Excerpt from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception**

The preceding lectures have tried to bring the world of perception back to life, this world hidden from us beneath all the sediment of knowledge and social living. In so doing, we have often had recourse to painting because painting thrusts us once again into the presence of the world of lived experience. In the work of Cézanne, Juan Gris, Braque and Picasso, in different ways, we encounter objects – lemons, mandolins, bunches of grapes, pouches of tobacco – that do not pass quickly before our eyes in the guise of objects we 'know well' but, on the contrary, hold our gaze, ask questions of it, convey to it in a bizarre fashion the very secret of their substance, the very mode of their material existence and which, so to speak, stand 'bleeding' before us. This was how painting led us back to a vision of things themselves. Reciprocally, a philosophy of perception which aspires to learn to see the world once more, as if in an exchange of services rendered, will restore painting and the arts in general to their rightful place, will allow them to recover their dignity and will incline us to accept them in their purity.

What then have we learned from our examination of the world of perception? We have discovered that it is impossible, in this world, to separate things from their way of appearing. Of course, when I give a dictionary definition of a table – a horizontal flat surface supported by three or four legs, which can be used for eating off, reading a book on, and so forth – I may feel that I have got, as it were, to the essence of the table; I withdraw my interest from all the accidental properties which may accompany that essence, such as the shape of the feet, the style of the moulding and so on. In this example, however, I am not perceiving but rather defining. By contrast, when I perceive a table, I do not withdraw my interest from the particular way it has of performing its function as a table: how is the top supported, for this is different with every table? What interests me is the unique movement from the feet to the table top with which it resists gravity; this is what makes each table different from the next. No detail is insignificant: the grain, the shape of the feet, the colour and age of the wood, as well as the scratches or graffiti which show that age. The meaning, 'table', will only interest me insofar as it arises out of all the 'details' which embody its present mode of being. If I accept the tutelage of perception, I find I am ready to understand the work of art. For it too is a totality of flesh in which meaning is not free, so to speak, but bound, a prisoner of all the signs, or details, which reveal it to me. Thus the work of art resembles the object of perception: its nature is to be seen or heard and no attempt to define or analyse it, however valuable that may be afterwards as a way of taking stock of this experience, can ever stand in place of the direct perceptual experience.

This is not immediately all that obvious. In most cases, a painting, so it is said, represents objects; a portrait often represents someone whose name we are given by the painter. Is painting not, after all, comparable to the arrows in stations which serve no other purpose than to point us towards the exit or the platform? Indeed, does it not resemble those exact photographic reproductions which retain all the essential features of the object and allow us to examine that object in its absence? If this were the case then the purpose of painting as such would be to serve as a *trompe l'oeil* and its meaning would lie entirely beyond the canvas, in the objects it signifies: in its subject. Yet all painting of any worth has come into being in opposition to precisely this conception of its role, one which painters of the last one hundred years at least have quite consciously resisted. According to Joachim Gasquet, Cézanne said that the painter takes hold of a fragment of nature and 'makes it entirely painting'.[1] Braque put it even more clearly when, thirty years ago, he wrote that painting does not strive to 'reconstitute an anecdote' but rather 'to constitute a pictorial event'.[2] So painting does not imitate the world but is a world of its own. This means that, in our encounter with a painting, at no stage are we sent back to the natural object; similarly, when we experience a portrait *aesthetically*, its 'resemblance' to the model is of no importance (those who commission portraits often want them to be good likenesses, but this is because their vanity is greater than their love of painting). It would take us too long to investigate here why, under the circumstances, painters in general tend not to fabricate the kind of non-

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[1] Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne* (Paris: Bernheim-Jeune, 1926), pp. 130–1.

[2] Georges Braque, *Notebooks 1917–1947*, trans. by S. Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 22.

existent poetic objects that some have produced on occasion. Suffice it to say that even when painters are working with real objects, their aim is never to evoke the object itself, but to create on the canvas a spectacle which is sufficient unto itself. The distinction which is often made between the subject of the painting and the manner of the painter is untenable because, as far as aesthetic experience is concerned, the subject consists entirely in the manner in which the grape, pipe or pouch of tobacco is constituted by the painter on the canvas. Does this mean that, in art, form alone matters and not what is said? Not in the slightest. I mean that form and content – what is said and the way in which it is said – cannot exist separately from one another. Indeed I am doing no more than taking note of an obvious truth: if I can get a sufficiently clear idea of an object or tool that I have never seen from a description of its function, at least in general terms, by contrast, no analysis – however good – can give me even the vaguest idea of a painting I have never seen in any form. So in the presence of a painting, it is not a question of my making ever more references to the subject, to the historical event (if there is one) which gave rise to the painting. Rather, as in the perception of things themselves, it is a matter of contemplating, of perceiving the painting by way of the silent signals which come at me from its every part, which emanate from the traces of paint set down on the canvas, until such time as all, in the absence of reason and discourse, come to form a tightly structured arrangement in which one has the distinct feeling that nothing is arbitrary, even if one is unable to give a rational explanation of this.

