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Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetic Interworld: From Primordial Percipience to Wild Logos

‘...each brushstroke must satisfy an infinite number of conditions’

(Cézanne's Doubt:65-66, *Le Doute de Cézanne*:28).

Abstract: The overall aim of this paper is to defend the value of the arts as uniquely instructive regarding philosophical questions. Specifically, I aim to achieve two things: firstly, to show that through the phenomenological challenge to dualist and monist ontologies the key debate in aesthetics regarding subjective response and objective judgment is reconfigured and resolved. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's analyses complement and complete Kant's project. Secondly, I propose that through his phenomenological interrogations of the creative process the issue of the viability of his relational non-dualist ontology is defended against accusations that it has not gone beyond dualism or that it has collapsed into a monism.

Key words: Merleau-Ponty; ontology; aesthetics; intertwining; Kant; expression; Cezanne

Since Plato's infamous 'banishment' of the mimetic poets from his ideal city-state, the expressive arts have had a chequered history in philosophy, at times elevated to the divine and at other times treated with disdain for their purported inability to offer truth and with suspicion for their seductive charms. Neither of these extreme stances is finally defensible? Nonetheless, there is both a mystery in the arresting power of great art and opacity in the creative process that defy ready explanations. The overall aim of this paper is to defend the value of the arts as uniquely instructive regarding philosophical questions. Specifically, I aim

to achieve two things: firstly, to show that through the phenomenological challenge to dualist and monist ontologies the key debate in aesthetics regarding subjective response and objective judgment is reconfigured and resolved. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's analyses complement and complete Kant's project. Secondly, I propose that through his phenomenological interrogations of the creative process the broader issue of the viability of his relational non-dualist ontology is defended against accusations that it has not gone beyond dualism or that it has collapsed into a monism.

Merleau-Ponty's reflections on aesthetics appear regularly throughout many of his philosophical works and his aesthetic thought is given sustained attention in the three essays: *Cézanne's Doubt* (1945), *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence* (1952) and *Eye and Mind* (1961). The aesthetic writings track a parallel path to that of his general philosophy and serve to show how Merleau-Ponty's signature ideas become crystalized within the aesthetic domain. Notable among these ideas are: the body schema, the pre-reflective, primordial percipience, the *Reversibility Thesis*,¹ the interworld, Merleau-Ponty's prototype of Being – 'Flesh', 'wild being' and 'wild logos'. The aesthetic according to Merleau-Ponty is especially well-placed to reveal that the oppositions between interiority and exteriority are misconceived and that rather we live in an interworld within which internal relations obtain between self, other and world. Aesthetics, he claims, provides access to the perceived world not only prior to science but even prior to philosophy itself (EM: 123, *OE:13*). This is not to dismiss either science or philosophy *tout court*, but simply to situate them as potential allies alongside aesthetics with regard to the interrogation of the world as opposed to the exclusive status they have tended to enjoy.

¹ For a focused discussion and defense of Merleau-Ponty's Reversibility Thesis see (Daly 2014).

My analyses begin by positioning Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics in relation to a seminal moment, the influence of which has persisted throughout the history of the philosophy of art, and proceeds in the second part with an examination of his first essay *Cézanne's Doubt*. Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the phenomenology of the creative process, wherein inspiration and *technē* coincide, add another dimension to our understandings of how and why art works are able to generate both appreciation and controversy. This provides the basis for discussions in the third part of this paper about the implications of Merleau-Ponty's insights for the historical debate as to whether aesthetic judgments can, as Kant claims, be both intrinsically subjective and have a universal voice. I have chosen this particular debate because it accentuates Merleau-Ponty's reconfiguration of aesthetic questions and goes to the heart of his challenge to traditional ontologies. Even such philosophers as Schopenhauer, Hegel and Nietzsche who all challenged the Platonic view, nonetheless failed to adequately address the key issue which motivated this very debate, that is, the underlying dualist assumptions of mind/ body, self/world, self/other, real/ imaginary, the intelligible/ the sensible and so on. Merleau-Ponty's interrogations of primordial percipience and his relational ontology have undercut these assumptions. For Merleau-Ponty it is primordial percipience and the primordial world, presented respectively as 'wild logos' and 'wild being' in the later works, which reconfigure the philosophical landscape so as to enable a new approach. What is at stake in the last essay, *Eye and Mind*, is whether it overcomes what Merleau-Ponty himself recognized as a critical limitation of his early work – that the earlier work still remained subtly caught in the subject-object dualism of *Transcendental Phenomenology* (VI: 183, 200; VI: 237,253).

The fourth part examines the notion of 'style' which serves as a bridge from the more phenomenologically oriented early works, through the influences of structuralism, to the non-

dual relational ontology of ‘flesh’. The final part considers the last aesthetic essay *Eye and Mind*, and questions whether Merleau-Ponty’s notions of *the Visible* and *the Invisible* commit him to another dualism and conversely whether the notion of ‘flesh’ reduces his ontology to a monism. Key to interpreting aspects of this complex work is the examination of the references to painting, ‘wild being’ and ‘wild logos’ in the unfinished philosophical work *The Visible and the Invisible*, which Merleau-Ponty was writing at the same time.

Merleau-Ponty is not concerned with adjudicating between ‘good’ art and ‘bad’ art, but rather in interrogating the roots of expressivity and generativity. What kinds of creatures are we that we are driven to create, that our creations elicit responses in our fellow creatures and moreover, that these responses can be the source of meaningful debate, conflict and concordance? Art works have a compelling quality that invites interrogation, so that the wonder, the challenge to sensibilities and ethical salience bring us back time and again to stand before them.

