specifically the so-called

‘enactivist’ understanding of perception – and related notions of temporality drawn from the broader interdisciplinary space between philosophy, psychology and cognitive science. One particularly useful recent study of the ‘felt experience’ of temporality [5] likewise points to the emergent evolutionary advantage offered by a living organism’s ability to synchronize its behaviour with the temporal rhythms of its environment. This process appears to involve a developing sensitivity towards the repetition of temporal cycles of both exogenous (external/environmental) and endogenous (internal/bodily) origin.

In the final section of the paper I will speculate on the usefulness or otherwise of the commonly cited notion of ‘timelessness’ in buildings, typically claimed to be a thoroughly positive and even highly aspirational quality. By contrast I offer an alternative formulation of architectural ‘time-full-ness’, based on the various ways in which a designed environment might (rather than cutting itself free from its context) instead provide meaningful points of reference to the specifics of both its spatial and temporal location. By this means, I suggest that a time-full environment would provide evidence of, and support for, the ongoing attempts of its human users to synchronize their behaviours in relation to it, thereby dynamically constructing – and continually reconstructing – both themselves and their surroundings. I offer a proposal as to how this might be conceptualised according to a scheme of reference along two axes: a vertical axis of reference to “Historical Time”, and a horizontal axis that I call “Chronological Space” – a schema that also links to various typological approaches to architectural history and design.

## References:

- [1] Donald A. Landes, *The Merleau-Ponty Dictionary*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, P. 268.
- [2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (trans. Donald Landes) Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2012. P. 454-455.
- [3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (trans. Alphonso Lingis) Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- [4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (trans. Donald Landes) Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2012. P. 454.
- [5] Marc Wittmann, *Felt Time: The Science of How We Experience Time*, (trans. Erik Butler) Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2016.