Both Merleau-Ponty and Sartre present an existentialist approach to art. The existential approach to art focuses on the way in which creative works express a specific life-project for the artist. An aesthetic image or text epitomizes the way in which a human subject relates to his or her concrete lived experience. In *What is Literature?*, Sartre contends that authentic writing should express the commitment of its creator to change his or her society—“words are loaded pistols” he argues.

Merleau-Ponty gives a different twist to the existential dimension of art in *Eye and Mind*. Merleau-Ponty uses the method of phenomenology as the basis for an existential philosophy concentrating on painting rather than literature, Merleau-Ponty sees art as a disclosure of the “invisible genesis of things.” Merleau-Ponty stresses the artist’s immersion in the very being of the world he or she is trying to bring to visible expression.

Nietzsche had begun to view the world as an aesthetic phenomenon in the *Birth of Tragedy*. Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics could be said to be a development of this idea. His examination of painting illustrates how vision itself is painting. His analysis of the process of painting in Cézanne, Klee, Matisse and others brings out how the world is a product, in a sense, of an artistic vision. From *Eye and Mind*:

“There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here” (296).

* * *

Merleau-Ponty is best known for his analyses of human existence, perception and action in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Co-founder of *Les Temps Modern* with Sartre, his wide ranging articles cover topics from philosophical psychology, philosophy of language, political philosophy, philosophy of history and philosophy of art.

Had no fully developed aesthetics, but often wrote critical essays on the arts on painting especially, but also novels, and film.

But it can be said that his entire approach to the human situation was aesthetic and has important implications for aesthetics.

Main concern of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is to explore what it is like to encounter the world in a ‘primordial way’—prior to describing and explaining it in objective, scientific terms. Drawing upon gestalt analysis he proposes that one’s primordial experience is to exist towards things through a living body (thus rejecting Cartesian dualism).
to live is to struggle to achieve an equilibrium with things against the background posed by the
global environment, on the one hand, and one’s ‘body schema’ on the other
it is through this reciprocal interplay between the embodied self and world
that the primary perceptual world itself becomes formed
one is not only an embodied self
but an embodied social being as one’s immediate environment includes others
one’s perceived world is a social world

each bodily movement, each ‘object’ that one sees, each act or performance one carries out
is thus an aesthetic achievement—an expression of the meaning of one’s individual style
the living body is already involved in giving shape and expression to a world
every perception, feeling and action is thus a work of art

It is thus easy to see how a work of art, for Merleau-Ponty, is a kind of expressive body
a poem, novel, painting, a piece of music are, for Merleau-Ponty, individuals—
beings in which it is impossible to distinguish the expressive vehicle from its meaning

works of art thus have a kind of gestural meaning
they exhibit a complex vocabulary and syntax
we comprehend them in much the same way we grasp the meaning of bodily gestures
not by abstract thinking and analysis
but lending our bodies to them
living through their words, lines, colors, sounds

the process of creating artworks is also understood as a pre-reflexive, bodily one
Descartes was wrong
neither in speaking or in painting are there two actions
one of thinking and another of mobilizing the body
on the contrary, one thinks with one’s words, with one’s hands, with brush and paint
the idea is not ‘behind the words’ or ‘behind the painting’ but is ‘in’ the words and the painting

Merleau-Ponty’s thesis is that the possibility of both language and painting rests upon the
primordial, expressive possibilities of the human body

Merleau-Ponty was enamoured of Cézanne
in “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945) he saw a philosopher working with paint
he saw how Cézanne struggled to define his own style in the face of academic painting
with its ‘objective realism’

“What Cézanne finally managed to do, Merleau-Ponty thinks, was to cut through the conceptual biases of
these other styles and, like a faithful phenomenologist, let the solid, weighty, voluminous presence of
perceived things appear. By attending to surfaces and the structures perceptible beneath them, by painting
the modulations of colour at the edges of things and including perspectival distortions, he made canvases in
which these elements ‘are no longer visible in their own right, but rather contribute, as they do in natural
vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before
our eyes’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964c, p. 186)” (284) [Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception]
In his last published work ‘Eye and Mind’ (in The Primacy of Perception) Merleau-Ponty returns to Cézanne, as well as Klee, Matisse and others, to suggest that painting can have an ontological function precisely because painting does not “copy” things and does not offer things to thought as science does but presents them immediately and bodily painting gives us a true sense of the animation of the world and what it means to see it


* * *

Eye and Mind

1

opening paragraph starts out with basic phenomenological perspective wanting to return to the primordial, prereflexive experience of body in a world with others “In this primordial historicity, science’s agile and improvisatory thought will lean to ground itself upon things themselves and upon itself, and will once more become philosophy. . . .” (282)

art, especially painting, gives us access to this primordial experience the writer and philosopher are not able to hold the world suspended (take the phenomenological perspective) music is too far on the other extreme—too far beyond the world....

“Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees” (283)

the reproach of escapism is seldom aimed at the painter recalls with respect Cézanne’s “C’est effrayant, la vie” (Life is terrifying) even when any student since Nietzsche would reject any pessimistic philosophy

what is it about painting...that MP sees as perhaps underlying all culture?

