

# Perception and Painting in Merleau-Ponty's Thought

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## **Abstract**

Maintaining that “the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence” (1964/1964: 13), Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to develop a descriptive philosophy of perception, our kinaesthetic, prescientific, lived-bodily experience and cognition of the world—the unification of our affective, motor and sensory capacities. For Merleau-Ponty, ‘perception’ is an expressive and creative instance intimately linked with artistic practice, and although he wrote about all kinds of art, painting was the art form he considered in most depth. This paper seeks to elaborate upon the links between perception and painting in his thought, examining his three main essays on the topic of painting. We begin with the descriptive phenomenology of “Cézanne’s Doubt” under the influence of Edmund Husserl (1945), to structuralism in “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (1952), and finally to his formulation of an original ontology in “Eye and Mind” (1961).

**Keywords:** Perception; painting; Merleau-Ponty; art; phenomenology

In the lexicon of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘perception’ has an idiosyncratic meaning and drawing attention to and describing the role of this notion in human experience may be said to be one of the main aims and contributions of his phenomenology to philosophy today. Arguing perception to be an expressive and creative instance, Merleau-Ponty also maintains that it is intimately linked with artistic practice. For example, in a 1952 essay entitled “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” he wrote that “it is the expressive operation begun in the least perception, which amplifies into painting and art” (Merleau-Ponty 1951/1993: 106-7).<sup>1</sup> In other words, while perception is the origin of both the act of making art and its end-product, ‘amplification’ denotes the specific, important changes that occur in the ‘translation’ and ‘extension’ of perception into the physical process of art-making.

It is the aim of this article to explore the relationship between perception and art in Merleau-Ponty’s thought with reference to the practice of painting.

Although the philosopher wrote about music, visual art, film, poetry and literature, the subject of painting constituted the majority of Merleau-Ponty's writings on art at all stages of his philosophical career, believing as he did that particular instances of painting and phenomenological description were intrinsically intertwined.<sup>2</sup> This essay will explore his three essays that consider painting and painters, which provide a guide to the development of his philosophy: from the descriptive phenomenology of "Cézanne's Doubt" under the influence of Husserl (1945), to structuralism in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (1952), and finally to his formulation of an original ontology in "Eye and Mind" (1961).

## Perception

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) Merleau-Ponty famously pronounced that "[t]rue philosophy consists of re-learning to look at the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: xxiii), a task he proceeded to undertake for the rest of this work. In uttering this, he was foremostly reacting against the prevailing belief in the sciences and mid-century analytic philosophy that the abstract, objective view of the world employed by science represented a complete, self-sufficient view of reality, as well as reacting against the tendency in Western philosophy to accord an exaggerated significance to it. He argued that there was a widespread propensity towards being "held captive" (Wittgenstein's phrase)<sup>3</sup> by an *objectivist* picture of the world as existing entirely independent of ourselves—"high altitude thinking" (*pensée de survol*) or what Thomas Nagel termed the "view from nowhere."<sup>4</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's point is that this scientific viewpoint, removed from any individual perspective, is neither autonomous nor complete since it fundamentally depends on the existence of a prior (and much neglected) human engagement with reality. He explains that its theoretical constructs derive meaning from our ordinary pre-reflexive *bodily* participation in the world, or what he terms 'perception.' In other words, the world is not something external we merely contemplate but something we primarily inhabit, in which our mode of existence may be called, *per* Heidegger, being-in-the-world. Maintaining that "the perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence" (1964/1964: 13), Merleau-Ponty seeks to develop a descriptive philosophy of perception, reminding science that its abstract concepts rely upon pre-theoretical acts of lived experience, our "operative intentionality" (1945/2008: xx).

For Merleau-Ponty, the word 'perception' refers to our kinaesthetic, prescientific, lived-bodily experience and cognition of the world—the unification of our affective, motor and sensory capacities. For the world to be comprehended intelligibly and accorded meaning, Merleau-Ponty argues that any individual must have a primordial awareness of their body's positioning and its unity. Although this basic embodied world-structuring is not a conceptless chaos, its cohesion is not of the same order as abstract thought, which struggles to express this unity without distortion. Since the body operates amongst and upon other persons, things, and situations without being explicitly conscious of the fact that it is doing so, this perception is mostly pre-reflexive. Still, it is a *creative* action, in that it filters out certain things and focuses its attention on others. As the body organises and gives structure to the phenomenal field through its positioning, it is also the case that “the places in which I find myself are never completely given to me: the things which I see are things for me only under the condition that they recede beyond their immediately given aspects” (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1964: 16). Placing evaluations on certain phenomena and not noticing others is the basis of perception being said to 'stylize' – a creative act of perception and meaning attribution. However, stylizing will never be completed, since it is constantly renewing its process of structuration, although it can become “sedimented” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: 149-50).

