

Merleau-Ponty: Eye, Body and Postmodernism

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) has been one of the major figures in the philosophy and aesthetics of a few decades ago. Furthermore, he influenced numerous recent authors, these ranging from Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard to Jacques Lacan. Moreover, via Lyotard's early work *Discours, figure* (1971), which became influential in the US and the UK only in the second half of the eighties, his ideas took hold in writers who hadn't even mentioned him. Still, as a recent commentator wrote, Merleau-Ponty "represents a part of contemporary heritage, he is often quoted, but, nonetheless, he remains absent. Nobody ignores him, but only few have read him."¹⁾

In this article I intend to take as my point of departure Merleau-Ponty's essay "Eye and Mind" from 1961. I shall also, at least partly, take into consideration his ideas or rather statements from some of his other more or less concurrent writings, with the help of which I hope to illuminate some of the issues presented in this, Merleau-Ponty's probably most widely read essay. In Part II shall concentrate upon the ideas in "Eye and Mind" which can be relevant for a discussion of the difference between the static and the moving eye and the inclusion of the latter into a post-humanist conception of the subject. I shall then develop some of the consequences of Merleau-Ponty's insistence upon a different understanding of vision, which would somewhat coincide with what Martin Jay has called "a new ontology of sight".²⁾ In Part II I shall sketch some of the uses Merleau-Ponty's views on these matters have been put to by other writers, especially those who were concerned with the visual arts. In Part III I shall finally point to some of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's treatment of vision may facilitate our contemporary conceptualization of the differences between the fine arts with their spatial and corporeal features and the new mechanical media like photography, film, television and video. In this last part I shall also draw upon Fredric Jameson and some other authors so as to:

- (a) support Jameson's thesis that postmodern art is effectively an art form where the links between the referent, the signifier and the signified have been severed;
- (b) that the mechanical reproducibility of artworks not only helped in lowering the barrier between high art and mass culture, but also helped to establish certain works

1) Renaud Barbaras, *De l'être du phénomène. Sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, (Grenoble: Millon, 1991), p. 9. It should be added that such a description doesn't apply everywhere. See, for example, numerous translations of Merleau-Ponty and writings on him published by Northwestern University Press (Evanston, Illinois).

2) Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 263.

- as fetishes (human bodies included) or raised their value as originals, and
- (c) to claim that art as we have hitherto known, is increasingly being dissolved in the broader category of culture, hence losing its modernist normative and existential prerogatives;
- (d) my final claim shall be that much of this has to do with the fact that visual arts and culture are no longer supported by discursive master narratives, but are effectively self-supporting, a consequence of which is a predominance of the effects of the moving gaze: pictures and images as the dominant forms of contemporary representation thwart totalization, thus effectively bringing about what some call “dedifferentiation” or “reenchantment of art”. This last observation can also be found, although differently phrased, in Merleau-Ponty, whose work can thus perhaps lead us to insights concerning our own contemporary culture.

I

Maurice Merleau-Ponty begins his essay “Eye and Mind” with a distinction between scientific thinking and what he terms the “there is” which precedes it.³⁾ The latter is “the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies — not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine but this actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts.”⁴⁾ In Merleau-Ponty’s view then (who here is not far removed from Heidegger) scientific thinking should return so as to recapture an originary unity underlying the Cartesian divisions of the modern era. And he continues: “[A]rt, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would wish to ignore. Art and only art does so in full innocence. (...) Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees.”⁵⁾

As we know, three of the persistent motifs found in Merleau-Ponty’s later writings are (a) the relationship between the visible and the invisible, (b) the body as an intersection of the seen and the seer, and (c) the idea of the flesh of the world. It is these three themes that shall be my main concern here. Underlying them is Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the phenomenological unity of the subject and object within a modified subject itself, thus foreshadowing Jacques Lacan’s insistence on the omnipresence of the Symbolic, which prevents us from reaching the Real. As we know, Merleau-Ponty differs greatly from Lacan, although he embraced some of his views. As he himself said, “[p]henomenology and psychoanalysis are not parallel. Far better than that: both are directed toward the same latency.”⁶⁾ Lacan too speaks favorably of Merleau-Ponty already in his *Ecrits*, where in a paper from 1946 he writes: “The work of Merleau-Ponty shows in a decisive manner that

3) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader. Philosophy and Painting*, ed. and with an intr. by Galen A. Johnson, (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 122.