2

begins with emphasis on bodily nature of painting “Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint” (283)

refuses to conceive of vision as an operation of thought (anti-Cartesian perspective) vision is a matter of opening oneself to the world not setting up before the mind a picture or representation of the world
the embodied self is already caught up in the fabric of the world
the primordial experience of this self is undivided
no separation between mind and body, the sensing and the sensed, the self and other

“The body’s animation is not the assemblage or juxtaposition of its parts. Nor is it a question of a mind or spirit coming down from somewhere else into an automaton” (285) [explicit rejection of Descartes]

“Well once this strange system of exchanges is given, we find before us all the problems of painting” (285)
quotes Cézanne “Nature is on the inside”
the point again is that there is no separation between subject and object, self and world

rejects the idea of painting as “imitation” of nature
the image is not a copy

vision looks out from the insides
the eyes are like the “computers of the world”
which have the gift of the visible

“In whatever civilization it is born, from whatever beliefs, motives, or thoughts, no matter what ceremonies surround it—and even when it appears devoted to something else—from Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility” (286).

Painting, for Merleau-Ponty, “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible” (286)

go on to describe painting as a kind of interrogation
not an interrogation by one who knows—not the schoolmaster’s questioning
but rather the question comes from one who does not know

the roles become reversed, the painter is interrogated by the subject of the painting
quotes Marchand (?) “Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me...”

the entire Modern history of painting has a metaphysical significance

what does he mean by “metaphysical significance”? 
That painting illustrates that the Being of the world is not separated from man
painting gives us a sense of “the feeling of mutation within the relations of man and Being” (290).
Suggests an example with Cézanne quotes Giacometti “I believe Cézanne was seeking depth all his life” (290)

MP says we can no longer look at depth as the third dimension
“if it were a dimension, it would be the first one” (290)

“Cézanne knows already what cubism will repeat: that the external form, the envelope, is secondary and derived, that it is not that which causes a thing to take form, that this shell of space must be shattered, this fruit bowl broken and what is there to paint, then? Cubes, spheres, cones (as he said once)? Pure forms which have the solidity of what could be defined by an internal law of construction, forms which all together, as traces or slices of the thing, let it appear between them like a face in the reeds?” (290-291)

Turns then to the problem of color remember that for Descartes and the rest of Modern Philosophy, the world itself is absent of color color is only a secondary quality of things and thus not really in the things but the product of the eye

Merleau-Ponty challenges this way of thought which is based on the sharp division of subject and object, self and world...

The painter’s vision is not a view upon the outside, a merely “physical-optical” relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible. Ultimately the painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all “autofigurative.” It is a spectacle of something only by being a “spectacle of nothing,” by breaking the “skin of things” to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world. (291)

We see here the notion of art as the disclosure of the “invisible genesis of things.” The painter is not an isolated subject trying to imitate or copy a world that is outside of himself. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “[a]rt is not construction, artifice, meticulous relationship to a space and a world existing outside” (292). The world becomes world through an artistic vision. This seems to echo Nietzsche’s remark: “Why couldn’t the world that concerns us be a fiction?”

This notion is further developed in his reflections on the line in painting:

It is simply a matter of freeing the line, of revivifying its constituting power; and we are not faced with a contradiction when we see it reappear and triumph in painters like Klee or Matisse, who more than anyone believed in color. For henceforth, as Klee said, the line no longer imitates the visible, it “renders visible”; it is the blueprint of the genesis of things. Perhaps no one before Klee had “let a line muse.” (293)

painting is clearly no longer a matter of elementary representation

In view of this situation, two alternatives are open, and it makes little difference which one is chosen. First, the painter may, like Klee, decide to hold rigorously to the principle of the genesis of the visible, the principle of fundamental, indirect, or—as Klee used to say—absolute painting, and then leave it up to the title to designate by its prosaic name the entity thus constituted, in order to leave the painting free to
function more purely as painting. Or alternatively he may choose with Matisse (in his drawings) to put into a single line both the prosaic definition [signalement] of the entity and the hidden [sourde] operation which composes in it such softness or inertia and such force as are required to constitute it as nude, as face, as flower. (293)

Later on Merleau-Ponty reflects on Rodin and the problem of movement
draws out an interesting contrast between art and photography
is this contrast still relevant?
Reflects on a painting, Epsom Derby, of horses:

Rodin said very wisely, “It is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph is mendacious; for, in reality, time never stops cold.” 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. But 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. . . .” (295)

This passage perhaps sums up Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “vision” that painting makes visible:

Now perhaps we have a better sense of what is meant by that little verb “to see.” Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present at the fission of Being from the inside—the fission at whose termination, and not before, I come back to myself. (295)

what is meant by the “fission of Being”?  
Here he means the separation of subject and object, this splitting apart of Being 
the notion of self comes after this “fission of Being” 
the “vision” in painting comes before 
it comes in this primordial, pre-reflexive experience in which there is no purely subjective self and objective world  

A Cartesian can believe that the existing world is not visible, that the only light is that of the mind, and that all vision takes place in God. A painter cannot grant that our openness to the world is illusory or indirect, that what we see is not the world itself, or that the mind has to do only with its thoughts or with another mind. He accepts with all its difficulties the myth of the windows of the soul....” (295)