Influenced by the later writings of Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty characterized phenomenology as a “study of essences” (1945/2008: vii); yet *contra* early Husserl, this return is not brought about through attempting to annihilate our embodied relationship to the world to attain a pure interiority of transcendental consciousness (something Merleau-Ponty deems impossible). Instead, it was through loosening the intentional cords tying us to the world, by approaching it with “wonder,” that these non-cognitive relationships with the lived-world would be brought more fully to our notice (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: xv).<sup>5</sup> If this pretheoretical lived experience or our operative intentionality could be understood more clearly, then abstract thought of all kinds, he argued, would have a better chance of becoming more truthful, in that it would be more aware of its own foundations. For Merleau-Ponty, philosophising begins not with the self *or* the world but with their reciprocal confirmation, which constitutes the most fundamental kind of knowledge and which makes all other kinds of abstract knowledge possible.

Merleau-Ponty situated his phenomenological description as a third position between empiricist and intellectualist understandings of the world

and accounts of epistemology. Empiricism, a sort of reductive materialism, begins with physical objects in the world as given and subsequently tries to explicate mental “stuff”—the mind, emotions, perception—in terms of empirical categories.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, intellectualism begins with consciousness as given and subsequently attempts to explain the reality of objects and the world in terms of mental stuff by reference to forms of intuition and categories of the understanding. Each assumes, therefore, the separation between the mental and the physical (whilst proceeding to favour one side of the division), a dualism Merleau-Ponty fundamentally rejects. Instead, he begins with describing an irreducible involvement of individuals and the world, exemplified in his statement that it is the *body* which perceives (Merleau Ponty 1945/2008: 410). However, rather than using the terms *subject* or *body*, he describes humans as *body-subjects* and posits that consciousness is “incarnate” in the world (1945/2008: 225). This unity has led to the observation that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is characterised by ambiguity.<sup>7</sup>

Still, perceptions are never a passive or neutral intuition of sensorial stimulation but are always “subtended by an ‘intentional arc’ which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: 157). This may be termed an “invisible” structure which unites “intelligence, sensibility, and mobility” (ibid.), providing coherence, intelligibility, as well as meaning to our perceptions. Any meaning which becomes ‘visible’ or ‘speaks’ to us does so only insofar as it is defined against this ‘invisible’ or ‘silent’ background of perceptual, reflective, and historical relationships and further elaboration of the relation between the visible and the invisible will be discussed at the end of this essay with relation to “Eye and Mind.” What is important for now is that meaning is not found pre-existent in the world but is called into existence by the body’s own activity in the world.

Before moving to the first of his three essays, it is important to draw attention to a point related to the formulation of meanings and expression which will re-surface throughout this paper: Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ modes of expression in *Phenomenology of Perception*.<sup>8</sup> His use of the term ‘expression’ extends from everyday use of language, to scientific language, to body gestures, to all kinds of art, be it abstract, figurative or other. A secondary expression is an instance where we articulate the world in terms of perceptions or concepts which are routine and familiar to us. In contrast, a primary expression is an instance where we take up an unorthodox or innovative position in relation to the world, when we express it in a *new way*, as does the poet in his or her transformation

of language, or indeed any artist for Merleau-Ponty. It is here also, I think, that he would like to place the philosopher; he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that “[p]hilosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but like art, the act of bringing truth into being” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: xxiii). With these points concerning perception in mind, I will now go on to discuss the first of the three essays, “Cézanne’s Doubt.”

### Cézanne’s Doubt

Published in 1945, one of this essay’s most important elements is the great philosophical significance of Cézanne’s mature paintings (after his impressionist phase) for Merleau-Ponty.<sup>9</sup> Believing himself and the artist to be engaged in the same project, Merleau-Ponty describes how Cézanne could express through colourful brushstrokes what phenomenology could only indirectly attempt to access through philosophical language: pre-reflexive perception. In his “Preface” to *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty wrote about the impossibility of ever achieving a complete phenomenological *epoché*, or bracketing of the natural attitude (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: xiv). Yet he believed that through the medium of paint (instead of philosophical language) Cézanne *had* succeeded in rendering a prescientific perception of the visible.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the philosopher, whose enunciation of this experience must contend with the risk of distorting it since he or she employs the same objective representations used in scientific description, a painter can bring features of that experience into greater perspicuity.