4) *Ibid.*

5) *Ibid.*, p. 123.

6) Quoted in Jean Starobinski, *The Living Eye*, (Harvard, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 145.

all sane phenomenology, of perception, for example, commands that we consider the lived experience before all objectivation and also before all reflective analysis which intermingles objectivation with experience.”⁷⁾ Nonetheless, later on, in the sixties, Lacan parts ways with Merleau-Ponty, who has, in the meantime, enthusiastically endorsed Lacan’s interpretation of the mirror stage as the stage of the constitution of the ego. For in Merleau-Ponty’s view, and this is of crucial importance for our discussion, a prereflective ego remains extant beside the one of the “specular I”.⁸⁾ It is this prereflective ego, this basis within, which is the precondition of all divisions into the seen and the seer, which is the originary place before the division into senses and, most importantly, it is also the originary place of art. This is the “there is” to which Merleau-Ponty refers in “Eye and Mind” and which enables him to exert such a formidable influence upon innumerable artists and theorists. It enables him, he thinks, to circumvent the traditional modern division into science and art which inevitably posits art into the realm of ideology or at least places it in a position which is inferior to science.

This “there is” is designated also by another name: “flesh”. Merleau-Ponty refers to this “flesh” on innumerable occasions, but the term nonetheless - obviously not by coincidence - remains oblique. The closest we get to its fixated meaning is its designation as being similar to one of the four elements, existing neither as a physical or mental entity - a designation, which by its very nature points to some of the difficulties encountered by any attempt to assign a fixed meaning to the term. This “sliding of meaning” obviously fulfils Merleau-Ponty’s desire to keep the term as illusive as possible, so as to require the reader of his discourse to remain incessantly aware of its temporal and therefore non-definable nature - in some respects thus not far removed from Derrida’s “différance”. Hence as Merleau-Ponty himself states in *Le visible et l’invisible*, “what we call flesh, this mass intrinsically worked upon, hasn’t got a name in any philosophy.”⁹⁾ A notion related to the one of “flesh” has subsequently been developed by Jean-François Lyotard, who in his book *Discours, figure* speaks of a “figure-matrix”, of which he says: “Not only it is not seen, but it is not visible just as it is also not readable (...) it is sheer difference.”¹⁰⁾ This same concept is later on, in the eighties, employed by Rosalind Krauss in her essay “The Im/pulse to See”, published in 1988. One of the reasons for this plethora of influences of the notion of “flesh” although transmogrified into other terms - as witnessed by Lyotard, Rosalind Krauss and a series of other writers, to some of which I shall return later on — lies, I think, also in the congeniality of these authors with Merleau-Ponty’s appreciation of art.

Needless to say, the three aforementioned themes found in late Merleau-Ponty’s writings are interrelated. Here I cannot elaborate upon them in depth; suffice it to say, that the relationship between the visible and the invisible in a way replaces Sartre’s division into Being and nothingness, which Merleau-Ponty finds unsatisfactory. In Merleau-Ponty’s view, which arises from his phenomenological foundations, the invisible is the not-yet-

7) Jacques Lacan, ‘Les effets psychiques du mode imaginaire’, *Écrits*, (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 179.

8) Cf. Jay, *op. cit.*, p. 322 et passim.

9) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 193.

10) Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, (Paris: Klincksieck, 1981), p. 278.

visible, in other words and using a somewhat different, although not incompatible terminology, in his view the whole world exists for us within the Imaginary and the Symbolic only: outside of them there is no nameable reality available to our consciousness. For this reason there is no “void” outside of Being. This is so also because everything is in the process of emergence; it is a “not yet”, in other words, it is an event. It is within this potentiality that the flesh finds its placement, for it represents the aforementioned “there is”, existing before any divisions, that is, not only before those articulated in language, but also through the senses and the conscious. This flesh is, as Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a “*Weltmöglichkeit*”,¹¹⁾ a possibility of something emerging into existence, an event, and therefore a motif recurring not only in the early but also in the later Lyotard, who in fact specifies his own description of the postmodern exactly as such an event occurring within the bosom of modernity itself.

