

Consciousness and Perception: The Point of Experience and the Meaning of the World We Inhabit

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Abstract I suggest that consciousness may be culturally shaped, and thus it may be a romanticism of science to attempt explaining conscious experiences as if there could be one and only general abstraction of the whole human living conscious experience – in spite of history, culture, language, etc. My starting point is *perception* – its relation to conscious experience and, most of all, the meaning with which, through the mediation of perceptual processes, the world presents itself to each of us. I figure it out mainly by a combination of three different approaches to human experience: i) Maurice Merleau-Ponty's works on perception; ii) Constance Classen and David Howes' *Anthropology of the senses*; iii) Vilém Flusser's hermeneutical conception of *language as reality*.

Key-Words: Consciousness, Culture, Perception.

1- Introduction

For the last 15 years, I have been working with problems that emerge in the intercrossing of art, technology and perception. Such a set [art, technology, perception] has made it impossible to avoid, here and there, facing the question of consciousness. For an example: in the early stages of this research, dealing with art and synesthesia (Basbaum, 2002), I was led through Cytowic's (1997) considerations on the primacy of emotion, and also to an article by Gray, Williams, Nunn and Baron-Cohen (1997), in which

synesthesia is considered a kind of possible entrance to find out how consciousness happens.

More recently, searching for a more philosophical approach to perception, which happened to be Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (originally published in 1945), I was led to Husserl's phenomenological concept of *intentionality*, and then to more recent works of Francisco Varela (1996, 1999), in which both Merleau-Ponty's and Husserl's works re-emerge to feed contemporary scientific research on consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's, Husserl's and even Heidegger's phenomenological approaches also show up in other contemporary scientific works, such as Engel and König (1998) – on perception – and Wheeler (1996) – on artificial life, thus making me feel somehow comfortable to elaborate some insights on consciousness. To do so, I'll also take in account some anthropology and some hermeneutics.

The goal of this work, then, is to propose that *consciousness is a culturally shaped phenomena, and that any conception that may emerge about it from a traditional Western scientific approach cannot go further than suggest a model of consciousness that, at best, can correspond to the experience of consciousness in the culture in which this very specific way of dealing with reality is embedded.*

2 - The Main Claims

According to Merleau-Ponty (1945), perception is the silent philosophy of everyday life, the unspoken order by which we live and that sustains quietly all our acts, words and thoughts.

John Cage once read the following English translation of a Kuang-Tse's poem:

“The four mists of Chaos
 The North, the West, the East and the South
 Went to visit Chaos himself
 He treated them all very kindly
 And when they were thinking of leaving
 They considered among themselves
 How they might repay his hospitality
 Since they had noticed that he had no holes in his body
 As they all had (eyes, nose, mouth, etcetera)
 They decided each day to provide him with an opening
 At the end of seven days,
 Chaos died (‘Apud’ Campos, 2003)

By stressing the role of the senses in giving us an ordered and meaningful world in which to live (thus 'killing' chaos), this translation of Kuang-Tse elegantly states the primacy of perception on our lived experience, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* (1945) struggled hard to put in Western terms. Following the phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Heidegger, and taking advantage of the then recent findings of German *Gestalt* psychologists, he de-constructs classical theories of perception that have dominated Western thought since Descartes, and opens the field to an entire new scrutiny, by giving decisive emphasis to the way by which we are tied to the world by perceptual bonds.

In the path opened by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty continually remembers his readers of the inexhaustible mystery of the experience of the world (Fig. 1), while also overcoming all duality between mind and body. We do not *have*

a body: we *are* our body, and this incarnated experience is the primal source of any meaning we may assign to the world and its representations.

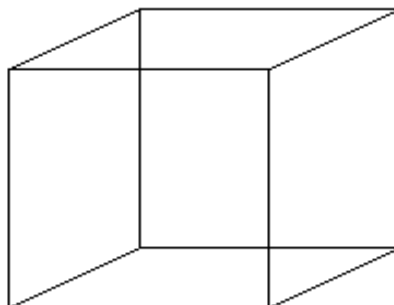


Figure 1- The Necker Cube: an ambiguous figure as simple as that should be enough to remind us of the endless richness of living perceptual experience.