Further, parallel to his own ‘third position’ in phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty saw Cézanne engaged in a struggle to express artistically a different stance from either impressionism and academic painting. The ephemerality of impressionism, which seemed to focus solely on the immanent sensuousness of light, air, and patches of colour, neglected to represent any solid reality, while the objective linear intellectualism of academic painting, with rigorous use of perspective, forgot the individual viewpoint. Instead of following either art-historical “ready-made alternatives suggested to him” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 63), Cézanne painted in an original way: pursuing reality without abandoning its sensuous surface, stating that he sought instead to develop an optics—a logical vision—which had “no element of the absurd” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 63).<sup>11</sup> Paying attention to the real object as well as its appearance to our shifting senses, Cézanne portrayed how, for a viewer, the world has already and continues to *come into being* as a configured space of individuated contours. He

famously painted sliding distortions of perspective, what the philosopher termed a “lived perspective” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1993: 64) rather than the objective linear type. In the same vein, Cézanne would in some works repeatedly mark a multiplicity of outlines around a figure (refusing a single clean silhouette), thus subverting any impression we may have that the outlines of objects exist prior to our sense-making creative perception of them (Gilmore 2006: 296). As Merleau-Ponty writes, when Cézanne’s pictures are seen in wholeness, their

perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right, but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 65).

Cézanne did not limit himself to modifying traditional artistic ways of representing perspective, but also drew attention to the process of subjective meaning-construction so that in his paintings people often appear strange, as if observed by a non-human creature (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 66). In this, Merleau-Ponty believed the artist was attempting to render the process by which perception constructs meanings from objects or other people from experience, in that he suspended “these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has instilled himself” (ibid.). As Jonathan Gilmore writes:

Cézanne makes thematic the content of that phenomenological description of what he sees, raising it to a level of perspicuity such that his painting is both the product of vision and *about* vision, both exemplifies the way in which we perceive our environment and pictorially describes or reflects on the way in which we perceive (Gilmore 2006: 293).

Berated throughout his life by art critics, Cézanne obstinately stuck to his aim of depicting a new artistic expression. Still, as evinced in the essay’s title, he was plagued by incertitude as to whether what he had expressed would become meaningful for others, and Merleau-Ponty vividly chronicles this nervous state of unknowing: “the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 69). What Cézanne, and generally speaking, the artist, expresses will not be a clearly

articulated thought, “since such clear thoughts are those that have already been said within ourselves or by others” (ibid.). Thus a position such as (later) Cézanne’s, marked with rare originality, cannot be understood by a viewer through equating his works with other, prior artistic modes of representation – rather its meaning is primarily incomprehensible. In the same manner as in which Merleau-Ponty’s term ‘primary expression’ was referred to earlier, an artist’s work gains meaning and resonance from the intersubjective world in which the artist is situated and not solely by his or her expressing something:

The painter can do no more than construct an image; he must wait for this image to come to life for other people. When it does, the work of art will have united these separate lives; it will no longer exist in one of them like a stubborn dream...It will dwell undivided in several minds (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 70).

In this, Cézanne’s painting is not an imitation of anything, nor a product for good taste (as art had respectively been deemed in the first case by Plato and in the second by Kant and Hume), but “a process of expression” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 67-8) of what is found in perception: “the painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things” (ibid.). He explains that “[t]he artist is the one who arrests the spectacle in which most men take part without really seeing it and who makes it visible to the most ‘human’ among them” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 69).

### **Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence**

Merleau-Ponty’s second essay under discussion, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” is not a *direct* philosophical investigation of painting but rather an investigation which can be said to unfold *indirectly*.<sup>12</sup> Although its primary point is to critically respond to the aesthetic theories propounded by André Malraux in his four volumes of art history and criticism, *The Voices of Silence* (1951), along with the arguments of Jean-Paul Sartre in “What is Literature?”<sup>13</sup>, a phenomenological engagement with painting can nevertheless be discerned in the wide-ranging discussions of art institutions, art’s ability to signify, and the concepts of style and imagination with relation to art.<sup>14</sup> Considering that the thesis

of painting being an amplification of perception is what is at issue here, I will accordingly focus upon the following topics linked to this (although his essay covers a range of themes): the relation of style to perception and its fundamental intertwining with painting; Merleau-Ponty's uniting of the imagination and perception; and the ability of art (like perception) to express meaning to a viewer (as compared to language).

First, the question of style. Merleau-Ponty points out that Malraux problematically employs the concept of style in both a highly individualistic sense, in that the latter writes it is a projection of the artist's idiosyncratic imagination—and at the same time in an objective, almost metaphysical sense, in that he connects style with a suprastylistic force, the expression of what he terms “the Spirit of the Age” (Malraux 1949/1949: 99,139). While critiquing this tension, later proceeding to reformulate it, Merleau-Ponty mentions how Malraux's best passages are the ones where he talks of how “perception already *stylizes*” (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 91). For both, style begins as soon as any person perceives the world, organising it into meaning.<sup>15</sup> Certainly Merleau-Ponty's usage of the word comes from Husserl, who, in *Ideas II* had written about a personal, unique style particular to any individual's experiencing and acting.<sup>16</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, style starts “as soon as certain elements of the world take on the value of dimensions to which from then on we relate all the rest, and in whose *language* we express them” (ibid.), or as he wrote in an earlier essay: “I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1964a: 50). The thesis that stylizing is contained in every act of perception is equivalent to the point made earlier that all perception is creative; rather than a neutral apprehension of ‘what is,’ it is anyone's particular way of seeing and making sense of the world by means of an “inner schema” (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 90), a “system of equivalences” (1952/1993: 91) that permits the world to reveal itself as intelligible. For Merleau-Ponty, it is engaging with others which makes style apparent: each of our perceptions is involved in a symbolising signification which expresses to others, sometimes very subtly, a particular project of being-in-the-world.