Before I draw some consequences from the above observations, let me refer briefly to the body as presented by Merleau-Ponty. As Renaud Barbaras describes it, for Merleau-Ponty, “the body reveals a relation to itself which is neither identity nor difference: ‘higher’ than the exteriority of the physical object, it is in this way the sensed; ‘lower’ than the pure interiority of the conscience in which this sensing is incarnated, or rather, it is its own incarnation.”¹²⁾

As we can see, we again encounter this undifferentiated entity in which all the differences are collapsed, or rather, which exists before any differences are constituted. The sensible world — and this is the world that is at stake here — is, “(like painting) the sum [ensemble] of paths of my body and not a multitude of spatio-temporal individuals - this is the Invisible of the visible.”¹³⁾ Again the opposition to the Cartesian desire to freeze an event into a static state is obvious. It is for this purpose, as Merleau-Ponty argues also in “Eye and Mind”, that Descartes believes “painting is only an artifice that puts before our eyes a projection similar to the one things themselves would.”¹⁴⁾ It is also this feature of his philosophy, that made Merleau-Ponty such a plausible defender of art and made his writings so readily applicable to it.

Another trait of Merleau-Ponty’s theory is his insistence that the eye is never a static eye: the eye incessantly moves and it is through this movement only that the gaze is able to perceive. If this were not so, we would not be able to distinguish the texture of a surface, the movement of light upon it and the changes it brings about. Even the size of objects we see depends upon our ability to contextualize through the movement of our eyes, which is, of course, linked to our bodily movement. It is from this movement that arises the ability to determine whether we are moving away from the object (as the crew of the ship encountering the sinking Titanic thought) or whether the object is diminishing in size or disappearing (under the sea, in the case of the Titanic). It is all these elements that are in play when we look at a painting or, for that matter, any object attracting our attention.

It is within this broad framework that painting, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, possesses a

11) Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, p. 304.

12) Barbaras, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

13) *Le visible et l’invisible*, p. 300.

14) Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 133.

special value, for it offers a representation not of that frozen moment captured by a photographic camera, but of a movement, which can be represented only by the hand of an artist and, as a consequence, in great art perceived also by the viewer of such art. In such a case, the gaze of the viewer is consubstantial with the gaze of the artist, forming the “television” which makes us, as Merleau-Ponty phrases it in *Signes*, “in the most private part of our life simultaneous with others and with the world.”¹⁵⁾

The similarity between such views and Jacques Lacan is more than obvious when Lacan refers, in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (from 1964), to an artwork: “The painter gives something to the person who must stand in front of his painting which, in part, at least, of the painting, might be summed up thus — *You want to see? Well, take a look at this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one’s weapons. This is the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting.”¹⁶⁾ Here Lacan, through the realm of art, posits an intersubjectivity practically identical with Merleau-Ponty’s. Nevertheless, an insurmountable difference between the two remains: for Lacan the Cartesian subject is not something to be discarded and overcome as in Merleau-Ponty, but something to be recognized as the imaginary point of identity which enables the constitution of what we call the “I”.

II

A series of authors has used various ideas from Merleau-Ponty in their own theoretical or critical writings. Some of these have already been mentioned. In Part II I shall limit my discussion to three authors, with the help of which I shall proceed to the final part of this essay.

In her well-known book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* Rosalind Krauss, in a paper written in 1983, compares the reception of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) in France at the time of its publication and influencing, for example, the works of Alberto Giacometti, with its influence in the US in the sixties, referring, in this latter case, especially to its imprint in the work of Richard Serra. If, in the first case, the main thrust was supplied by Merleau-Ponty’s already mentioned observation concerning our perception of objects viewed from a distance - rather obvious from Giacometti’s elongated figures depicting their position far away - then Richard Serra drew upon different ideas from Merleau-Ponty’s book from 1945: “The abstract subject, for Serra, can only be a function of time. Any subject that is fixed in time, isolated and unchanging, becomes for him an image, and an image is by definition not abstract. It is always an image of something, always a depiction. Thus beyond the fact that Giacometti’s world is ‘peopled’ so that distance is bound to a distant face, a distant body, this distance has always been rendered a sculptural image. It is there in the object, stamped onto its surface through the indelible fracture of the modeling, through the abruptness with which the sides of the face recede before our eyes, so that whether physically far or near, we are always presented with this image of ‘distance.’”

15) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 24.

16) Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 101.

“For Serra the abstract subject only yields itself up within a kind of experiential ground through which space and time are felt to be functions of one another.”¹⁷⁾

In Richard Serra’s case, then, we again encounter the Merleau-Pontyan desire to avoid the static fixity, to present movement. Thus, as Krauss documents - and it is primarily for this purpose that I have just quoted from her essay - an influence of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is present not only in the theory of art, but also in its practice.

A more theoretical influence can be found in Norman Bryson. He, in his *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (1984), notes that Leonardo’s structure of vision assumes that “‘I see the world’ and ‘I am one within my seeing the world.’”¹⁸⁾ Merleau-Ponty’s position in this respect goes a step further, for in his case it would be phrased as “‘I see myself seeing myself.’”¹⁹⁾ Bryson himself makes yet another step: he detects a gender distinction within a painting that he is analyzing: “[W]hile both genders are destined to a life-long work of elaboration of those gendered images, in the dispensation patriarchy (at least) a crucial asymmetry is introduced into the subject’s relation to the gaze of the other, to the social description of vision. Both genders must locate themselves within the description, but *possession of the Description* — I capitalise the term to indicate its status within the whole construction of social vision — is a correlate of social power.”²⁰⁾ What Bryson executes is a furthering of the consciousness of the inclusion of the human subject into the social field as developed by Merleau-Ponty’s existentialist phenomenology, which he supplements with gender-based distinctions as represented within a historical painting — in his case David’s “The Oath of Horatii” — simultaneously historicizing the painting by drawing our attention to its implicit socially antagonistic setting.

The third author that I shall sketchily scrutinize now, and who, to a large extent, differs from the previous two, is Paul Crowther, who based many of his views in his recent books *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (1993) and *Art and Embodiment* (1993) on Merleau-Ponty’s ideas concerning the human condition and art. Crowther observes — and in this follows Merleau-Ponty — that since “the work of art expresses the artist’s personal relation to a shared world, (...) [it] is, therefore, of interest both in its own right and in its implication for other lives. The meaning and richness of the work will be inexhaustible simply by virtue of our historicity. As the patterns and meanings of personal and collective existence take on new meaning, so will our understanding of particular works of art and their creators.”

“In Merleau-Ponty’s theory, then, we find that the artwork is defined and given its rich meaning by virtue of occupying a unique half-way position between perception and reflection.”²¹⁾ While having high regard for Merleau-Ponty, Crowther also criticizes what he sees as a deficiency of the latter’s theory, namely, a lack of evaluative criteria for determining what art is and hence for delimiting art from non-art generically.²²⁾ In other

17) Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1986), pp. 272-3.

18) Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 66.

19) *Ibid.*, p. 65.

20) *Ibid.*, p. 70.

21) Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 51.

22) Cf. for example *ibid.*, p. 54.

words, Crowther finds no criteria in Merleau-Ponty which would help us distinguish between good art and bad art, for the two — and what lies between them — are collapsed into the generic category of “art”. Put differently and leaving Crowther aside, there is no way in which Merleau-Ponty can explicitly establish — in spite of his “tele-vision” and similar sharings of the social consciousness — evaluations which would transcend the rather narrow borders of the individual ego.

III

So far I have pointed to some of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas and the influences his theories concerning perception, the body, art and the visible had in the last decades among various authors and artists. As becomes obvious from the examples of Giacometti and Richard Serra, Merleau-Ponty’s theory was inclined to have an influence not only on those who were thinking about art, but also on those who were practicing it. From the two aforementioned examples from art it is also clear that Merleau-Ponty’s influence was predominant within the framework of modernism. Krauss and especially Bryson and Jacques Lacan, who all transcend the modernist and modern theoretical framework, nonetheless refer to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology as an important step in the right direction, and do so in spite of seeing in it also a step behind the present time, which we can provisionally call postmodernity. In Crowther’s case, the situation is somewhat different, but this is so because Crowther champions not only an existentialist version of aesthetics, but also a normative one, which is far removed from much of contemporary reflection upon art and culture.

