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Seeing, Painting and Art

I

In his now already classical book *Vision and Painting* from 1983 Norman Bryson disputed what he saw as some of the standard tenets of art history. His opening argument concerning traditional art history was that from their very beginning in antiquity Western views on painting consist of the desire to create a »perfect copy«: from Pliny through renaissance and Dante to Ernst Gombrich Bryson detected this desire to create a painting – and, to do this, to discover the perfect technique for its execution – that would enable us to reproduce the perceived in a truthful way. From the times of Zeuxis's pictorial rendering of grapes which misled the birds into believing they were real to the modern age, painting is »thought of as a rivalry between technicians for the production of a replica so perfect that art will take the palm from nature. (...) The difficulties confronted by the painter are executive and concern the fidelity of his registration of the world before him.«[1] The painter's task is to mirror the reality before him, to carry out in painting what in geometry and in optics the renaissance development – or, in accordance with such thinking, »discovery« – of perspective offered to the painter. It is understandable that within such a context painting is a craft, and that the notion of creation is reserved for the divine being. The perceived and the represented are one and the same. All human beings possess in principle the same perceptual faculties and share the same visual field, a common technique of rendering a representation of the perceived is therefore possible. Renaissance developments in the arts and sciences, the latter offering the former tools for a truthful rendition of the perceived world, for the so-called »*construzione legittima*, the perspective called 'correct' or 'exact',«[2] offer the hope of the further diminution of the chasm between the painting and what Bryson calls »the Essential Copy« – the perfect replica.

For Bryson the problem with art history was the holding on to opinions

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[1] Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1983, pp. 1 and 3.

[2] Hubert Damisch, *L'origine de la perspective*, Flammarion, Paris 1993, p. 107.

Filozofski vestnik, XVII (2/1996), pp. 25-43.

such as the ones presented above. Illustrating this with the work of Ernst Gombrich (although at the same time presenting the latter's writings as »a transitional aesthetics«) Bryson pointed out that Gombrich was, by accepting as his epistemological credo Popper's theory of verification and falsification, effectively ascribing to, or developing, an art history which found its evaluative criterion in a hypothesis of a continued progress towards the Essential Copy, a progress driven by novel demands upon schematic conventions of image-making,[3] and hence a »provisional and interim improvement on the existing corpus of hypotheses or schemata, improved because tested against the world, through falsification«.[4]

Art history is firmly rooted within the modern epistemological horizon. It also ascribes to an Aristotelian poetics which is also visible from resemblances between Aristotle's and Gombrich's presentation of mimesis: for Aristotle mimesis is one of the features that distinguish humans from beasts, by mimetic activity we learn, and »a reproduced object invokes pleasure in all people«.[5] Gombrich expresses the same thought: »The pleasure is in recognition.«[6]

Problems concerning art history, such as those discussed by Bryson, are related to its epistemological status since its constitution a century ago and its inclusion into a modernist scheme of reflective thinking. In other words, art history has probably, just as traditional aesthetics, as a modernist discipline emptied itself in the form we have become used to in the first half of this century and has been, just as rationalist philosophy, caught in that same tradition which is most often identified with Cartesian perspectivalism and its dependency upon monocular and abstract vision and optics, not to mention its philosophical dualism. Since the aim of painting under discussion is primarily cognitive – the rendering of a representation in such a way that a recognized meaning is established, since Alberti this being accomplished with the use of perspectival mechanisms – the aim of the artist is to accomplish a pictorial technique which will be, as *a procedure*, hidden from our scrutinizing eyes and will offer to our gaze only the picture itself as a complete whole. What is then called »perspectiva artificialis«, the »perspective of the painters as it is distinguished from the perspectiva naturalis of authors of the Middle Ages, the theory of direct vision, reflected or refracted (...), is as such confused with that of optics.«[7] Nonetheless, *perspectiva artificialis* had to be as-