1 Situating Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics

Within the history of philosophy since Plato there has been the tendency to regard the arts as at times a corrupting influence and at other times a mere embellishment, secondary to the more serious concerns of epistemology, ontology and ethics. Merleau-Ponty’s approach takes a radical turn from thinkers who are still caught in dichotomous schemas, which set the thinker apart from the painter, reason against sense, the ideal apart from the perceived and reality against appearance. These dichotomies have their roots in Plato’s dualist metaphysics. For Plato, as philosopher Stephen Watson describes, “the poet, attractive and repulsive at the same time to the philosopher, is divinely inspired, possessing a unique ‘knowledge’

exceeding the philosopher's grasp" (Watson 2009). Plato's ambivalence is evidenced in the strikingly contrasting depictions of poets in the *Phaedrus* and *The Republic*; in the former poets are highest in the hierarchy of souls, whereas in the latter they are relegated to the lowest orders as imitators of imitations, copiers of copies and so they and their work are doubly devalued. Plato's anxieties about and rejection of the arts are motivated by both the dualist metaphysical commitments and his project to set forth the conditions for an ideal city-state. I propose that Merleau-Ponty's non-dualist ontology can shed new light on this 'ancient quarrel' and reconfigure the terms of aesthetic debates.

Merleau-Ponty consistently sought both to undermine dichotomous prejudices and to reinstate the status of perception and the perceived world through the recognition of the interdependence between mind and body, between self and other, between subject and world, between appearance and reality, between reason and nature, between form and content (PP:127, PP:146, PP:129, *PP:159*). Through art, Merleau-Ponty claims, it is possible to encounter the world in a primordial way prior to the conceptual processes of description and explanation and it is the perceiving feeling and acting body which gives access to this world. Through the reciprocal interplay of the global environment and the body schema in a pre-reflective dialectic, the world arranges itself and is instituted for the perceiver. Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic appreciations therefore contrast starkly with the Platonic approach which presents us with a world riven by oppositions wherein the ultimate value is reason but which none-the-less is vulnerable to the allure and corrupting potential of art. For Merleau-Ponty these dichotomies are untenable and the body, the senses, appearances and art are neither dangerous nor deceptive, but in fact have essential epistemological and ontological value.

Cézanne, for Merleau-Ponty, was the exemplary artist who uncovered through his paintings key elements of his own ontology - the primordial expressive power of the body and the pre-reflective primordial world. Cézanne employed the various artistic elements of color, texture and composition so that elements were “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” (CD:65, DC:26,27).

2 Cézanne’s Doubt

Merleau-Ponty’s essay Cézanne’s Doubt focuses on the work of Paul Cézanne (1839 - 1906) and the life of Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519). Both of these artists illustrate pivotal aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological project: firstly, the centrality of perception and the body in all epistemological and artistic endeavours; secondly, the claim that the phenomenal world is the real world and so appearances rather than concealing in fact disclose the real; thirdly, the necessity of the other - the artwork must express, communicate to an-other to be successful; and fourthly, the correlation between the life of the artist and the artwork. While for Merleau-Ponty this particular life called for this particular work to be done, this in no way indicates that there is a causal relationship between the life and the work. Art works can never serve to *explain* the life of the artist (CD:70, DC:36). As Merleau-Ponty writes:

Thus it is true both that the life of the author can teach us nothing and that – if we know how to interpret it – we can find everything in it, since it opens onto his work..... [Cézanne] himself was never at the center of himself: nine days out of ten all he saw around him was the wretchedness of his empirical life and of his unsuccessful attempts, the debris of an unknown celebration..... That is why he questioned the picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances other people directed

toward his canvas. That is why he never finished working. We never get away from our life. We never see ideas or freedom face to face. (CD:75, DC:44)

Cézanne's evolving work can be seen as a reaction against the predominantly Romantic emphasis of much of nineteenth century European art, which fore-grounded the sensibility of the individual artist. However, his early work still bore the stamp of the subjectivism typical of this period; the subject matter the mere occasion for promoting moral stances and expressing subjective states of mind. Combining baroque composition, the techniques of perspective and line which aimed to capture movement along with this interior sensibility, Cézanne produced works such as *Le Meurtre* (1867-70), *The Abduction* (1867) and *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1875 – 1877). Merleau-Ponty, describes these as portraying 'the moral physiognomy of the actions rather than their visible aspect' (CD:61, DC:19). With the influence of the impressionists and Pissarro in particular, Cézanne abandoned these imagined scenarios for a precise study of appearances and thus his work at this time shares the diffuseness typical of impressionism (*The House of Pere Lacroix* 1873; *The Modern Olympia* 1873). This stage was short-lived and he moved away from the shimmering depictions of light and air, the luminous atmospheres and the restricted palette devoid of earthy colors, seeking rather the real thing beneath the surface impressions.