The lived experience is understood as the merging of subject and the scene of things in which he exists, to the production of a "world" which is defined both by the uniqueness of the subject's perspective and by the scene which allows his consciousness to be: from a certain set of living relations among things around, he or she organizes a coherent but never fully determined scene, in which he or she also defines himself or herself. What we call "reality" is, then, not a pre-existent *objective* world, as claimed by rationalism and science, but an opened and always unfinished agreement among the many subjectivities that share this reality, generating a common-sense "cosmos" that we assume as the "real" world. Husserl's claims for a return to "the things themselves" is an attempt to recover an experience of the world which precedes any reasoning and any language, and which is the source and ground of all possible knowledge:

"Everything I know about the world, even if through science, I know as from a vision of mine or as from an experience of the world without which the symbols of science could not say anything. Science's whole universe is built over the lived world, and if we intend to think science with rigor, appreciate its full meaning and its scope, we need first to awake this experience of the world from which it is a second expression." (Merleau-Ponty, 1994:3)

In this approach, perception *is the contract we sign with the world*: it ties us to reality, and I'm able to build a "world" for me because I perceive this alterity which affects me; also, I perceive the other and I'm forced to recognise that his/her world is not necessarily identical but is *as real* as mine – thus the necessary agreement just referred.

However, most of all, perception gives me a world in which I believe: *it is the founder of the very notion of truth*. It is from this notion, born from the faith with which I invest my perceptions of myself, the other and the things outside, that philosophy and, later, science were able to work in a method that would guarantee a "rational" and "mathematically provable" truth. Even if I'm experiencing an illusion, it is true for me until proved false by another perception, which will be experienced as true, until still another experience shows its falseness. Of course, the same words could be applied to Science, and that's what Merleau-Ponty claims: given that perception does not give me "a chaos of pure sensations", as classical theories used to sustain, but a coherent set of dynamical relations invested with meaning – as *Gestalt* has showed – common-sense, philosophy and science are just utterances of a thesis of the world presented by perception: they just explicit, in different levels, something already done in perceptual experience. Thus, subject and

object define each other, and there's no opposition between reason and sensation, since perception is the baby-cradle from which reason develops. But while perception gives me *things* which are endless source of meaning, defined by context and circumstance, reason takes such things as *objects*, represented in such a way as being constant, calculable, perfectly defined and ideally severed from any uncontrollable circumstance. Of course, this level of ideal abstraction is demanded by a way of dealing with things whose main goal is to have power and control over them, as Heidegger has stated.

But why classical philosophy and science have failed to notice the operations of perception Merleau-Ponty describes? It's because perception hides itself in order to allow us to have a world where reason can play. However, it can show itself, as long as we are able to return to it, to suspend judgement and pay attention to this genesis of reason in the living tissue of perception, from which reality happens to us *and which is the primal source of consciousness* – of course, there's some similarity here with meditation.

I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's work allows us to say that *the senses (perception) launch us in the direction (sense) of the world, and are the foundation of the meaning (sense) with which we invest our experience.*

This association of words (senses-sense-sense) happens in many languages. In fact, ordinary language is plenty of metaphors which reveal the relations among perceptual experience and the genesis of words. Canadian anthropologist Constance Classen (1993:70) has written a short glossary of "words of sense", from which a nice example is the word "pensive", originated in "the Latin *pensare*, meaning weigh and hence to ponder, consider".

3 - Classen and Howes' *Anthropology of the Senses*: from the point of view to the point-of-experience

Beautiful and deep as it is, however, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* is not able to realize the simple fact that *not all cultures have come to perceive the world in the terms demanded by rationality*. Given that we don't have anymore – or, I suppose, we shouldn't have – the illusion that reason is, for itself and *a priori*, the only and the best way to approach and understand the world (as it's been the faith of the XIXth century), we are now in better position to see certain limits in his work. Most of all, it can be suggested that *Merleau-Ponty was not able to realize that the perception he so well describes, this one which rationality makes explicit, is Western perception*: a relationship with the world increasingly dominated by the mediation of the eye.