[3] Cf. Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b.
[6] E.H. Gombrich, *The Image and the Eye*, Phaidon, Oxford 1982, p. 122.
[7] Damisch, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

sisted by the two-point perspective (or »*construzione legittima*«) for it was found insufficient by itself, when confronted with continuous attempts to appropriate it within the conceptual field of the monocular and static eye of optics. Hence even Descartes himself in *Dioptrics* pays special attention to visual errors, mentioning that often circles are better represented by ovals and that »often to be more perfect as concerns the quality of images and to better represent an object, they must not resemble it.«[8] A related story is recounted by Pliny in connection with a competition between Alcamenes and Phidias for a sculpture of Minerva which was to sit on top of a tall pillar. »Alcamenes sculpted a harmonious sculpture and Phidias a figure with deformed limbs, with a gaping mouth and a stretched neck. On the day of the exhibition the first received the votes, while his rival was stoned. But the situation was reversed when the sculptures were put in their place. Installed on top of the pillar, Phidias's statue acquired great beauty, while the other became an object of derision.«[9] As even a hasty glance upon the elevated sculptures and facades of churches and medieval towns attests, the practicing sculptors and architects were very conscious of the need to accommodate the observer's gaze and its peculiarities, which often diverged from the geometrical and optical laws imposed by the monocular static gaze and even from the two-point perspective. The limitations of the »perfect copy« were imposed also by the intrusion of the body.

In paintings, engravings or drawings a special case were the anamorphoses, today the best-known among them certainly being that of a skull on Hans Holbein's »Two Ambassadors«. Anamorphism is a case of pictorial representation requiring a different perspectival vantage point. Other »scopic regimes« range from Dutch and baroque painting to El Lissitzky.[10]

Examples such as anamorphoses witness that perceived objects, if they are to offer »true« representations, i.e. such that our perception will accept them as such, must often resort to devices that visibly diverge from rules that are in accordance with the monocular static gaze. Artists have to resort to all kinds of gimmicks to make adjustments for the pair of human eyes which

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[8] Descartes, *La Dioptrique* (*Oeuvres et lettres*), Gallimard, Paris 1952, p. 204.

[9] Quoted in Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Anamorphoses. Les perspectives dépravées – II*, Flammarion, Paris 1996, p. 19.

[10] This topic was most fully developed by Martin Jay in the essay »Scopic Regimes of Modernity« in *Force Fields*, Routledge, London 1993; cf. also Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1983; Christine Buci-Glucks-mann *La folie de voir: De l'esthétique baroque*, Flammarion, Paris 1986; on Lissitzky see Damisch, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

gaze at their works from various positions, distances and angles: heads of sculptures lowered more or less than normally, eyes in different positions within the face, taller or shorter figures, adjustments for different vantage points, etc. – these are all compensations artists have to make for the fact that human sight is not a mechanic optical instrument, but an integral part of the human *body*.

Bryson based his critique of the »natural attitude« – the belief that perspectival painting is through most of history of painting considered the most appropriate, exact, scientific and true – on Husserl's description of such an attitude within sciences.[11] Husserl's attempt to retract the Cartesian dualism and »return to things themselves« was related to his belief that philosophy is essentially seeing. *Wesenschau*, intuition, is visual, although it is far removed from ocularcentrism of modern science and Cartesianism. Instead, phenomenology wants to regain the unity of the object and the subject which was obliterated by that very same Cartesianism and which, furthermore, caused also the emergence of the »natural attitude« of modern sciences criticized by Husserl.

What Bryson seems to have offered as an alternative to the art of Western art history as a history of the development of the »Essential Copy«, was a history of art as that »of painting as a *material practice*«.[12] If, pointed out Bryson, art history, or any theory for that matter, were to be able to attain this aim, it should have taken into consideration the role of the human body in the execution of a painting: it no longer suffices for us to perceive a painting as a *result*, ignoring at the same time the procedure (»material practice«) that led to it. Instead, we should heed this practice as well as the bodily framework within which and with the visible help of which this deed is accomplished. Bryson suggests traditional Chinese painting as a positive example of the way in which the bodily determination of a painting is to be perceived: the visible way in which brushstrokes were executed and the fact that the strokes are not only vehicles of a technique but are simultaneously also directly the expressive means of painting as such. Western painting is instead purportedly essentially offered to our gaze as a static scene, presented to our monocular vision. Classical painting, executed in accordance with the perspectival rules, furthermore offers what Kaja Silverman ascribes to still photograph: »Whereas the moving image consigns what it depicts to oblivion, the still photograph gives us access to a stable and durable image of self.«[13] It is this feature of

[11] Cf. Bryson, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5 et passim.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[13] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Routledge, New York 1996, p. 198.

painting as well, i.e., the representational stability which it can offer to the subject, that precludes classical Western painting to tread the same path as its Chinese counterpart. Bryson argues that European painting disclaims what he called »deictic markers«,[14] marks of the bodily inscription into the representation: »Western painting is predicated on *the disavowal of deictic reference*, on the disappearance of the body as site of the image; and this twice over: for the painter, and for the viewing subject. (...) [I]f China and Europe possess the two most ancient traditions of representational painting, the traditions nevertheless bifurcate, from the beginning, at the point of deixis.«[15]