A convergence and commonality between the philosophical project of Merleau-Ponty and the artistry of Cézanne becomes apparent at this transitional point. Merleau-Ponty sought to respond to the challenge of scepticism by his return to the world through his analyses of perception and the body. Cézanne, in a parallel move, sought to find the world, the objective structures given through the subjective visual impressions. And so while maintaining the

impressionistic aesthetic, he aimed for the visual thing not the mere impression. Employing a similar strategy to Husserl's 'zu den sachen selbst', Cézanne sought to capture the real appearing thing beyond the surface sensuousness of the visual phenomena (*Still Life with Onions and Bottle* 1896-98; *The Basket of Apples* 1895). The darker colors which he introduced into his palette, allowed him to discard both perspective and outline without losing the object itself. Objects gain a solidity and weight through his use of gradations of color, they seem illuminated from within - definition and form are achieved so that "when the color is at its richest, the form reached its plenitude" (CD:65, DC:28). By cancelling pictorial depth, the foreground and the background emerge simultaneously, creating a holistic perception and collapsing the space between the subject and the object, between seer and seen. In this way it seems the viewer occupies the same space as the subject matter of the painting. With this there is in a sense an 'invitation' to engage, to touch, to move around the objects and see the hidden sides. This was why Merleau-Ponty claims Cézanne was able to paint according to "the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive" by enlisting the visual capacities of the viewer themselves which include movement and tactility (CD:64, DC:25). Cézanne painted within a kinaesthetic, pre-scientific lived-bodily presence to the world and so Cézanne rejected assertions that his work, like other art works, belonged to culture. Rather, he claimed his art was "a piece of nature" (CD:62, DC:22).

Cézanne's creative experience is synaesthetic; the sense impressions merge as in primordial perception; he tastes color, touches sound and sees the heaviness and textures of objects. The lived object is the locus from which all these contributions to sense radiate and the painter lends his body to this encounter. The painter who conceptualizes and separates himself from the object, or consciously aims at a particular expression given by a face using particular artistic devices, misses the entire mystery "renewed every time we look at someone ... of a

person's appearing in nature" (CD:66, DC:29). Cézanne was aiming for the primordial world, not in the sense of wanting to paint like a 'primitive', but that he wanted to return to pure perceptual experience. Cézanne's 'lived perspective', Merleau-Ponty notes, anticipated the discoveries of subsequent psychological research which found that there is always a dynamic of rectification in our vision, as with for example, the organization of sense data into meaningful wholes and the differentiation between figure and background. In a sense, naturalistic representational artists offer a 'pre-digested' experience, whereas Cézanne offers the experience pre-rectification. The apparent distortions are not distortions; they are in fact more true to direct perception.

How is Cézanne able to achieve the effect of the lived perspective? He first immerses himself in all the levels of the subject matter. For a landscape, he studies the geology, the flora and fauna of the area. For a human being, he studies the anatomy and researches the human world of the individual. He next allows all his understandings to germinate, forgetting all he has consciously learnt, until eventually he comes to a point when his meditations are consummated. At this point, he would declare "I have a hold on my motif" (CD:67, DC:32) and then be able to express, to paint. Cézanne wrote, "the landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness" (CD:67, DC:32). Thus the body becomes a bridge between the painted and the painter, not just in a functional sense in that the artist's hand holds the brush, his eye perceives the color, but in an ontological sense. The artist becomes an intertwining of vision and movement. The artist's body absorbs the dimensions and layers of meaning of the landscape; the very being of the landscape co-inhabits the artist's body. The extensions of rock and trees push out within the envelope of skin. The soils and sands sediment heavily, layer upon historical layer, in the limbs and muscles. The waters pool in the cavities. And the voices of the inhabitants whisper along the neural pathways. Cézanne recognizes he can only

paint the tangibles and the visibles. What is intangible or invisible must arise organically from his meditations. Similarly, painting a face does not strip the face of thought and interiority. The painter interprets from a self-presence, which encompasses presence within his own body and presence with the other. Other minds are given to us only as embodied, as faces and gestures; there are no consciousnesses apart from or behind these expressions and behaviors. The painting is also in a sense an incarnated consciousness and this is why Cézanne's artistry when approached with an open attentiveness generates an uncommon experience in the viewer. Such paintings offer an external vantage on the self in a way similar to another consciousness. They undercut our usual secure identifications and expectations, and deliver us over to the primordial, the "chaos of sensation" (CD:63, DC:23) to a vision "which penetrates right to the root of things beneath the imposed order of humanity" (CD:66, 67, DC:30). It is for this unique vision and artistic virtuosity that Merleau-Ponty accords Cézanne's work with profound philosophic significance.

The perspicacity of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic interrogations become crystalized in the consideration of the historical debate advanced by Kant – that art can be subjectively compelling and nonetheless have a universal voice that speaks to others, thereby legitimating aesthetic judgments. While Kant grounds this in the commonalities of cognitive capacities of artists and viewers alike, Merleau-Ponty adds the missing dimensions – embodiment, percipience and the shared world. Philosopher Kathleen Lennon writes, distinguishing Merleau-Ponty's approach from Kant's; "the world taking shape for us is not the work of a transcendent subject, but an aspect of our bodily immersion in the world we perceive" (Lennon 2015). Before advancing a response to the Kantian account of aesthetic judgment, we need to explore the intertwined natures of artistry and the artist. To this end a phenomenological analysis of the inspiration - *technē* debate is instructive.