Endless authors, in different fields, confirm this occularcentrism: metaphors of vision dominate the way we conceive reason. *Clarity, light, the need to see to believe, the power of visual representations* (that dominate the history of science), *the need to "picture" a certain situation*. As put by Hanna Arendt:

"from the very outset, in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought in terms of *seeing*...The predominance of sight is so deeply embedded in Greek speech, and therefore in our conceptual language, that we seldom find any consideration bestowed on it, as though it belonged among things too obvious to be noticed" ('apud' Levin, 1993: 2)

It is unnecessary to insist in such a point, which emerges in thinkers as radically different as Martin Heidegger (1977), Walter Benjamin (1997) or Marshall McLuhan, as much as in a historian such as Alfred W. Crosby (1997). The power of the eye is already there in the *Medusa* myth, and is later implemented in the form of numerous machines of vision that have helped to shape modernity and empower science. In the words of Walter Benjamin:

Nothing distinguishes more deeply ancient man from modern man than his surrender to a cosmic experience which the latter hardly knows. It's wreck is already announced in the blossom of astronomy, in the beginnings of Modern Age. Kepler, Copernico, Tycho Brahe, weren't moved only by scientific impetus, that's for sure. However, there's in the exclusive stress on an optical bond with the universe, to which astronomy would soon lead, a sign of what was to come. The ancient dealing with the cosmos would happen through another path: inebriety" (Benjamin, 1997: 68)

The most radical and even opposite ideas developed in Western culture rely always on the eye, in the terms described above by Arendt. The power of the reason that has evolved from this particular way of looking at the world and making sense of it can be illustrated by Man Ray's work *Indestructible object* (Fig. 2). Over the rod of a metronome, a cyclopic eye – Renaissance perspective's eye – wave mechanically from one side to the other. By doing so, its oscillation unveils different perspectives of the real, without ever losing its prominence. It is the perpetual motif, able to contemplate, detach, target, focus, enframe and thus theorize about any phenomena: visuality and visual representations are necessarily tied to Western philosophy and science. In a few words: the point-of view.



Figure 2: Man Ray's Indestructible Object (1920)

But then, asks Portuguese philosopher Maria João Ceitil (2001: 42): “what has the world of philosophers to do with the world of a gardener, a perfumist or a musician?” We are led to think about alternative ways of dealing with the real which may not be constrained by the normative impositions of the Greek eye. In fact, adventurers such as Walter Benjamin, with his hashish experiences, or Aldous Huxley, with his mescaline trips, tried to experience different perceptual worlds, which provided them different approaches to the meaning of reason and Western culture. However, their

great accounts of such experiences, constrained by the impositions of a language that much historically shaped by the visual (and which has been turned into a visual experience in itself, as McLuhan's work brilliantly showed), could not do much more than be captured by the river of our visual stress.

When an Andaman Island's Ongee wants to know how you are, he asks: "how is your nose?" [when/why/where is the nose to be]. According to Howes:

"Sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all the values and practices of society are enacted."
(Howes, 2003: xi)

In the late 1950s, Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (1980) had noticed that only Westerners could find any interest in an Eskimo shaman's mask as exposed to visual appreciation in a museum. For the eskimos, such a mask had meaning only when used by the shaman, talking and dancing in a sacred ritual. The voice coming through the mask, was, then, not the shaman's voice anymore, but the voice of a deity. Such oppositions McLuhan and Carpenter figured, between *visual* and *oral* cultures, helped latter the emergency of an anthropology focused in the sensory worlds of different cultures.