If, then, one of Chinese painting's salient features is the visible trace of the existence of the artist's body within the picture itself, from where does then this feature arise? Why is it that »[t]he work of production is constantly displayed in the wake of its traces; [that] in this tradition the body of labour is on constant display, just as it is judged in terms which, in the West, would apply only to a *performing* art«?[16] Far from wishing to engage in a discussion concerning Chinese art, I would nevertheless like to point out that obviously the European tradition, or at least its more recent part, is not necessarily thus far removed from the kind of painting that Bryson is here opposing to the more classical Western painting. I shall develop this argument in Parts II and IV.

As François Cheng explains, the Chinese art »always tends to recreate a total macrocosm where the prime unificatory action of the Breath-Spirit, or the Emptiness itself, far from being synonymous with the vague or arbitrary, is the internal place where the grid of vital breaths is established. We witness here a system which proceeds more by integration of successive contributions than by ruptures. The Stroke of the Brush, the art of which is carried by painters to an extreme degree of refinement, incarnating the One and the Multiple in the measure in which it is identified with the original Breath and with all of its metamorphoses, contributes no less to this permanence of a tirelessly pursued signifying practice.«[17] Since a painting is a microcosm related to the macrocosm and is simultaneously its integral part, the emptiness within a painting is not »an inert presence [but] is traversed by breaths linking the visible world [the painted space] with the invisible one«.[18] As the author explains, the empty space of the picture mediates between its various

[14] Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[17] François Cheng, *Vide et plein. Le langage pictural chinois*, Seuil, Paris 1991, p. 10.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

elements – between the Mountain and the Water for example, the relation between which would otherwise appear rigid and static. An additional element is brought into the picture since the T'ang dynasty (618-907), when painters commenced to introduce poems into the white empty space of their pictures. The poem »is not a simple, artificially added commentary; it inhabits a real space (there is no hiatus between the calligraphed signs and the painted elements, for they both come from the same brush), introducing into the picture a living dimension, that of Time.«[19] The world is a whole, therefore the emptiness in the picture, which depicts a fragmentary part of this wholeness, represents the invisible which structures relations within the visible itself, and is consequently just as crucial as the painted surfaces. In this way painting witnesses to the cosmological unity; it is hence no wonder that »[i]n China, of all the arts, painting occupies the supreme place«.[20]

II

Reading Bryson, especially his book *Vision and Painting* from which I quoted above, as well as *Tradition and* Desire (1984), and hence his critique of art history and some of its tenets, arguing for a painting and theory thereof which would not only, at most, take into consideration the optically »deficient« gaze of the viewer but also corporeal marks of the painter (illustrating the two sides by classical European painting on the one hand and Chinese on the other), one is continuously reminded of a philosopher and a painter who both pursued a similar aim. The pair of course is that of Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne. As in the case of Bryson, Merleau-Ponty too criticizes the »natural attitude« admonished by Husserl and carries this out not only in the realm of science but foremostly in the realm of painting[21] which he sees not only as

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

[20] Cf. Cheng, *op. cit.*, p. 11n.

[21] »[T]he classical perspective is only one of the ways humanity has invented for projecting the perceived world before itself, and not the copy of that world. The classical perspective is an optional interpretation of spontaneous vision, not because the perceived world contradicts the laws of classical perspective and imposes others, but rather because it does not require any particular one, and is not of the order of laws.« – Merleau-Ponty, »Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence«, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader. Philosophy and Painting* (ed. and intr. by Galen A. Johnson), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill. 1993, p. 86.
A perhaps even more revealing passage concerning *perspectiva artificialis* can be found in the »Eye and Mind« essay: »[T]he painters knew from experience that no technique of perspective is an exact solution and there is no projection of the existing

related to the first, but as showing its inherent truth, a truth which was distorted in the renaissance artistic tradition. Merleau-Ponty's aim was – and remained – Husserl's credo to »return to things themselves«: »To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.«[22] For Merleau-Ponty it is foremost painting which offers a privileged access to what he will later start calling Being. Although philosophy is, like art »the act of bringing truth into being«,[23] »art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore. Art and only art does so in full innocence. (...) [We want] the writer and the philosopher (...) to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of humans who speak.«[24]