Cézanne's creative approach reconfigures the artistic enterprise and offers an alternative perspective on the debate, originating in Plato's *Ion*, as to whether creativity arises from inspiration or from *technē*. The view that acts of creation involve contributions from both inspiration, whether this is conceived in divine or secular terms, and *technē* (skill) is not new or remarkable. Returning to Plato, nonetheless, we see he dichotomizes the issue, valorizing craft over art because the former, the work of artisans, concerns reality and thereby the forms, whereas art remains at the level of appearances. Plato's rejection of the arts, arguing that poetry in particular could not be justified nor explained and most importantly could not be controlled because it involved no *technē*, is clearly misconceived. What remains opaque nonetheless is the explanation as to how *technē* and inspiration collaborate in the creative process. Regarding mimetic art, naturalistic representational art, the artist's skill is measured in terms of accuracy. With non-naturalistic representational art the artist's skill is measured in terms of originality and power, how he re-presents the known and familiar in a new and challenging way. This movement is from conception to execution; from the interior private ruminations of the artist to manifestation in the exterior world. This is culture which is always reflective, descriptive and second-hand. Cézanne's artistry in contrast is simultaneously expressive and responsive. Cézanne is aiming for the pre-reflective, the primordial, to create "a piece of nature". Merleau-Ponty writes: "Cézanne's or Balzac's artist is not satisfied to be a cultured animal but takes up culture from its inception and founds it anew: he speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before" (CD:69, DC:35). It is the interplay of inspiration and *technē*, through the embodied pre-reflective consciousness of the artist, which provides the occasion for true originary creation. And while the element of inspiration is not narrowly conceived as a visitation from the divine, the act of creation nonetheless retains an attitude of reverence; a being with the world, a refusal to dominate

either technically or conceptually, surrendering to the creative process that unifies self and world.

The interplay of *technē* and inspiration, experienced by the artist as freedom, depth and insight penetrating through to the heart of things, facilitates the communicability of the artwork. Others resonate with the artist's expression, but this is never assured in advance. Philosopher Ted Toadvine writes: "The source of Cézanne's uncertainty lies in this contingency (the paradoxes inherent in instituting a new tradition rather than simply rearranging the ready-made acquisitions of culture); nothing guarantees that the work will hit its mark, since only creation can teach where the mark lies" (Toadvine 1997). If the idea, the image is to be meaningful, it must also "take root in the consciousness of others" (CD:70, DC:36). If the artist has a conscious aim or pre-established message, the effect becomes contrived and the impact lost. Expression and communication are precarious enterprises according to Merleau-Ponty; there are no guarantees of success, just an inner imperative to venture out. Unlike mathematics and the sciences which have fixed variables and relatively predictable outcomes, expression and communication are unmeasurable, volatile and infinitely open-ended. Words are expression but clearly they do not resemble that which they designate - the word 'elephant' does not resemble an elephant;² words can neither be reduced to definition; words bring with them whole worlds through their susceptibility to metaphor, irony, connotation and allusion. This is why Merleau-Ponty proposes that Cézanne "writes in painting"; worlds are invoked rather than being merely represented. Art works cannot be reduced to representations, like arrows in stations that indicate a platform or an exit, nor are they equivalent to photographs which give us an exact copy of the object. If this account were true then "the purpose of painting as such would be to serve as a *trompe l'oeil* and its

² Magritte's painting of a pipe under which he has inscribed 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'.

meaning would lie entirely beyond the canvas, in the object it signifies; in its [subject-matter]" (WP:95, C:55). Paintings are "overdetermined by that with which they are in direct communication: the visible" (Watson 2009). It is precisely because painting accomplishes so much more than representation that it has value for us and moreover, that its value and significance can be the source of controversy demanding a "perpetual re-reading" of the "pictorial gestures" (IP:47). Edward Casey defends a similar view when he writes: "painterly representations are genuine presentations.... they strive to show not to replicate" (Casey 2002).

The artist converts into a poem, a painting what would otherwise remain locked at the level of individual experience, so that through words, through painting we come to know we live in a shared world. Expression thus by its very nature relies on the recognition of other embodied consciousnesses without which it would be meaningless. The other is a constant and necessary presence in the work of the artist, not just at the social level of subject matter and audience, but in a more profound ontological sense. Merleau-Ponty's relational ontology reveals the deep levels of interdependence between artist and viewers, thereby establishing a complementary ground for Kant's claim that aesthetic judgment is inherently subjective but nonetheless can claim universal assent. The complementary ground is incarnation itself, the conscious corporalities, the incarnated consciousnesses of self and other and their shared world – the interworld.

3 Subjective response and universal voice

What is it in the artwork that holds our attention hostage in delight, fascination or horror? How can we judge whether a work of art is good or even great? Why should others agree

with our judgments? Aesthetic judgment has inspired many diverse accounts, tending to gravitate towards either an objectivist or subjectivist position.

Kant's aesthetic theory aimed to accommodate both the objective requirements of judgment and the undeniable significance of the subjective response. To assert that something is beautiful is not merely descriptive. It is also responsive and implicit in this assertion is the expectation that others will respond similarly and agree with the judgment. Kant's argument for the compatibility of the subjective response and the universal voice rests on two crucial aspects: humans share the same capacities – sensibility, imagination and understanding, and the condition of disinterestedness.

Merleau-Ponty challenges Kant asserting that he has not followed his own program to its logical conclusion. While Kant has already demonstrated that the *a priori* is unknowable prior to experience, independent of facticity, he has also insisted the *a priori* is what ought to be the case. Merleau-Ponty argues that “[f]rom the moment in which experience – that is, the opening onto our *de facto* world – is recognised as the beginning of knowledge, there is no longer any way of distinguishing a level of *a priori* truths and one of factual ones, what the world must necessarily be and what it actually is” (PP:220, PP:256, PP:229, PP:266). As Galen Johnson notes, Merleau-Ponty was somewhat hasty in this critical assertion and he proposes the “ought” which Kant deploys in his subjective-universality of aesthetic judgment is not equivalent to the “moral ought” as an imperative, but rather “ought” as in “should be able to” indicating capacity, and in this way is not an absolute. Johnson writes, Kant “argues that there must be an *a priori* ‘common sense’ as transcendental ground of the universality of aesthetic judgment, yet he concedes that this common aesthetic sense remains a ‘mere ideal