McLuhan's insights concerning different arrangements of the sensorial apparatus have thus been investigated and expanded in the last decades by a number of anthropologists dealing with the senses. Classen (1993: 15-36), for example, brilliantly illustrates the growing dominance of the eye in Modern

Age by describing the way by which roses are valued by their smell until the XVIIIth century, and then progressively valued only by their visual form in flower contests of the XIXth century. In the other hand, different cultures emphasis in other senses gives birth to cosmologies based, for example:

- in thermal sensations, like the Tzotzil's of Chiapas, Mexico;
- in olfactory sensations, like the Ongee's of Little Andaman Island, in Bengal Bay;
- in a highly synesthetic cosmology, like the Desana's of Amazon, which make meaning of their world based on multisensory correspondences experimented under hallucinogenic plants trance; (Classen, 1993: Chapter 6)
- in such an emphasis on aural experience, like the Kaluli people of Bosavi, as to "reckon time and space by reference to auditory cues and entertain a fundamentally acoustic view of the structure of their physical and social universe." (Howes, 2003:xvii)

These radically different sensorial arrangements (and there are many more), the meanings they ascribe to the world and the ways of dealing with life that emerge from them, make reasonable for us to talk not anymore about a "point of view", typical of Western culture, but of a "point of experience", the kind of hierarchy of the sensorium that structures experiences and cosmologies in different cultures. Since, as noticed before, we cannot, anymore, sustain any necessary superiority of the Western way of making meaning of the world, these and other different *experiential gestalts* are precisely what remembers us of the infinite richness of lived experience to which Merleau-Ponty refers.

4 - Flusser: the challenge of language

And then, there is the problem of language. For Huxley, as for a number of different authors, which date back even to Kant – who said that "we embed on things the structure of the syntax of judgements"– , we superimpose over our experience of reality the structure of language:

"To formulate and express the contents of this reduced awareness [consciousness] man has invented and endlessly elaborated those symbol-systems and implicit philosophies which we call languages. Every individual is the beneficiary and the victim of the linguistic tradition in which he has been born – the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives access to the accumulated records of other people's experience, the victim insofar as it confirms him in the beliefs that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things" (Huxley, 1954)

Many features of consciousness – depending on how you define such a broad term – are thought to be possible just through language. Conceptual thinking, for example, seems to be dependent of language. If there's a general consensus that we have a large portion of our experience which is unconscious, there's also the challenge that, if we are to have access to internal states, to first person experiences, we cannot get round the conditions by which languages determine the way we make meaning of ourselves and the world around. That's what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan realized: if we are to discuss a subject's accounts of his/her dreams, for example, we do not have access to a dream but to an account of a dream – an account constrained

by the limits and impositions of the language in which it is done, and which can be extended to one's whole lifetime, since the very notion of an "I", a "self" is already constrained by language. This recognition that we cannot escape this implicit philosophy of our language when we build any kind of knowledge is the so called "hermeneutic circle". The typical orthodox hermeneutic approach is summarized in Nixon's critique of Shear and Varela's work:

"Experience of the 'real', outside language, must therefore certainly exist. But it can lead to no new knowledge. As soon as comprehension is attempted, one is drawn into the inescapable web of the hermeneutic enclosure of language" (Nixon, 1999: 258)

Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser – who lived for 30 years in Brazil and has a lot of his work written in Portuguese, as much as in German and English, and also knew several other languages, including Latin and Greek – has written in the early 1960s a compelling book named *Língua e Realidade* (*Language and reality*, 1963), in which he develops the idea that *language is reality*. For Flusser, "one of the fundamental desires of human spirit in its attempt to comprehend, govern and modify the world is to find out an order. A chaotic world, though conceivable, would be incomprehensible, so that the will to govern or to modify it would be meaningless and useless" (Flusser, 1963: 11). The fiber with which man changes this "chaos" into a "cosmos" – an ordered structure which allows to catalogue all apparent phenomena, and relate them to a system of rules such as to give them a certain hierarchy – is language (see Fig. 3). It is language which turns the "chaos of perception" into the "ordered cosmos" which we call "reality", with named things and causally

related phenomena (in spite of systemic approaches, stochastic models, butterfly effects, chaos theories and so on).