Rejecting either an objective or subjective interpretation, Merleau-Ponty reformulates the concept of style, similarly to his treatment of the concept in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as an intersubjective phenomenon. That is, something which occurs in the experience we share with others in relation to the world, yet something particular to and personified by each individual, which they are neither aware of nor can know but may be able to recognise

in retrospect. Taking the example of the artist, Merleau-Ponty writes that an artist's style is just as inaccessible to him or her as any individual's face and everyday gestures: it "is a mode of formulation that is just as recognizable for others and just as little visible to him as his silhouette" (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 90). What is particular about the artist, however, is that he or she can condense and express his or her creative bodily encounter (or perception) with the world into something more permanent than moments of experience, for example, in paper, canvas, stone or clay. Working in a medium enables the artist's body to continue the creative stylizing process begun in the artist's perception itself, in order to concentrate the "scattered meanings" found there (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 92) and make them exist in a unified concrete form.<sup>17</sup> In this, Merleau-Ponty's point is that there is a *unity* to all painting (and indeed visual art), irrespective of the historical, cultural or personal circumstances of its production; or of its genre as abstract, representational or somewhere in between (Merleau-Ponty, 1952/1993: 105).<sup>18</sup>

Still, the fact that the artist is not just anyone who can draw is made clear from a passage in "Cézanne's Doubt" in which Merleau-Ponty distinguishes "the invention of pleasurable objects" by "cultured animals" from "Cézanne's or Balzac's artist" who "takes up culture from its inception and founds it anew" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 69). The latter, not content to be "cultured men," exemplify what Merleau-Ponty really means by the term "artist"—the creators of a "reason which would embrace its own origins" (*ibid.*). The artist is the person, therefore, who brings primary expressions into being.

However, this expression is not just a transference of mental states, since it is the process of physical re-creation in a medium that takes the creativity of perception to completion. As he wrote in his last essay "Eye and Mind," "we cannot imagine how a mind could paint" (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 123).<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty's work on style continues the lines of thought (influenced by Husserl) on the phenomenology of painting in "Cézanne's Doubt" based on the primacy of perception and the living body. I now turn to the issues of imagination and the status of the artwork as a sign in relation to language and truth in this same essay, where we embark on issues of invisibility and lines of thought that will carry Merleau-Ponty toward the new ontology at work in "Eye and Mind."

## Imagination, Perception and Meaning

In theorising about the arts, as is exemplified in the modern aesthetic tradition beginning with Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the realm or faculty of imagination seems impossible to ignore. The imagination and the linked aesthetic ideas were crucial in Kant's understanding of genius, as well as in Hegel's understanding of genius in his *Lectures on Fine Art*: both philosophers highlighted the importance of the imagination in their accounts of how great masterpieces were created. However, problematically for Merleau-Ponty whose philosophy of painting thus far has been based on the concept of perception, this word seems to refer to a series of acts or ideas separate from the usual meaning of perception. Like Sartre, at least in earlier writings, he seemed to have conceived of perception and imagination as distinct.<sup>20</sup> Yet how would a philosophy of painting rooted in perception account for a creative mental act (assumedly performed in the imagination) or for mental images 'seen' in the imagination? A different, combined account of perception and imagination is found in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," in which the act of imagining and the faculty of imagination are now related to the world and to perception. This change can be seen from Merleau-Ponty's allusive phrase that perception or "a system of systems devoted to the inspection of a world" is capable of leaping "over distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations—a meaning—in the inconceivable flatness of being" (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 103). Following Galen Johnson, I interpret "hollows" and "reliefs" to include both images and "what is there" (Johnson 1993a: 30), referring to the fact that the imagination is a variant of perception—that our perception of the world encompasses images, which yet do *not* refer to "nothing" (*per* Sartre: Sartre 2004: 11-14). This kind of poetic and allusive language prefigures what will be seen in "Eye and Mind," where Merleau-Ponty writes that imagination "gives to vision that which clothes it within, the imaginary texture of the real" (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 126). In this essay, the relationship between the artist and the invisible will be addressed more fully.