standard' (CJ22/89)" (Johnson 2010). Notwithstanding the qualification that Johnson offers on Kant's behalf, there is still a contentious issue. Merleau-Ponty concurs with the near-universality in Kant's account, but he takes issue with the claim that the *a priori* 'common sense' is transcendental and proposes there is needed a reassessment of our notions of *a priori* and *a posteriori* through a rigorous appreciation of the fact of embodiment (PP:xvii, PP:xix, PP:lxviii, PP:18). Merleau-Ponty's entire life's work, through which he offers rehabilitated conceptions of both the body and perception, can be regarded as addressing this very problem at the heart of dualist epistemologies and dualist ontologies. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty articulates this *a priori* in terms of the sensible idea, the unity of essence and existence, of meaning and expression. The sensible idea, whether a musical phrase or the capture of light in a painting, "could not be given to us as ideas except in carnal experience" (VI:150, VI:197).

For Merleau-Ponty the communicability of an artwork requires the establishment of "concurring points of internal evidence" between incarnated consciousnesses and in this way the art work can assert "a claim on every possible mind like a perennial acquisition" (CD:70, DC:36). Furthermore, because subjects are embodied, they are situated and hence inhabit a world. Thus it is not only as Kant claims from the *a priori* synthetic constitution of consciousness that communicability and the potential for universality are to be derived, but as much from the fact that the artist and the perceiver of a work of art each lends their body to the experience within a shared world, thereby establishing systems of equivalents. The encounter is first and foremost a pre-reflective, bodily one. Lennon offers a parallel assessment with particular focus on the aspect of imagination. She writes:

We have not ...lost the synthesizing activity which, for Kant, distinguished the productive imagination. But the synthesizing activity is not the imposition of

conceptual form onto intuited matter. It is rather the *taking up* or *grasping of shape* in the world we encounter and which emerges in relation to our body. The productive imagination here is bodily, and it does not so much impose form as take up form, as a consequence of its sensitivity to the world in which it is placed. This is initially, a pre-reflective and pre-conceptual activity of the body (Lennon 2015).

Art has a gestural meaning and our comprehension of art relies on lending our body to the encounter in the same way we grasp the meanings of bodily gestures (S:159, *S:201*). For Merleau-Ponty anger is not a mental state behind the facial expression. The facial expression is the anger. So too the elements of a painting - the colours, the shapes, the textures are deciphered not at the level of thought, but in the very blood, breath, flesh and bones of the living conscious body and these elements are the meaning, not a mere means to meaningful ends. Merleau-Ponty writes, “The painting does not so much express the meaning as the meaning impregnates the painting” (ILVS:92, *LIVS:69*).

As embodied consciousnesses, we are always spatially, temporally, historically and culturally situated and as such within the Merleau-Pontian vision this commits us to not just interest, but vested interest as against Kant’s goal of disinterestedness. The elements Kant tries to eliminate from his account - the moral, the political, the sensuous, the egoistic - are all returned and add not only a richness to the subjective response, but also commonalities. To be clear, this vested interest is not endorsing instrumentality in the aesthetic project but rather allowing that aesthetics goes beyond just the pleasures afforded in contemplation of the beautiful. So too, these ‘interests’ do not solely serve the atomistic, isolated, individual subject, but crucially serve the collective. The subject belongs to a ‘we’. Not only do we share the same sensibilities and susceptibilities which underwrite our appreciations of

aesthetic experience in general and art works in particular, but we also share a world. In this way, the subjective response does not devolve into subjectivism.

Merleau-Ponty is offering a non-absolutist universality of aesthetic judgment. Unlike Kant who bases this on 'equivalent cognitive capacities and sensibilities', the transcendental 'common sense' of aesthetic judgment, Merleau-Ponty grounds this in the phenomenal realm, the shared world and its epistemic correlates - perception and the pre-reflective body. The body-subject, that which is neither mere object nor pure subject guarantees the communicability of the artwork and provides a basis for agreement as to aesthetic merit. However, agreement is neither certain nor the response unconditioned. Aesthetic judgment, as with ethical judgment, is a lived task and occurs within a dynamic, emergent world and so one never arrives at a final destination.

4 'Style' in Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence

Merleau-Ponty's second essay *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence* represents a transition from the phenomenological concerns and methodology to the influences of structuralism. Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic focus shifts from primordial percipience to expression and historicity. This second essay seeks to resolve the limitations of the earlier work and is his first sustained attempt to grapple with the emerging thoughts, which were to become the ontology articulated in *Eye and Mind* (1961) and the posthumously published work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). The other becomes especially conspicuous in this phase of his project, as not only the inspiration, the motivation and confirmation of expression, but in a more basic sense as that whereby culture is possible at all; the first cultural object is, according to Merleau-Ponty, the body of the other (PP:348, PP:406,

PP:364, *PP*:406). Others are also given through artefacts, language and the expressive arts.

These traces of the Other testify to our living in a shared world, and as Merleau-Ponty aims to show, an interworld wherein self, other and world are revealed as being ontologically interdependent.

Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence begins with a discussion of Saussure's theory of the diacritical sign and this leads into a critique of the aesthetic theories presented in Andre Malraux's *The Voices of Silence* and Jean Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* Merleau-Ponty continues his dispute with dichotomous schemas in criticisms of these thinkers whose theories rest on dualistic foundations. Although these analyses serve to further Merleau-Ponty's general philosophical aims, I wish to focus on what I consider to be the key theme of 'style' which leads directly into the final essay and prefigures the ontological notion of 'flesh'.