For Flusser – just as for Marshall McLuhan – a concept we highly stress over reality, such as "causality", is already embedded in the structure of the language we inherited from the Greeks. Merleau-Ponty would share such approach: in the *Phenomenology of Perception* he continually states the uselessness of trying to understand perception from its finished results – that fact that we have a "world" and an experience of "truth" –, veiling the genesis of this world -- the very work of perception -- with concepts which are a much later abstraction. Just because the results of an equation are right, it does not mean that its terms are what constitutes our living experience. Perception is not reducible to parts: I always perceive a meaningful whole, an arrangement of relations, a *gestalt*. Classical models which used to separate "pure sense data" from superior processes of association or judgement are impositions of a language structure over an experience that cannot be fragmented (of course, here Merleau-Ponty does not meet Flusser, as he cannot believe in the "pure chaos of sense data").

But Flusser goes ahead, to give us a vision of the Babel Tower: By comparing Czech, German, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Chinese, Japanese and even Eskimo examples, he goes on to suggest the impossibility of precise translation, each language being is a cosmos in itself:

"[...] the possibility of translation is one of the few possibilities, maybe the only attainable one, for the intellect to supersede the boundaries of language. During this process, it annihilates itself temporarily. It evaporates while leaving the original language territory to condense again when reaching the translation language. Each language has its own personality, allowing to the intellect an specific

'climate' of reality. Translation is, thus, impossible. It is possible just approximately, among languages which are ontologically similar." (Flusser, 1963: 50-1)

As a consequence of reality being restrained to what we access in language, for Vilém Flusser philosophy and science cannot but be researches about language. Science investigates empirically the meaning of words inherited from our language history, such as "atom" or "consciousness" (these examples are mine), while Philosophy investigates the meaning of "atom" and "consciousness" through its own varied approaches and schools. Interestingly, Flusser suggests that poetry and religion are creators of language: the latter, centrifugal, targets the ineffable territory of the "nothing beyond language"; while the first, centripetal, *plucks language out of this nothing*.

Merleau-Ponty is well aware of the problems posed by Flusser when he writes:

"the full meaning of a language can never be translated into another. We can speak many languages, but one of them remains always the one in which we live. To completely assimilate a language, it would be necessary to fully take over the world which it utters, and we never belong in two worlds at the same time." (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 255)

Since, for Merleau-Ponty, language makes explicit a world already done by perception, Flusser's Babel expresses "the many ways, for the human body, to celebrate the world and finally live it". To sum up, *they make explicit distinct points-of-experience*.

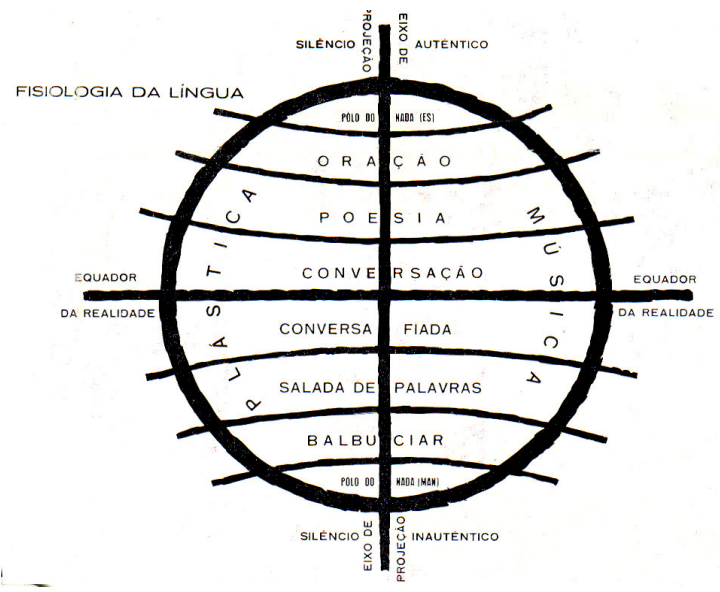
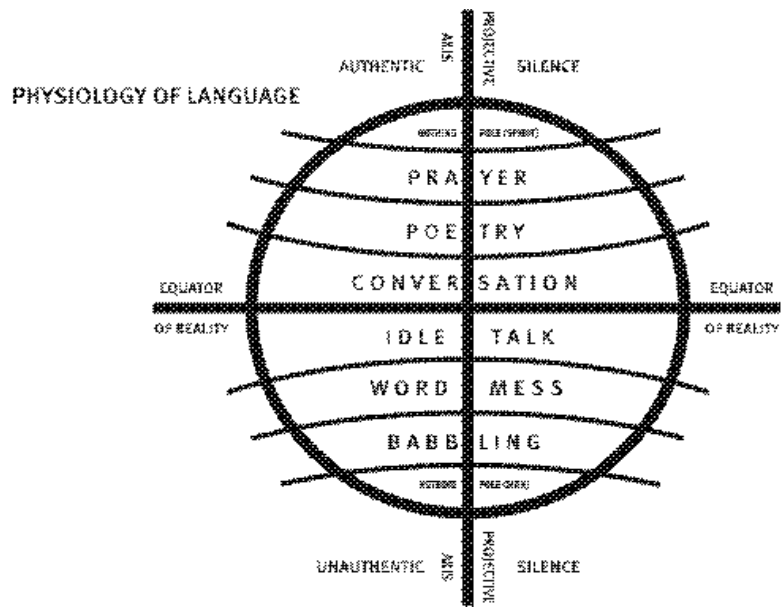