Cinema has yet to provide us with many films that are works of art from start to finish: its infatuation with stars, the sensationalism of the zoom, the twists and turns of plot and the intrusion of pretty pictures and witty dialogue, are all tempting pitfalls for films which chase success and, in so doing, eschew properly cinematic means of expression. While these reasons do explain why, hitherto, there have scarcely been any films that are entirely filmic, we can nevertheless get a glimpse of how such a work would look. We shall see that, like all works of art, such a film would also be something that one would perceive. Beauty, when it manifests itself in cinematography, lies not in the story itself, which could quite easily be recounted in prose and still less in the ideas which this story may evoke; nor indeed does it lie in the tics, mannerisms and devices that serve to identify a director, for their influence is no more decisive than that of a writer's favourite words. What matters is the selection of episodes to be represented and, in each one, the choice of shots that will be featured in the film, the length of time allotted to these elements, the order in which they are to be presented, the sound or words with which they are or are not to be accompanied. Taken together, all these factors contribute to form a particular overall cinematographical rhythm. When cinema has become a longer-established facet of our experience, we will be able to devise a sort of logic, grammar, or stylistics, of the cinema which will tell us – on the basis of our knowledge of existing works – the precise weight to accord to each element in a typical structural grouping, in order that it can take its place there harmoniously. But as is the case with all such rule-books where art is concerned, it could only ever serve to make explicit the relationships which already exist in successful completed works and to inspire other reasonable attempts. So the creators of the future, just like those of today, will still have to discover new relationships without being guided to them; then, as now, the viewer will experience the unity and necessity of the temporal progression in a work of beauty without ever forming a clear idea of it. Then, as now, this viewer will be left not with a store of recipes but a radiant image, a particular rhythm. Then, as now, the way we experience works of cinema will be through perception.

Music offers too straightforward an example and, for this reason, we shall not dwell on it for long here. It is quite clearly impossible in this case to make out that the work of art refers to anything other than itself; programmatic music, which describes a storm or even an occasion of sadness, is the exception. Here we are unquestionably in the presence of an art form that does not speak. And yet a piece of music comes very close to being no more than a medley of sound sensations: from among these sounds we discern the appearance of a phrase and, as phrase follows phrase, a whole and, finally, as Proust put it, a world. This world exists in the universe of possible music, whether in the district of Debussy or the kingdom of Bach. All I have to do here is listen without soul-searching, ignoring my memories and feelings and indeed the composer of the work, to listen just as perception looks at the things themselves without bringing my dreams into the picture.

Finally, something similar may be said of literature, even though the analogy has often been disputed because literature uses words which also serve to designate natural objects. Many years have already elapsed since Mallarmé made a distinction between the poetic use of language and everyday chatter.[3] The chatterer only names things sufficiently to point them out quickly, to indicate 'what he is talking about'. The poet, by contrast, according to Mallarmé, replaces the usual way of referring to things, which presents them as 'well known', with a mode of expression that describes the essential structure of the thing and accordingly forces us to enter into that thing. To speak of the world poetically is almost to remain silent, if speech is understood in everyday terms, and Mallarmé wrote notoriously little. Yet in the little he left us, we at least find the most acute sense of a poetry which is carried entirely by language and which refers neither directly to the world as such, nor to prosaic truth, nor to reason. This is consequently poetry as a creation of language, one which cannot be fully translated into ideas. It is because poetry's first function, as Henri Bremond[4] and Paul Valéry[5] would later remark, is not to designate ideas, to signify, that Mallarmé and subsequently Valéry[6] always refused either to endorse or reject prosaic commentaries on their poems. In the poem, as in the perceived object, form cannot be separated from content; what is being presented cannot be separated from the way in which it presents itself to the gaze. And some of today's authors, such as Maurice Blanchot,[7] have been asking themselves whether what Mallarmé said of poetry should not be extended to the novel and literature in general: a successful novel would thus consist not in a succession of ideas or theses but would have the same kind of existence as an object of the senses or a thing in motion, which must be perceived in its temporal progression by embracing its particular rhythm and which leaves in the memory not a set of ideas but rather the emblem and the monogram of those ideas.

If these observations are correct and if we have succeeded in showing that a work of art is something we perceive, the philosophy of perception is thereby freed at a stroke from certain misunderstandings that might be held against it as objections. The world of perception consists not just of all natural objects but also of paintings, pieces of music, books and all that the Germans call the 'world of culture'. Far from having narrowed our horizons by immersing ourselves in the world of perception, far from being limited to water and stone, we have rediscovered a way of looking at works of art, language and culture, which respects their autonomy and their original richness.

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* Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, translated by Oliver Davis, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 93-101.

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[3] Stéphane Mallarmé, *passim*. See, in particular, his *Réponses à des enquêtes* (response to Jules Huret, 1891), in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1945).

[4] Henri Bremond, *La Poésie pure*, his lecture at the public session of the five Academies, 24 October 1925 (Paris: Grasset, 1926).

[5] Paul Valéry, *passim*. See, for example, 'Avant-propos' (1920), *Variété* (Paris: Gallimard, 1924); 'Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé . . .' (1931), *Variété III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936); 'Dernière visite à Mallarmé' (1923), *Variété II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1930); 'Propos sur la poésie' (1927), 'Poésie et pensée abstraite' (1939), *Variété V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944). See also Frédéric Lefèvre, *Entretiens avec Paul Valéry*, with a Preface by Henri Bremond (Paris: Le Livre, 1926).

[6] Paul Valéry, *passim* (in his literary criticism, prefaces, theoretical writings and lectures), for example 'Questions de poésie' (1935), 'Au sujet du *Cimetière marin*' (1933) and 'Commentaires de Charmes' (1929), *Variété III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936); 'Propos sur la poésie' (1927), 'L'homme et la coquille' (1937) and 'Leçon inaugurale du cours de poétique du Collège de France' (1937), *Variété V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944).

[7] See, in particular, *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 'How is Literature Possible?' and Blanchot, *Faux pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 'La poésie de Mallarmé est-elle obscure?'.