Merleau-Ponty's efforts to move beyond the dualist conceptual frameworks dominated by either the language of subjectivism or of objectivism, and to cut a path between, often required a redefinition, an expansion of the sense of certain concepts; one such central concept is 'style'.³ Merleau-Ponty's redefinition of the term 'style' calls us to question our entrenched preconceptions and opens us to a more expanded and dynamic conception of our world, our access to this world and our place within it. As Linda Singer notes in her article "Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style", the concept of style "takes on significance in the context of Merleau-Ponty's efforts to reconstruct the ground of knowledge from within the domain of perception, and to explain how meaning happens in the world for a finite incarnate consciousness" (Singer 1993). Merleau-Ponty's concern with 'style' must therefore be

³ For an extended discussion of Merleau-Ponty's use of language in his later work see (Vanzago 2005)

appreciated both within the epistemological commitments of his project and in conjunction with the key notions – the body-subject, expression, the other and the interworld. Selves are first apprehended not as epistemic subjects, but rather as agents; he thus gives priority to the “I can” rather than the “I am/ I know” (PP: 137, PP:159, PP:139, *PP:171*). This agency translates into a specific style, “a manner of being flesh”, often more readily recognised by others than oneself. In this way the expressive style of an artist is recognisable by others and is set against the background of other artists, other styles, both contemporaneous and historical.

For Merleau-Ponty, style with regard to creative endeavours issues directly from the historical, cultural contexts and the ‘merely human’ artist’s life, not as a fulfilment of a grand conscious purpose. In fact, he argues, fulfilment in any sense is unachievable. The artist’s style develops and evolves over time, so that each work gropes around and goes beyond the “significant intentions” of the artist (ILVS: 83). There is thus an intrinsic uncertainty not just in the works reception by those ‘gazing others’, but also in that the artistic process is as Merleau-Ponty describes of Cezanne – the problem of uttering “the first word.” Merleau-Ponty describes this: “[w]hat is given to [the artist] with style is not a manner, a certain number of procedures or ties that he can inventory, but a mode of formulation that is just as recognizable for others and just as little visible to him as his silhouette or his everyday gestures” (ILVS:90). If style were merely accounted for by the sum of features and artistic techniques, then a clever counterfeit would be just as valuable as the original.

What then is style? How is it generated and able to be recognized? An artist’s style is recognizable not merely from brush technique, colours and composition, but the presence of

the artist himself is in his work and defines it; this particular life called for this particular work to be done. Merleau-Ponty again revisits the idea he introduced in *Cézanne's Doubt* of the direct correlation between the life of the artist, his world and his art. As mentioned earlier, this is not suggesting that the artist's life explains the work or vice versa. Neither is reducible to the other because both are overdetermined. All the factors of the artist's existence, the context, the ordinariness, the joys, the encounters with others, the epiphanies, the despairs, converge and bring to his work this something recognizable by others as his style. Style emerges in the mutual interrogation of artist and world. (ILVS:95).

What work is 'style' doing for Merleau-Ponty with regard to leaving behind the persisting dualist metaphysics? Merleau-Ponty proposes that style subtends the particular and the universal and is thus able to map out the territory between beings and Being. The inseparability of substance and quality gives us the style of a thing; *what* it is, is inseparable from *how* it is. The quality is not something that attaches to a thing, it is essential and defines the thing as being the thing it is. This style can be apprehended at neither the subjective pole of experience nor the objective pole but rather permeates the field of lived significance arising from their intertwining. In this way, we can see that style, like the body-subject, challenges dualist oppositions as well as monist reductions. 'Style' thus serves as an entrée into the notions of 'flesh', 'wild being' and 'wild logos' of the later works.

5 Flesh, Wild Being and Wild Logos in *Eye and Mind* and *The Visible and the Invisible*

Eye and Mind, first published in January 1961, is the culmination of his reflections on vision, painting and artistic processes and where he maps out his new ontology through the aesthetic lens. *Eye and Mind* is divided into five different but interrelated discussions. The first

discussion concerns the limitations and misapprehensions of science in its attempts to discover and define our world. Merleau-Ponty suggests painting offers a more accurate and less conditioned access to the world. The second discussion interrogates the ontological grounds for vision. The third discussion revisits his dispute with Descartes, concentrating on Descartes *Dioptrics*, and maps out a metaphysics of painting. The fourth, enters into discussion with various painters and sculptors, most notably Cézanne, da Vinci, Matisse, Rodin, Klee and Delaunay and revolves around the notions of line and colour within artworks. The final brief discussion returns again to his thoughts on historicity and temporality begun in *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*; that it is not appropriate to speak of art in terms of progress, in which one movement, one tradition, one artistic understanding supersedes the previous ones, because art should not be understood as events but rather as advents.

I will not offer a thoroughgoing analysis of this text here, but rather focus on three pivotal discussions which enable Merleau-Ponty to both resist any collapse into monism and move beyond dualism, thereby securing his non-dualist, relational ontology. The first of these concerns his discussions of vision and its reversibilities. The second examines the notions of ‘wild being’ which re-establishes a pre-human meaning of the world and ‘wild logos’ as the creative, expressive opening onto this world. Here I draw on the parallel unfinished text *The Visible and the Invisible*. Finally, I consider the notion of ‘flesh’, Merleau-Ponty’s proto-type of Being.