One of the features of postmodern art is a proliferation of installations and all kinds of works which can hardly be called pictures or sculptures. Most of the contemporary critics and theorists have problems determining what to call such works: they sometimes designate them as “earthworks” or “installations” or simply in a negative way, as what they are not. Some of the features of these works, whether they are exhibited in enclosed spaces or in open ones — these spaces themselves often furnishing the very materials which are used for the execution of such works — are related to a profuse use of various materials. Examples of such works range from Christo’s recent “work” in Berlin to innumerable works seen in countless galleries and exhibition venues worldwide. It is this use of material, of texture, of shades of color and lighting and tens of thousands, if not millions of perceptible differences which appertain to such works and which establish a difference between them and other works and non-works. Very often they possess — although called and received as artworks — no perceptible value as a sign. They don’t point anywhere, they don’t signify anything, and they don’t represent anything but themselves, which is not much of a representation. As we know at least from the early 8th century, when John of Damascus in his *Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*²³) analyzed images, an image (if I limit myself to visual representations) is something that is alike to something, but can still be

23) Cf. Mosche Barasch, *Icon*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 188 et passim.

distinguished from it. Such works cannot pretend to have the status of representations, in fact don't even intend to. The same often applies to contemporary visual arts of other kinds, be they video or others. What they, nonetheless, do have in common — and this is something they cannot and certainly do not want to avoid — is the special perceptual value attained by the use of visual effects and montage, all of which point to another feature of this art — namely movement. What I want to suggest is that these works, aspiring to the name of art, fulfil most of the preconditions Merleau-Ponty assigns to art, although they may not belong to the modernist tradition. Some of Merleau-Ponty's statement like that from "Eye and Mind" that "painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility,"²⁴⁾ can offer at least some kind of foundations to the otherwise almost non-existent evaluative basis of postmodern works. It could thus perhaps be claimed that his theory, in spite of being, as Crowther rightfully observed, devoid of normative and evaluative criteria, due to its celebration of visibility as an essential feature of the human body in its integrity and in its connectedness with the flesh of the world, offers certain possibilities for postmodern aesthetics. By this I am not claiming that other influential contemporary aesthetics do not exist, but none, with the exception of the institutional theory of art, fulfils the criteria necessary for being designated as "aesthetics". It is not my purpose here to start developing such aesthetics. What I am implying is that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception may offer what Fredric Jameson was searching for, when he called for a new cognitive mapping, after discovering that contemporary postmodern art does not yet offer one.

Within such a framework, where obviously the only viable aesthetic theory to be widely accepted, in spite of its numerous deficiencies, is the institutional theory of art, which claims that anything proclaimed by an artworld to be art and practically functioning at least within this artworld as such is an artwork, and with the profusion of artworks sprouting up everywhere and being complemented by an increasingly aestheticized environment, it may come as a surprise that artworks often function as fetishes. This applies to the artists' names, their works, as well as the whole network of which an artworld is made of. Avant-garde art itself has, at least since its post-war emergence in the US, become increasingly commodified and ephemeral. In this respect, it is no different from an infinite number of similar products offered for our material or symbolic consumption. The status of the fetish of a recognized artwork has followed and been augmented by the immense proliferation of reproduced works produced by different technical means. As Paul Crowther rightfully claims, "[o]riginal works now command unparalleled prices [and] major galleries draw increasingly large attendances even for mediocre exhibitions. At the heart of this lies an astonishing practical reversal of Benjamin's logic. For it is precisely because we are so accustomed to reproductions of visual artworks that our encounter with an original takes on the shock-value of privileged experience."²⁵⁾ We may argue that the issue of prices has no great relevance for the authentic quality of art, which may be correct. Nonetheless, the same problem of evaluation arises as soon as we attempt to decide what such an authentic quality may be, for we immediately find ourselves framed by our own cultural environments,

24) Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 127.