Merleau-Ponty's sharpest divergence with Sartre in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" is found in his discussion of art's ability to signify and express meaning. In conjunction with his separation of perception from imagination, Sartre drew a line between prose on the one hand and "the arts" on the other: poetry, sculpture, music and painting (Sartre 1948/1993: 4). He believed an artwork to be a spontaneous, imaginative projection of the subject, the most free and "magical" of expressions, but

also the least capable of engaging the life of one's times and of expressing knowledge or truth about the world. "Does anyone think," he wrote, that Picasso's *Guernica* "won over a single heart to the Spanish cause?" (ibid.). Sartre denounced the painter as "mute" (1948/1993: 3), arguing that the imagination and artworks were both impoverished and inferior in contrast to reflective thought or knowledge – and in this he joined a long line of like-minded rationalist philosophers.

Instead, for Merleau-Ponty, the artwork *can* signify, since it can 'reveal' the world to a viewer in a new way. This is linked with the aforementioned distinction between primary and secondary modes of expression. In the aesthetic experience, the viewer's usual system of categories of meaning are irrupted and expanded through the artwork's ability to reveal or disclose (*dévoiler*) new significations.<sup>21</sup> This means that in the work of art we find the origins of new non-cognitive (primary) meaning, summoning the viewer away "from the already constituted reason in which 'cultured men' are content to shut themselves" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 69). Only later, through language and discussion, can what is expressed take on forms of meaning and later, become abstracted or objective cognition. The ability of the artist to express or disclose new meaning has already been discussed in "Cézanne's Doubt"; an artwork articulates its particular expression, opening up a horizon of interpretative possibilities for the audience or viewer, the result being that an artwork's meaning is just as much determined by an audience's reaction as by the artist's original creation. Against Sartre, Merleau-Ponty argued that the forms of expression of meaning found in pictorial art and in writing are not reducible one to the other. In contrast to prose and traditional philosophy, he writes "the voices of painting are the voices of silence" (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 117). Painting returns its viewer to a pre-linguistic "silent" realm, "the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and the exchange of ideas have been built in order to take cognizance of it" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 69), more fundamental and more primary than that secondary realm of abstract and reflective thought, with which language is bound up. This characteristic is evidenced in the variety of rich meanings that a painting (or any artwork) evokes, in that something is always 'left over' from any formalism and analysis. For Merleau-Ponty, this means that painting gives expression to the 'silent' domain of pre-reflexive bodily relationships and engagements. Prose and traditional philosophy are deficient in that they can never free themselves from "the precariousness of the silent forms of expression" and can only give "distorted" articulation to "the things themselves" (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 115). As he writes in "Eye and Mind":

Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible – painting scrambles all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings. (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 130)

## Eye and Mind

“Eye and Mind” appeared in the inaugural issue of the journal *Art de France* in January 1961, the last work Merleau-Ponty published before his death in May that year. Directly addressing the themes of the enigma of vision and painting itself as in “Cézanne’s Doubt,” he re-iterates that painting is close to the palpable life of things, unlike modern science and philosophy which are deficient in this respect. The latter, both monsters born of Cartesianism (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 138), consider reality as something external to ourselves, rather than something we constantly live in and are in the midst of.<sup>22</sup> Unlike classical science, modern science has “given up living in things” (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 121) in favour of manipulation, operationalism, and theoretical models while philosophy is too closely linked with language, advice and opinions in contrast to the “innocence” of painting (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 123). This notion of the innocence of painting echoes Merleau-Ponty’s writings in “Cézanne’s Doubt” sixteen years earlier, where he wrote how (unlike phenomenology’s best efforts to do the same) Cézanne’s particular sort of painting successfully bracketed the “natural attitude,” representing phenomena as they appear in pre-theoretical experience without the distortions of language. Painting has privileged access the “there is,” which is “the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world” (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 122).

Yet in “Eye and Mind” Merleau-Ponty burrows to a level beneath that of the other two essays to explore the fundamental roots and primary impulses of painting. By 1961, his philosophy had significantly changed emphasis, as is also evident in other works being composed during the same period (such as the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*). Instead of a phenomenological description of our being-in-the-world, he was now in the process of outlining an original post-Cartesian ontology, a non-dualistic study of Being which went beyond (or beneath?) traditional philosophical distinctions and dualisms. Rather than maintaining a dichotomy between consciousness and objects, something he castigates in the *Visible and the Invisible* to have been a distinction which rendered the problems posed in the *Phenomenology of Perception* “insoluble” (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969:

200), instead, he notes we read:

... a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things. (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 123)

Merleau-Ponty propounds the unconscious ground of conscious experience as a unified stuff which he terms 'flesh.' With this notion,, Merleau-Ponty contents that mind and body Upon this realisation, he propounds the unconscious ground of conscious experience as a unified stuff - *flesh*. With this notion of flesh, Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969:247, 259), subject and object, self and world (1964/1969: 123), as well as other related dualisms are fundamentally intertwined as an interdependent chiasm (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 248-51). Flesh is an "anonymous visibility" (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 142) that precedes any identification of particular beings or dichotomy between self and other. This all-encompassing unity or element does not refer to a substance, matter, or spirit (1964/1969: 139, 146) but to a "general thing midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of Being wherever there is a fragment of Being" (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 139). As Taylor Carman writes, flesh is:

The *sensibility* of things, the perceptibility both of the perceptual environment and of ourselves as perceivers – the *visibility* of vision, the *tangibility* of touch, the *exposure* of anything to which the world itself can be exposed in experience, including the bodily sense or experience of motor intentionality (Carman 2008: 123)

Flesh is that which the world and the individual *of it are* – the ontological ground of the phenomenal manifestation of being in the world. Flesh is our "brute and savage being" (1964/1969: 200), our unconscious bodily immersion in the world – entanglement of Flesh is that which the world and the individual of it are ñ the ontological ground of the phenomenal manifestation of being in the world. Flesh is our ibrute and savage beingî (1964/1969: 200), our unconscious bodily immersion in the world ñ an underlying entanglement of world and subject.

Now a heightened awareness of flesh leads to an experience of what Merleau-Ponty terms *reversibility*, a role-swapping between a human and the world, which is something quite often experienced by artists. Merleau-Ponty does argue perception to be characterised by reversibility generally, insofar as the human body *switches* between roles: it can both touch something, and be touched, it can both look at something, and be looked at. Further, while any part of the body can touch or be touched, there is always a gap (or *écart*) between each action. We cannot be aware of touching and being touched right at the same time, but this impossibility does not amount to, or justify constructing a dualism in that each action is reversible.

However, it seems a particularly strong kind of reversibility is frequently experienced by artists, particularly painters, who generally may be differentiated from non-artists due to their *gift of the visible* (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 127), a gift earned by their continued exercise of their incarnated vision or *fleshy eyes* through the act of painting (*ibid*). The roles between the painter and the visible may switch, and he cites the example of Paul Klee, who is reputed to have said *in a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me* (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 129).

A heightened awareness of flesh leads to an experience of – a human . Now perception is characterised by reversibility generally – in that the human body ‘switches’ between roles: it can both touch something, and *be* touched: it can both look at something, and *be* looked at. While any part of the body can touch or be touched, there is always a gap (or *écart*) between each action. We cannot be aware of touching and being touched right at the same time, but this impossibility does not amount to, or justify constructing a dualism in that each action is reversible. Yet a particular kind of reversibility particularly painters,, a gift earned by their continued exercise of their incarnated vision or “fleshy eyes” through the act of painting (*ibid*).

This reversibility does not mean that Merleau-Ponty is imputing consciousness and/or vision to inanimate things, in an exaggerated Leibnizian panpsychism (Johnson 1993: 48). Rather, it refers on the one hand to the general ambiguity of the overlapping experienced in a human body to be both perceived (in that it is an object) and perceiver (in that it is also a subject). On the other hand, it refers to how the painter-seer is intensely caught up and *intertwined* in the midst of the visible, through their affiliation with a medium. By result of their heightened exposure of the visible, the painter may interchange the usual roles of watcher and

watched so that they both imagine and physically experience the opposite of what is considered normal. On how painting is intimately tied with the *visible*, he writes: "painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility" (1961/1993: 127). Yet painting is the *realisation* of the visible: "It gives visible existence to what profane vision thinks is invisible" (ibid.) - "a texture of Being" which we occupy and inhabit. Such "invisible" qualities, which constitute objects to be observable at all in perception, exist at "the threshold" of "profane vision which forgets its premises" (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 128).

Caught up in their lives, non-artistic individuals forget or neglect this "scaffolding" of the visible and take it for granted, proceeding (in the case of Cartesianism) to construct "scientific" models upon an exorcising of the visible's "spectres" (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 130).<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the painter, through his or her specially attuned perception attained by having a relation to an artistic medium, has an aesthetic insight to this "invisibility," which means on a rough level that he or she can notice usually hidden "things," reaching beyond what is immediately given in vision to that generally unnoticed or invisible scaffolding which sustains it (Crowther 1993a: 52). In this ability to express the invisible, Merleau-Ponty is theorising, at a very fundamental level, a general definition of painting. Quoting the Belgian writer Henri Michaux, he wrote that painting is the production of a thing which breaks the "skin of things" (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 141). It calls attention to the means whereby it and things generally become visible: it makes visible first and foremost the conditions of its own visibility (Crowther 1993: 111).