Figure 3: Vilem Flusser's 'physiology of language' (from the original 1963 Brazilian edition) and same scheme "evaporated" from Portuguese and "condensed" into English.

5 - The Concept of Consciousness that Derives from this Approach

Let me make a brief summary of the topics we've just discussed.

First, I offered a brief exposition of some ideas from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. What matters for us is that *perception*, silently and unnoticed, *gives us a world already invested with meaning, to which all possible knowledge is indebted* – and which culture, including language, makes explicit.

Second, I suggested that, although Merleau-Ponty has been able to honor perception as the ground of all possible meaning we may ascribe to our living experience, he couldn't realize that the model of perception he describes is Western culture's occularcentric model, one that informs all our traditions of knowledge – those dependent from a *point-of-view*. However, alternative arrangements of the whole sensorium, offered by Constance Classen and David Howes' *Anthropology*, show that not all cultures are so much based on vision, but have, for example, thermal, olfactory, synesthetic or auditory cosmologies – *thus offering a much better notion of point-of-experience*;

Third, I presented the problem of the so-called hermeneutic circle, mainly through ideas of Czech-Brazilian philosopher Vilém Flusser. *Language is reality*: we are imprisoned in the limits of our language, and we superimpose its structure over our whole experience. Although it can be said that languages explicit a point-of-experience (and are, thus, tied to perception), this does not imply that we are able to think reality outside the hermeneutic circle.

At this point, it looks reasonable to define some scope of the word (yes, it seems to be a word...) "consciousness", with which we're playing here. Chalmers (1995), in a quite famous paper, lists some of the possibilities:

"The ability to discriminate, categorize, and react to environmental stimuli; the integration of information by a cognitive system; the reportability of mental states; the ability of a system to access its own internal states; the focus of attention; the deliberate control of behaviour; the difference between wakefulness and sleep. (Chalmers, 1995: 2)

Other items could be added to this list, the question of moral consciousness ("oh, I left my poor students abandoned in Brazil to come to Tucson..."), being one of them. I'll narrow the field by adopting, for practical reasons, Jeffrey Gray's (et al) synthetic definition, on a paper on synesthesia referred above. They distinguish "conscious experience" and 'brain event'. We take the first one, which refers to "above all the perceived world with all its various qualities, but also bodily sensations, proprioception, mental images, dreams, internal speech, hallucinations and so on" (Gray et al, 1997:173). For all that's been said, I consider this "primary awareness" presents already a world and a self both invested with meaning.