25) Paul Crowther, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

referring to tradition, context and so on. In other words, by accepting the posthumanist logic, we have inadvertently jettisoned also those evaluative criteria that are not metaphysically founded or exceed the criteria of sheer craftsmanship.

With the elimination of distinct borders between various art forms and genres, when we can no longer formally distinguish between works on the basis of techniques used, materials employed (these being increasingly collapsed into the “mixed media” category), it may come as no surprise that certain authors, for example Suzi Gablik, Arthur Danto, Scott Lash and partly Zygmunt Bauman, claim that the current deintellectualization of art, its emergent status as objects devoid of a discursively articulated foundation, brings about the Nietzschean, “basic”, corporeal, mythic and therefore authentic nature of art. Interestingly enough, such ideas arise partly in the same environments which produced the neoavant-garde art of the fifties and sixties and which has obviously reached a limit represented by high modernism.

Suzi Gablik hence, without mentioning Merleau-Ponty or any similar author for that matter, exclaims: “The philosophers of the Cartesian era carried us away from the sense of wholeness by focusing only on individual experience. Ultimately this individualistic focus narrowed our aesthetic perspectives as well, due to its noninteractive, nonrelational and nonparticipatory orientation.”²⁶⁾ She then proposes a project of reenchantment as opposed to the modernist disenchantment of the world: “Reenchantment, as I understand it, means stepping beyond the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism and scientism — in a way that allows for a return of the soul.”²⁷⁾

In a similar, although less euphoric way a cognate tendency is championed by Arthur Danto in his well-known book *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986) where he hails what he calls the “art of disturbance”²⁸⁾ which is, he says, “a regressive posture, undertaking to recover a stage of art where art itself was almost like magic — like deep magic, making dark possibilities real, rather than shallow or illusory magic where nothing really happens but it looks as though it has, where there is a repertoire of tricks rather than the invocation of alien forces from a space other than the one we occupy.”²⁹⁾ Danto then refers to Heidegger: “The reversion to this beginning, to another and forgotten frame of mind, bears comparison with the parallel program in philosophy, that of the late Heidegger, who saw all philosophy after Socrates as a vast deviation from some direct encounter with Being, which Heidegger then took to reenact in writing of a different order altogether than the analytical forms which characterize western philosophical inscription since ancient times.”³⁰⁾

Scott Lash in his *Sociology of Postmodernism* (1991) defends a similar position, although on a more sociological basis. His basic thesis is that postmodernism is a “regime of signification whose fundamental structuring trait is ‘de-differentiation’.”³¹⁾ Another

26) Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), p. 7.

27) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

28) Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.126.

29) *Ibid.*, pp. 126-27.

30) *Ibid.*, p. 127.

31) Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 5.

sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, describes the current postmodern situation as one in which exists a “cacophony of moral voices, none of which is likely to silence the others, [in which] the individuals are thrown back on their own subjectivity as the only ultimate ethical authority.”³²⁾

In the just quoted authors one could certainly find substantial differences concerning their views about art and other matters. What I tried to show by quoting a few short passages from their works is that their authors detect similar features in our contemporaneity and that their observations, although they may be mutually contradictory, partial, subjective or simply wrong, nonetheless, at least symptomatically express current events in art and culture. Interestingly enough, much of what they say about art relates well to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. The return to subjectivity, the reliance upon this subjectivity as the only “ultimate” authority — not only in ethics, but in aesthetics as well (a reenchantment that transgresses what Gablik calls “the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism and scientism” — thus allowing “for a return of the soul”), are not far removed from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. It is true that “mind” is not the “soul”, but that was just the point Merleau-Ponty was making in his 1961 essay, namely that the eye and mind are one and should not be divided into the *res cogitans* (of which the observing eye is a paradigm) and the *res extensa*. It is no coincidence either that Danto is relating to the late Heidegger, who has much in common with the late Merleau-Ponty, one of such common traits being his belief in an undifferentiated unity existing before the divisions into the “Sein” and “Seiende”. Another common feature of Merleau-Ponty and contemporary aesthetics (and art) is the importance assigned to the body.