First of all, let us clarify what is at stake in these later works. Merleau-Ponty is seeking to free his thinking from a tacit dualist metaphysical orientation so as to achieve a genuinely

non-dualist ontology and he sees this as intimately connected with language. According to Merleau-Ponty, “language accomplishes thought” (PP:178, PP:207, PP:183, *PP*:217) and so until the language is adequate for the task, then the thought remains incomplete and obscure. For this reason some of the earlier concepts are reworked and renamed; perception is replaced by vision, embodiment by ‘flesh’, dialectic by reversibility, expression by ‘wild logos’, and the pre-reflective world by ‘wild being’. By way of acknowledging the challenge of articulating the new ontology, Merleau-Ponty introduces *Eye and Mind* with a quote from Cézanne – “What I am trying to convey to you is more mysterious; it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the impalpable source of sensations” (EM:121, *OE*:7) – reflecting thus his own grappling towards a means of communicating his philosophical insights.

The Reversibilities of Vision and Movement

Merleau-Ponty privileges vision over the other perceptual faculties. This chauvinism has been criticized by some interpreters who propose it skews the debates and reduces his account to a perceptual monism. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty has his reasons, some of which are in fact challengeable. With regard to the first concern, he proposes, one could not make a world of scents and sounds (VI:83, *VI*:115); vision, however, gives us an irreducible world of abundance and mysteries. With regard to tactile experiences, the experience of the thing is at the point of contact, where the finger connects with the object; with hearing it is in the ear; and with scent in the nose. With vision the thing maintains its exteriority; and so vision has a dual function of granting access but also keeping at a distance and this is the ‘being there’ – the *dasein*, *l’être-là* – ‘being not-here’. As Renaud Barbaras notes, although “the experience of vision feeds the realist illusion” by keeping the thing at a distance, it also thereby resists any collapse into solipsism (Barbaras 2004). In this way, the world maintains its own sovereignty and vision is not reabsorbed into understanding as in the Cartesian account. And

it is, according to Merleau-Ponty, through painting that “vision makes itself philosophy. And the role of the philosopher, then, is not to submit the silent word of the painter to the reign of understanding, but to extend the silence at the heart of his own word to the painter” (Barbaras 2004).

The second concern, that Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the primacy of perception devolves into a perceptual monism, is addressed in Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of the reversibilities which obtain between body and world, seer and seen, vision and movement. Merleau-Ponty quoting Valéry writes – the painter “takes his body with him.” It is this fact of embodiment, that the body is “an intertwining of vision and movement” (EM:124, *OE:16*), that explains the painter’s powers of metamorphosis, of transforming the world into paintings. Vision and movement reveal an intrinsic relationship as against the traditional heterogenous explanations in which the perceiving subject is primarily a spectator. Furthermore, eye movement establishes the central location of the seer around which the visible radiates and the movement of the body offers variable locations, all of which again place the seeing agent at the centre of ‘the map of the visible’.

Everything I see is on principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, and is marked upon the map of the “I can.” Each of the two maps is complete. The visible world and the world of my motor projects are both total parts of the same Being.
(EM:124, *OE:17*)

This overlapping of vision and movement, reveals the inadequacies of a scientific approach which would have the world laid out before us, a representation, ‘a world of immanence and

ideality' available for appropriation. Merleau-Ponty's seer is immersed in the visible in virtue of embodiment, 'he opens onto the world' (EM:124, *OE*:17).

The enigmas of vision and visibility are revealed particularly through painting, Merleau-Ponty argues, because painting "gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible; [and] thanks to it we do not need a 'muscular sense' in order to possess the voluminosity of the world. This voracious vision, reaching beyond the 'visual givens', opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesurae. The eye lives in this texture as a man in his house" (EM:127, *OE*:27). The perceptual modes are reversible so that the visual offers more than just the sense data of lights, shadows and colours. The visual offers the being of the object which is multimodal; the visual inheres in the tactile and vice versa. As philosopher Donald Landes writes:

The visible and the tangible weigh upon each other, and our experience already structures its metastable possibilities according to the intertwining that is sensed, though never explicitly thematized, from the fact that visibility and tangibility belong to the same world through my body as a single seeing/ seen and touching/ touched expressive and open trajectory (Landes 2013).

A further metaphor Merleau-Ponty uses to describe such reversibilities is that of "the finger of a glove – that is turned inside out" (VI:263, *VI*:317); there is no need for any spectator to reverse the finger in order to know that there is an invisible inside. The invisible is the lining and depth of the visible (VI:149, *VI*:195); they are "the obverse and reverse of one another" (VI:152, *VI*:200).

What is Merleau-Ponty trying to communicate in all these enigmatic statements - the phrasings, rephrasings, images and metaphors? It is as he puts it “the most difficult point” (VI:149, *VI:195*) trying to articulate the relation between the visible and the invisible, between the phenomenal and the ideal, between the originary world and the cultural world. And at the end of the last complete chapter of his incomplete work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty announces his “ultimate truth” (VI:155, *VI:204*) - that reversibility defines the relation in these various articulations of the most fundamental binary; the invisible is the invisible of the visible and the visible is the visible of the invisible. There is a necessary relation between the two; while distinguishable, they are inseparable and together they constitute the ‘flesh’ of the world (Daly 2014).