## Conclusion

As has been explored, for Merleau-Ponty painting may be described as the amplification of perception, in that it is not just a re-creation of what occurs in acts of perceiving, but rather a transcending and extending of it. Rooted in pre-reflexive experience, the artist expands upon the original thought or inspiration through an embodied art making. This amounts to artists having access to, and art-objects expressing, a more fundamental realm of human experience in a way that is inaccessible for non-artists and language. The "primary expression" which the artist initiates through their "gift of the visible" (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 127) provides privileged access to the stylizing inherent in acts of perception which create a structure to the chaos of the world. Originating in bodily cognition and expression, the 'languages' of painting, music and poetry are more primordial,

more “silent” (in the sense of the ‘silent’ domain of pre-reflexive bodily relationships and engagements) than that of the secondary expression of conceptual language used in philosophy, which reaches its most abstract form in science. Still, in later works (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 179) he has admitted that his pre-reflexive or tacit “cogito,” the idea that there is a self anterior to thought and language which we can gain access to, is impossible to imagine without language.<sup>24</sup> He admits that it is necessarily a *product* of language, particularly the language of the philosopher. This means, accordingly, that language plays an increasingly important role in his later works than in his earlier ones.

All forms of art, but in particular painting, were of great philosophical significance for Merleau-Ponty through all stages of his career, a theme I hope has been demonstrated in this article. It is not surprising that, perhaps for this reason, his style of writing changes, as is distinctive in “Eye and Mind” where his expression is notably allusive and poetic, stepping away from more analytic or philosophical methods of argument. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty praised the style of Proust, writing that “no one had gone further in fixing the relations between the visible and the invisible” (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 149). Perhaps this is the style he is emulating in this essay. In expressing himself through this poetic language, he is becoming more like the artist whom he so much admires.

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 This sentence was brought to my attention by Paul Crowther in his chapter “Merleau-Ponty: Perception into Art” in Crowther, P. (1993). *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (pp.40-55). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 2 This is the only kind of art that will be discussed in this essay, mainly due to limitations of space, but also because I want to avoid discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s “philosophy of art” (if there indeed is one). A good argument contesting this is found in Jonathan Gilmore’s paper “Between Philosophy and Art”, which argues that Merleau-Ponty’s deep commentaries on the arts illustrate and extend his general philosophical views, but generate no philosophy of art in themselves (Gilmore 2006: 292).
- 3 In §115 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes “A picture held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language only seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.” See Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Philosophical Investigations.*, G. E. M. Anscombe (Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, p. p.53e. While Merleau-Ponty does not use this phrase, it suffices to illustrate dominant, blinkered thinking (in this case the objective world as being independent of subjective experience).
- 4 See Nagel, T. (1986). *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. Merleau-Ponty often used the phrase “high-altitude thinking” (*pensée de survol*) – see, for example *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 73). In “Eye and Mind” he refers to scientific thinking as a “thinking which looks on from above” (Merleau-Ponty 1961/1993: 122).
- 5 A. D. Smith argues very well in “The Flesh of Perception” that the Merleau-Ponty of *Phenomenology of Perception* and the late Husserl, apart from terminology, hardly differ at all. See Smith, A. D. (2007). The Flesh of Perception. In T. Baldwin (Ed.). *Reading Merleau-Ponty: On Phenomenology of Perception* (pp.1-22). New York and London: Routledge.
- 6 This term, mental “stuff,” refers to its use by both Bertrand Russell and William James. See for example, Russell, B. (2002). *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, . London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p.15, or James, W. (1988). *Manuscript Essays and Notes*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1988, p.31.
- 7 This is what Alphonse de Waelhens, in the foreword to the second French edition of *The Structure of Behaviour*, took to embody the core of what was distinctive about Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. In De Waelhens, A. A Philosophy of the Ambiguous in Merleau-Ponty, M. (1965) *The Structure of Behaviour*. (pp. Xviii-xxvii). A. L. Fisher (Trans.). London: Methuen. (Original work published 1942).