It was very consistent with such views that Merleau-Ponty's (as well as Heidegger's) existential phenomenology had to end in a poeticized discourse which attempted to emulate the world, to avoid the »abstract and derivative sign-language« which is always a discourse *on* the world. What philosophy can do is open our eyes to the world and make us conscious of its own limitations and limits: »A philosophy becomes transcendental, or radical, not by taking its place in absolute consciousness without mentioning the ways by which this is reached, but by considering itself as a problem; not by postulating a knowledge rendered totally explicit, but by recognizing as its fundamental transcendental philosophic problem this *presumption* on reason's part.«[25] A part of this »presumption on reason's part« is also the belief into

world which respects it in all aspects and deserves to become the fundamental law of painting. For example, the Italians took the way of representing the object, but the Northern painters discovered and worked out the formal technique of *Hochraum*, *Nahraum*, and *Schrägraum*. Thus plane projection does not always stimulate our thought to rediscover the true form of things, as Descartes believed. Beyond a certain degree of deformation, it refers us back, on the contrary to our own vantage point; as for the things, they flee into a remoteness out of reach of all thought. Something about space evades our attempts to survey it from above.« (»Eye and Mind«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 135.) An analysis of the decentralized organization of visual space of the »Northern painters«, implying links between such painting and optical developments of the time, is offered by Svetlana Alpers in her book *The Art of Describing: Dutch Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (cf. note 10).

22 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Preface), Routledge, London 1995, p. ix.

23 *Ibid.*, p. xx.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, »Eye and Mind«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 123.

25 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 63.

what Bryson will later call the »Essential Copy«, a belief that an authentic and universally valid rendering of the perceived world is possible through pictorial representation. To constrain the attempts of reason to distance itself, as absolute consciousness, from the perceived world which not only surrounds it but of which it is, itself, an integral part, philosophy must start at the closest possible starting point, which is one's own body. Contrary to Descartes, who established an infinite distance between the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans*, Merleau-Ponty is one of the first philosophers not only to emphasize the necessity of theorizing consciousness as a part of our corporeal being (such views abound already in the nineteenth century, in Marx, among others) – incessantly presenting this argument throughout most of his *oeuvre* – but, furthermore, to »embody« his views within his interpretations of the works of painters (and occasionally sculptors), hence arguing for a perceptual and corporeal inscription of a painter within his picture and, also, of its viewer with whom the painter purportedly shares the visual field.

As in Chinese culture, in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy too, painting is a privileged art form. As Merleau-Ponty argues in the *Preface* to *Phenomenology of Perception*, »[t]o seek the essence of perception is to declare that perception is, not presumed true, but defined as access to truth. (...) We must not (...) wonder whether we really perceive a world, we must instead say: the world is what we perceive.«[26] A privileged form of perception is vision. In this respect Merleau-Ponty follows in Husserl's steps and shares certain traits of Heidegger's philosophy. Although Heidegger criticizes in 1938, in the essay by the same name, the modern »time of the world picture« and privileges the word and hearing over the image and vision, a few years earlier he not only uses a picture – a van Gogh painting – to explain his understanding of an artwork, but generally regards the Greek cultural universe as that of an unsurpassed existential authenticity – with this same world also being that within which commenced the ocularcentrism of the Western civilization. Still, for Heidegger, the word (language) nevertheless remains the most authentic form of communication and, of course, the precondition of thought. In Merleau-Ponty's similar, but differently oriented philosophy, an authenticity such as that which Heidegger finds in poetry, is revealed in painting. It is not the language which is »the house of Being«; instead »[t]he eye lives in this texture [of Being] as a man in his house«.[27]

Both in the case of Chinese painting and in Cézanne's case (as interpreted by Merleau-Ponty, but often explicitly supported by citations from

[26] *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
[27] Merleau-Ponty, »Eye and Mind«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 127.

Cézanne's own statements) the painter is someone who strives to present and represent the holistic unity of the invisible and the visible, the presence of a temporal or spatial absence in what is perceived as presence – this also being the reason for Merleau-Ponty's disavowal of photography.[28] When Bryson discovers in a Chinese landscape painting the landscape to be the subject and, equally, the subject to be »the work of the brush in 'real time' and (...) a[n] extension of the painter's own body«,[29] may we not say that something similar is true of Cézanne's juxtaposition of individual brush strokes[30] or Rodin's practice of rendering visible the connecting welds of his sculptures? It would seem that Merleau-Ponty's presentation of Cézanne's paintings (as well as Rodin's or Giacometti's sculptures) shows certain similarities with that which Bryson offers in connection with Chinese painting and which he simultaneously presents as a positive alternative to the stance of traditional art history and of classical perspectival painting in Europe, an alternative he tries to complement with a different reflective vantage point, one which will accentuate the »deictic reference«, and therefore the body as an uncircumventable theoretic subject. It would therefore seem that (at least in the 1983 book) what Bryson attempts to propose or defend, is to a large extent already present in Merleau-Ponty's own early work.

