

Summary: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" (1964)

"Eye and Mind" is a complex and poetic analysis of painting as a form of vision. In this essay, Merleau-Ponty develops an alternative to the **representationalist** view of perception by extending Heidegger's notion of human reality as **Being-in-the-World**. He does this by means of an extended exploration of a paradox of human vision—that we not only see those things that make up the world, but we see **ourselves** in the world. In other words, the body that sees, also sees itself. This **reflexivity** leads to a kind of ambiguity of vision. It is the investigation of this reflexivity and its embodiment in the practice of painting that gives Merleau-Ponty's essay its subtle, intriguing, and elusive character.



Paul Cezanne, *The Big Trees*, 1904

But if it is true that the world in which we live and to which we belong is inherently ambiguous, then "Eye and Mind" can be seen as **illuminating** our contingency of being rather than obscuring it.

I.

The essay begins by characterizing painting as a practice that is detached from the immediate demands of life. "[P]ossessed of no other "technique" than the skill his eyes and hands discover in seeing and painting, he [the painter] gives himself entirely to drawing from the world—with its din of history's glories and scandals—*canvases* which will hardly add to the angers or the hopes of humanity; and no one complains."^[2]¹ This way of being in the world is contrasted with that of the scientist, the writer, the philosopher and the musician.

In order to understand the nature of painting—the bodily relation of the painter to the world—we must first understand what it is for a human

being to be "in" the world. This must be understood **phenomenologically**, not theoretically or objectively. Thus, in the second section (II), Merleau-Ponty describes the nature of our bodily involvement in the world.

II.

We are creatures that both see and move about among other creatures and things. The visible world and the world in which we move are intertwined—they are parts of our world and cannot be separated from one another. Since my ability to see is intertwined with my ability to move, it follows that vision is not a purely thinking or **representational** process. We should not think of the world as being external to us so that we need to construct accurate images of it in the mind in order to find our way about. This so-called Cartesian (or representationalist) view of perception is based on the false assumption that the mind is an internal refuge that is separate from the external world of objects that we see around us. In other words, it embraces a false dichotomy between inside and outside—internal and external worlds. But as Merleau-Ponty argues, since vision and movement

¹ All quotes are taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie, trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964. Page numbers in this text refer to the manuscript provided.

are united in a body that moves-and-sees as part of one complete process, any theory that **separates** representational minds and represented objects will not allow us to understand the nature of our actual experience in the world.

Having made the point that vision and movement are linked by means of the body, Merleau-Ponty goes on to explore the "enigma" or paradox that the human body "simultaneously sees and is seen".[3] The human body is an object in the world that experiences itself as itself, and at the same time, as a part of the world of things that are not itself. In touching my hand, I am both touching and being touched. Yet both sides of this experience are **mine**.²

As Merleau-Ponty says, this paradox produces other paradoxes and leads to the observation that "the world is made of the very stuff of the body".[3] But since the body and vision are inseparable, we must conclude that vision, body and world are intimately intertwined. They are of the same "fabric"—the same "flesh".[6f] This is where Merleau-Ponty works through a central metaphor.

A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident befalls the body, undoing what no accident would have sufficed to do...[4]

This poetic and mysterious passage is the key to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the nature of human embodiment. It also points the way to his account of painting as the exploration and archaeology of the visible.

III.

Merleau-Ponty tells us that the things of the world and our bodies are "made of the same stuff". [4] Vision occurs within and among things. The "manifest visibility [of things] must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility".[4] What does this mean and how is it related to the production of paintings? The elements of visibility—light, color, depth—are not **things**—not tangible, concrete objects. Yet they do exist. They are there before us, but only because they "awaken an echo in our bodies and because the body welcomes them".[4] Things that are visible to us have an "internal equivalent" in our body. This equivalence is not to be understood as a representation that stands in for the thing seen.



Lascaux Cave

Seeing does not produce or depend upon a new thing in addition to the seeing and the seen. Rather, we feel the presence of the thing in us in a visceral way, by means of what Merleau-Ponty calls a "carnal formula".[4] Not only is there no distinction between the thing and our idea or mental representation of it, there is no absolute distinction between the subject who sees and the object that is seen. The seer and the seen are "made of the same stuff" and share in a unity of being.

If we extend this analysis to paintings, we realize there is no sharp distinction between the image and the context in which the image is

² This is what I referred to above as **reflexivity**. It is an important concept not only in philosophy and psychology, but in art as well.

found. So, for example, there is a kind of ambiguity embodied in the animals painted on the walls in the caves at Lascaux. "The animals...are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations. Nor are they *elsewhere*." [4]³

In fact, since we do not look at a painting as we would a thing, the question is not so much **where** the painting is as it is how it functions for us as a form of visibility. We do not so much look "at" it. Rather, we see "with it" or "according to it". The image informs and guides us in the process of seeing, of dwelling in the visible.⁴

IV.

It may seem to you that Merleau-Ponty is taking a straightforward experience—seeing—and making it into something so complex and obscure that now it is a complete mystery! Is Merleau-Ponty increasing our understanding or is he making things worse? One thing that can be said about Merleau-Ponty is that he is absolutely unwilling to provide his readers with comforting simplifications. He believes that the world of human experience is filled with ambiguity. Reality, as we know it, is ambiguous to the core. Thus, to describe it "clearly" is always to describe it in terms that express its multiple aspects. Whether he is right or wrong about the ambiguity of human experience is something you must decide for yourselves. And the only way to decide is by appealing to **your own experience**. There is no objective court of appeal.

V.

Having characterized seeing as a process through which the thing "makes itself visible *in us*", Merleau-Ponty claims that the painter's task is to explore this process of seeing. Thus, the painter investigates **through painting** the means by which an object makes itself visible before our eyes. To do this the painter must develop a sensitivity to the elements of visual experience, e.g. light, shadow, reflections, color, depth, line and movement. These are just the sort of things that people who are not artists tend to overlook. Thus, one must be trained to see them and to use them to produce paintings. This results in a unity of "inspiration and expiration"—of allowing the world to be made visible within you and to make the world visible to others by painting. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when at the beginning of this section he says, "It is by lending his body to the world that the painter changes the world into paintings." [2]

Timothy Quigley, revised 5 May 13

³ Is Merleau-Ponty talking about the animals, the painting, or both? Is he making a distinction between the animals and the image? Should he?

⁴ Note that in discussing the cave paintings on the walls at Lascaux, Merleau-Ponty appears to be in disagreement with claims made by Clement Greenberg, in "Modernist Painting", about the distinction between a picture (or painting) and an image. "The Paleolithic painter or engraver could disregard the norm of the frame and treat the surface in a literally sculptural way only because he made images rather than pictures, and worked on a support—a rock wall, a bone, a horn, or a stone—whose limits and surface were arbitrarily given by nature." Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, V.4, Ed. John O'Brian, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 92.