- 8 This distinction is made by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “[t]here is, of course, every reason to distinguish between an authentic speech, which formulates for the first time, and second-order expression, speech about speech, which makes up the general run of empirical language” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: 207, footnote 4). This distinction between *primary* and *secondary* modes of expression may be paralleled with a passage in “Science and the Experience of Expression” in *The Prose of the World*. Here, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between *la langue parlée* (sedimented language) and *le langage parlant* (speech) (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 10). Sedimented language is “the language the reader brings with him, the stock of accepted relations between signs and familiar significations without which he could never have begun to read” (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 13). Speech is “the operation through which a certain arrangement of already available signs and significations alters and there transfigures each one of them, so that in the end a new signification is secreted” (ibid.). The former is similar to ‘secondary’ expression, while the latter is akin to ‘primary’ expression.
- 9 This essay expands upon Merleau-Ponty’s various comments on Cézanne in the chapter “The Thing and the Natural World” in *Phenomenology of Perception*.
- 10 For example: “Cézanne’s painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 66).
- 11 Émile Bernard called this tentative carving out of a new mode of expression “Cézanne’s suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 63).
- 12 This work was published in a two-part instalment in successive numbers of *Les Temps Modernes* (June, July 1952). It was originally intended to be the third chapter of *The Prose of the World*, but Merleau-Ponty extracted it and edited it from the book manuscript. The original is different from the edition published in his lifetime (the former being posthumously published by Claude Lefort).
- 13 This was finished in 1950, originally published as a three-volume edition titled *Psychologie de l’art*, subsequently collected in a one-volume edition in 1951 entitled *The Voices of Silence*. See Sartre’s paper “Qu’est-ce que la littérature?” was originally published in *Les Temps Modernes*, Feb.-July 1947, 17-22.
- 14 Unlike “Cézanne’s Doubt” which discussed only Cézanne and (briefly) Leonardo da Vinci, in this work numerous other painters appear, Matisse, Renoir and Van Gogh being given special attention.
- 15 In “The Primacy of Perception”, Merleau-Ponty writes how a perceived object is “a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of perspectival views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question” (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1964: 16).
- 16 As Husserl writes, “Every man [human being] has his character, we can say, his style of life in affection and action, with regard to the way he has of being motivated by such and such circumstances.” See Husserl, E. (1993) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*,

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*Second Book: Studies in the Phenomenological Constitution*. R. Rojcewicz & A. Schuwer (Trans.). London: Kluwer, p.283.

- 17 Merleau-Ponty writes: “[w]e must see it developing in the hollows of the painter’s perception as a painter; style is an exigency that has issued from that perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1952/1993: 91).
- 18 It is on these grounds that he rejects Malraux’s separation between “objective” classical painting and “subjective” modern painting. What will become clear from “Eye and Mind” is that Merleau-Ponty’s writings on art are derived from the basic orientation of the human body in the world, claiming that in its motivation, all art is the same. Criticisms levelled against him of his theories of art only being applicable to certain artists, in this case, cannot (I think) do much harm, since his examination of art is much deeper. He is not theorising about art in a way that detaches it from human experience, but rather shows how the two are equivalent in their involvement in the world.
- 19 This quote from “Cézanne’s Doubt” also makes clear this point: “Before expression, there is nothing but a vague fever, and only the work itself, completed and understood, will prove that there was *something* there rather than *nothing* to be found there” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1993: 69).
- 20 Undoubtedly such issues are key to any artistic act and a philosophy concerned with them. Until now, in accordance with Sartre, Merleau-Ponty had held perception and imagination to be separate. Sartre had written that imagining was the only type of conscious act wholly spontaneous, free and unmotivated by objects external to consciousness. Sartre wrote two works on the imagination, *Imagination* (1936) and *L’imaginaire* (1940). Images were distinguishable from perceptions or sensations by their distinctive *nihilation*, in that an image is an awareness of an object as nonexistent, absent, elsewhere, or a possibility. These views had been accepted by Merleau-Ponty in his early thought, and thus in both men’s writings, imagination had been accorded an impoverished and reduced importance in relation to perception. His writings on imagination in *Phenomenology of Perception*, mostly which concerned the brain-damaged patient Schneider’s illusions and anomalies, accorded a separation between perception and imagination, real and unreal. Merleau-Ponty also wrote, citing Sartre’s *L’Imaginaire*, that in contrast to perception, “the imagination has no depth, and does not respond to our efforts to vary our points of view: it does not lend itself to observation. We never have a hold upon it” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2008: 323-4). Further, his 1936 review of Sartre’s book in *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique* is very receptive to Sartre’s theses on imagination.
- 21 This is comparable to Heidegger’s characterisation of art as “world-disclosing” in “The Origin of the Work of Art.” See Heidegger, M. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in Krell, D. (Ed.). (1978). *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings* (p.143-188). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- 22 Much of this essay addresses Descartes’ essay *La Dioptrique* (Optics), one of the three “specimen essays” attached to the end of the first edition of the *Discourse*

*on Method*, illustrating Descartes' method. A small amount of Descartes' work comments on engravings, writing that art is capable only of disclosing those features of a world already available to human vision, something Merleau-Ponty fundamentally disagrees with. See Descartes, R. (1988). Optics. In J Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch (Trans. and Eds.). *Descartes, Selected Philosophical Essays* (pp.57-72). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- 23 As he writes: "To see the object, it was necessary *not* to see the play of shadows and light around it. The visible in the profane sense forgets its premises; it rests on a total visibility that is to be recreated and that liberates the phantoms captive in it" (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1993: 128).
- 24 "What I call the tacit cogito is impossible. To have the idea of thinking (in the sense of thought of seeing and thought of feeling), to make the phenomenological reduction to the things themselves, to return to immanence and to consciousness, it is necessary to have words. It is by the combination of words that I form the transcendental attitude" (Merleau-Ponty 1964/1969: 171).