The term ‘flesh’ summons to mind many associations - biblical, moral, substantive, reductively material and blindly unthinking. Interestingly, it is the biblical that perhaps has the closest affinity to Merleau-Ponty’s purposes with its references to generativity. In the working notes, Merleau-Ponty writes: “I call the world flesh ... in order to say that it is a pregnancy of possibles” (VI:250, *VI:304*). He is clearly trying to grapple with this generativity, why there is ‘something’ rather than ‘nothing’, the mysteries of incarnation and the relation of generativity to the word, to language and so the biblical allusion seems both reasonable and suggestive. Nonetheless, it is the substantive that has dominated philosophical misinterpretations and Merleau-Ponty himself anticipates exactly this problem. He writes: “We must not think flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit – for then it would be a union of contradictories – but we must think it as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being” (VI:147, *VI:193*).⁴ Our responsiveness to the world fits exactly

⁴ For an extended and insightful discussion of this interpretation see (Dillon 1995)

like “flesh responding to flesh” (VI:209, *VI:262*). ‘Flesh’ is where the apparent oppositions meet and are revealed as not absolute disjunctions but rather reversibles – the visible and the invisible, the phenomenal and the cultural, the sensible and the intelligible, facticity and logos. All these binaries are modalities of flesh, distinguishable but inseparable, and so reversibility as “the ultimate truth” achieves Merleau-Ponty’s non-dualist, non-monist ontology.

Merleau-Ponty is not only concerned to vindicate his non-dualist ontology, but also to educate and refine our perceptual engagement with the world, to reawaken our pre-reflective sensibilities, so that we can see as Cézanne sees, beneath the imposed orders of humanity. This is why Merleau-Ponty describes philosophy as a practice rather than a purely conceptual undertaking. So too our carnality has not been fully appreciated for its epistemic value and needs reawakening (VI:207, 208, *VI:261*).

Wild logos is thus the logic of the sensible, how it reveals itself in lines, shapes, colour, distances and light, which is taken up by the embodied subject in engaging with the world. This wild logos answers the question posed by Malraux as to how a painter can discover himself, his own expression ‘with and against’ other painters. Merleau-Ponty extends this idea to question how then one artist may know how to handle various mediums – what is the commonality that allows this ‘transubstantiation’ from painting to sculpture to drawing. He proposes that this perplexity persists only as long as one imagines the creative endeavor as drawing something out of nothing. Rather he proposes, each medium and each endeavour is ‘but the trace of a total movement of Speech, which goes into Being as a whole, and that this movement contains the expression with lines as well as the expression with colours, my

expression as well as that of the other painters' (VI:211, *VI:264*). The logic of this wild perception is only discoverable through the system of carnal equivalents.

Conclusion

Merleau-Ponty's interrogations of art and artistry continue to offer significant challenges to traditional and postmodernist accounts in the domains of both aesthetics and philosophy in general. Phenomenology is belatedly gaining deserved recognition in the general philosophical community in large part due to the empirical support emerging from research in neuroscience and psychology affirming some of phenomenology's key insights. Merleau-Ponty stands out as a pioneer in this extremely fruitful rapprochement with his early engagement with neurology and the psychology of his day. There seems, however, to be a regrettable reluctance to acknowledge the incredible perspicacity of his thought in the domain of aesthetics. Perhaps this is due to the prevalence of postmodernist views wherein Merleau-Ponty is erroneously regarded as a thinker who has been surpassed.⁵ One of the aims of this paper has been to demonstrate that such assessments are entirely misconceived. Merleau-Ponty's work continues to speak powerfully to us and he did in fact anticipate and reject the deconstructionist account (Dillon 1995).

I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic interrogations complement and complete those of Kant. Nonetheless, while Merleau-Ponty agrees with Kant on his near-universality of aesthetic judgment, Merleau-Ponty grounds this in the system of carnal equivalents within a shared world as opposed to Kant's 'common sense' of all transcendental subjects who share the same cognitive apparatus – sensibility, imagination and understanding. So too while

⁵ See Leonard Lawlor's paper (Lawlor 1998) in which he addresses what he proposes are persisting challenges to phenomenology from Deleuze – namely immanence and difference.

Merleau-Ponty endorses the non-instrumentality of art as reflected in Kant's condition of disinterestedness, he nonetheless stresses that absolute disinterestedness *per se* is unachievable given the intrinsic situatedness of subjects. And so it is not in the *a priori* synthetic constitution of consciousness that communicability and the potential for universality lie, but rather in the pre-reflective bodily encounter.

Merleau-Ponty's development of the notion of expressive 'style' reveals that substance and quality are inseparable; *what* a thing is inseparable from *how* it is. Style is essential and defines the thing as being the thing it is. In the same way, humanness is recognizable through thematic variations offered by individuals; individual style is a manner of being 'flesh', a distinctive way of inhabiting the world. Individual style, whether an object, a human being, an artist or artwork is an intertwining of both facticity and freedom, of the conditioned and the created. Style thus serves as an entrée into the notions of 'flesh', 'wild being' and 'wild logos' of the later works.

Merleau-Ponty's 'wild' or 'brute being' belonging to 'mythical time' (VI:168, VI:222), anterior to reflective consciousness, anterior to the separation of experience into essence and existence undercuts the conventional *modus operandi* of 'sedimented-ontic being'.⁶ 'Wild being', wherein essence and existence collide, 'asks of our experience of the world what the world is before it is a thing one speaks of and which is taken for granted, before it has been reduced to a set of manageable, disposable significations' (VI:102, VI:138). And this is precisely why there is no one master key to the visible and why each brush stroke must satisfy an infinite number of conditions because it must satisfy the 'unsurpassable plenitude of the real' (CD: 65, DC:27).

⁶ See Mauro Carbone (Carbone 2004) for an extended discussion of Merleau-Ponty's analyses of time and mythical time.

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OE L’oeil et l’esprit, (Paris: Editions Gallimard 1964)

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