From all the above discussion, I believe that consciousness should be investigated as a culturally shaped phenomenon. By this, I mean not only that it is, first of all, *a word*, as it's been said – with all the possible consequences in which this imply, according to an hermeneutical approach; I mean that, if we are to accept this somehow romantic generalization of the Western experience to the whole human experience (what would be, probably, to impoverish the scope of human experience), we should maybe consider that conscious experience, in the terms defined above, assumes radically distinct

cultural forms. And even if science is nowadays a more or less global institution, we can easily suggest that it represents, in many senses, the domination of a certain way of making meaning of the world.

It should not be necessary to remember what a chauvinism it is to state that such a way of making meaning of the world is *a priori* superior to any other. The present state of things in a global level should warn us not to believe so. And also, even the concept of an *objective reality*, which would be the main goal of science to dominate, has already been put in discussion by many authors in distinct fields – Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) classical work on metaphors is a good example of this. Curiously, such work, which has been considered to break many paradigms at the time of its issue, seems to share, with a different approach and arguments, many positions Merleau-Ponty hold already in the 1940s, such as the impossibility of a subject–object distinction, the role of the body in making meaning of life and language, and the prejudices embedded in objectivism.

All this said, I believe that the culturally shaped consciousness hypothesis should be investigated based on three central arguments:

- (1) If all that is in consciousness – meaning awareness of oneself and of the world in which one is immersed, or even meaning a mind state which is accessible to itself (which is a definition that would already raise many discussions) – is presented by the mediation of the senses, once we accept that perception is culturally formed, so it must be for consciousness;
- (2) By means of hermeneutics, it is reasonable to accept that consciousness is language, or is dependent on language for us to access it (this is the very well known question of the accessibility of internal states, in itself one of the biggest questions), and it is reasonable to accept that languages in themselves

present irreconcilable arrangements from culture to culture, thus it is again reasonable to suggest that a concept such as *consciousness* – if it is at all possible to impose such a notion over non-scientific-Western cultures – happens in quite different arrangements and even natures from culture to culture;

(3) But, most of all, concerning the problems presented by language and perception, if we take in account what Merleau-Ponty suggests about scientific approaches on perception – that is: *we superimpose over a founding experience which is perception a much later structure of the logic of reason, which is dependent on the former and develops from it in a very particular set of historical and cultural conditions* –, then I wouldn't say it is too weird to suggest that the same can be said about consciousness: thinking it through the lens of science, we are trying to impose over the very experience of being conscious the same scientific models of syntax, causality, logic and reason that emerge from a very limited scope of human experience. This is a point where, surprisingly, we find a convergence among such different thinkers as Kant, McLuhan and Vilém Flusser: through representations, we impose over reality the structure of language; thus, it is the same with our models of consciousness. We are, then, blinded to the experience it is, which is veiled by scientific models, linguistically constrained, we impose over it. And since experience is the ground of all knowledge, we should not only try to get back to our own experiences – this is more or less what Shear (1999) and his group seem to be trying – but to those, likely to be beyond our reach, of other distinct cultures.

6 - Some Final Considerations

For those who have followed this whole exposition, I'd just like to describe where this research is going to. By bringing together such different approaches, what I've been looking to understand is the kind of perception that is being shaped in our present technologically saturated environment. The ideas I'm working on – specially the attempt to describe a "digital perception" (see Basbaum, 2005) – would demand another study. Like many contemporary authors, I consider Walter Benjamin's and Marshall McLuhan insights on the effects of technology on perception – thus in the way we make meaning of the world and formalize knowledge – very compelling. However, it looks like neither Benjamin nor McLuhan have developed a more close approach to *perception*, specifically. They work over a concept they never define properly, and this leaves a whole territory to be explored – I regard as likely that there are other researchers working on this, as both Benjamin and McLuhan are heavyweight authors. What may be singular in this path here presented is this effort to make this exploration through a continental Phenomenology philosophical background, expanded by this dialogue with an anthropology of the senses – in which McLuhan, as it's been said, has played his role (Classen, 1993; Howes, 2003).

I'm thus pursuing meaning and perception inside our very contemporary culture, possibly in danger of falling, tautologically, in the traps of the hermeneutic circle – as Flusser would probably say (yet, of course, the only way to overcome this kind of problem is to be aware of it).

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