In many respects then, most of which I have only slightly touched upon, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology fits well into the current postmodern cultural situation and surprisingly well resembles many theories and observations made in the recent years about culture and our lived world in general. Not the least important similarity is also the preoccupation with the visible which today has, it has to be admitted, lost some of that depth which appertained to the painting of Merleau-Ponty’s time, and has been replaced with the visual, which in an almost cynical way reenacts Merleau-Ponty’s replacement of the pair “Being and nothingness” with the pair “visible and invisible”. This occurred because what emerged in the meantime — in the last thirty years that is — is what Merleau-Ponty saw as a lower form of rendering the invisible visible, namely photography, cinema and, of course, television. In the “Eye and Mind” essay he writes: “The photograph keeps open the instants which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping, the ‘metamorphosis’ (Rodin) of time. This is what painting, in contrast, makes visible, because the horses have in them that ‘leaving here, going there,’ because they have a foot in each instant. Painting searches not for the outside of movement but for its secret ciphers.”³³⁾

This short passage, which could equally be applied to the cinema, shows Merleau-Ponty’s doubts concerning these media which, although enabling an unprecedented presence of the

32) Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xxii.

33) Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, p. 145.

visible, also represented, in his view, a false rendering of it, for they showed the visible not as it exists from within, before the differentiation into the exterior and the interior, so to say, but after it, expressing the exterior only. One could perhaps find a follow-up to this line of thought from Merleau-Ponty in Jean Baudrillard, who also speaks about the seduction of the gaze, but, on the other hand, pessimistically proffers only a passivity of the audience in front of the television screens: the contemporary human being is schizophrenic, and is now “only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.”³⁴⁾

Much of this has to do with the fact that images thwart totalization. Merleau-Ponty, while not admitting this, for it would oppose his fundamental views, implies as much, when in *Signes* he claims that “vision produces what reflection will never understand.”³⁵⁾ He sees this feature of images and vision — within the framework of his existential phenomenology — not as a drawback, but as a privileged expression and trait of the totality of Being.

Leaving these questions aside, I would like to pose the question why is it possible that Merleau-Ponty’s ideas from the forties, fifties and early sixties appear to be so congenial with the current ones emerging within a postmodern situation? If we discard answers such as that this is a sheer coincidence, I would suggest the reason for such similarities lies in the fact that postmodernism is predominantly a continuation of processes emerging and developing in modernism itself. In other words, that postmodernism is a continuation and a full development of processes emerging in this century and therefore not such an enormous break with the modernist past as has often been suggested. The same as for Merleau-Ponty applies to Freud, Heidegger and to many other authors of this century. In this way I am also reasserting Fredric Jameson’s position that postmodernism is a cultural dominant which is still anchored within late capitalism, a thesis which could be supplemented by Zygmunt Bauman who correctly claims that the ability to think the limits of modernity and question it in itself represents a fundamentally different notion of modernity than in the past, for such questions had not been possible before.³⁶⁾

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In this way, I have completed a certain circle: at the beginning I pointed to a few of Merleau-Ponty’s views concerning the visible, the body, and the inclusion of both within the undifferentiated world which is also the originary place of art. I then mentioned some of the influences his work had in the past and, finally, some of the rather striking similarities between his work and that of a few contemporary authors concerned with postmodern art and culture. One last point needs to be made. I have often mentioned Merleau-Ponty’s insistence (one could refer here to Heidegger as well) that art emerges from somewhere where the differentiation into individual senses, into the intelligible and the unintelligible, has not yet taken place — i.e., where the line between the Imaginary and the Symbolic has

34) Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication”, in: *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 133.

35) Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, p. 23.

36) Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), esp. p. 116 et passim.

not yet been drawn. This has been the point taken on by Lyotard in the early seventies, who, nevertheless, later at least implicitly recanted it. It may be that it is this line of thought that should be developed further, if we would want to reassert art's position outside of the frame of ideology. It is true though, that much of postmodern art, which increasingly belongs to the normatively neutral category of culture, may have no need for this. Actually, this may also be the reason for the uncanny resemblance of Merleau-Ponty's existentialist aesthetics and much of the contemporary postmodern theoretical and critical discourse on art and culture.

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