It may be that although Merleau-Ponty has adumbrated many of Lacan's theses in his *Seminar XI* and elsewhere, his philosophical stature may have been reduced by the poeticized language (or what Bryson called the »heights

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[28] The most explicit disclaimer of Marey's photography as a prototype of photography as such is probably that from the »Eye and Mind« essay. It could be argued though that Merleau-Ponty does a disservice to photography, for he views it only as an impartial (»scientific«) visual recording device, hence ignoring the fact that in his own time (the essay was written in August 1960) photography surpassed the perceptual (and creative) horizon of Marey's photographic experiments and that it was therefore rather simplistic to reduce it to the stature of Descartes's engravings and camera obscura.

[29] Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[30] Bryson's accentuation of the traces of the brush strokes perhaps warrants a comment, for while in European painting the »deictic markers« may not be as omnipresent as in the Chinese one, it is nonetheless true that the artist's *style* or painterly writing is often quite unique. Merleau-Ponty thus mentions that »[t]he writing of Michelangelo is attributed to Raphael in 36 cases, but is correctly identified in 221 cases. We therefore recognize a certain structure which is common to voice, to physiognomy, to gestures and to the walk of each person, each person is for us nothing but this structure or this manner of being in the world.« – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, »Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie«, in *Sens et non-sens*, Gallimard, Paris 1996, p. 68.

of lyricism«[31]) of his late writings and, finally, by the waning of interest in phenomenological aesthetics or philosophy of art in recent decades. A good case in point may be Lyotard's early phenomenological work *Discours, figure* (1971) whose aim was, as Lyotard explains much later, primarily to challenge the onslaught of Lacanian privileging of the Symbolic and of relegating all art to the domain of the Imaginary[32] and hence ideology. Lyotard later abandoned phenomenology, obviously sensing that it doesn't offer the appropriate theoretical apparatus for analysis of radical artists of our century, such as Duchamp. As Forrest Williams writes in 1954, »[d]ue to whatever common cultural formations that may serve to link philosophical thought and artistic insight, the dominant philosophical system in France today known as 'phenomenology', and in particular, that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, on the one hand, and the art of Cézanne, on the other hand, appear to agree in origin, method and outcome. Their common origin was a response to a certain subjectivism of much of nineteenth-century art and philosophy; their common method, to search by minute scrutiny of their own experience for the outwardly given, objectively real; and their common achievement, to have avoided the opposite of extreme subjectivism, by discovering the real as the invariant structure of a given appearance.«[33] Nonetheless, while Cézanne retained his place in contemporary art history, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of him, his work, as well as his own philosophy of the perceived and the seen, both appear problematic, for they offer an analysis and a presentation that increasingly appear caught within the confines and limitations of its own (phenomenological) framework. After initial ingenious applications of Husserl's (and partly Heidegger's) phenomenology to the realms of perception, combined with perceptive insights into the logic of painting and the gaze, the late Merleau-Ponty increasingly strove to attain the impossible discursive articulation of Being, drifting in this way into the direction of a potential silence.[34] His discourse on Cézanne often appears caught within the realm of that very same undifferentiated framework of the Cartesian subject and, consequently, within the discourse on the artistic genius of the first half of this

[31] Norman Bryson, *Tradition and Desire. From David to Delacroix*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1984, p. 65.

[32] Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations. Law, Form, Event*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988, pp. 10-11.

[33] Forrest Williams, »Cézanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty«, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 165.

[34] For a discussion of this issue in Merleau-Ponty and its relations to Schelling, see Robert Burch, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 353 *et passim*, as well as Slavoj $i#ek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, Verso, London 1996, esp. pp. 50-51.

century that preceded psychoanalysis.[35] Merleau-Ponty's privileging of the body and of the corporeal features of the act of painting appears insufficient when confronted with the formidable task of presenting the absolute, for all he seems to have at his disposal – or offers – is a philosophy which privileges the visual as presented to us mainly through the pictorial representations of a modernist painter. With his late, especially the posthumously published writings, he furthermore gives the impression, just as the late Heidegger, of his discourse closing upon itself: his Being is static, his rejection of science universal, his discourse intentionally more and more ambiguous and cryptic, while the previously conceptually clear notions related to perception, painting, visibility and the gaze, although perhaps burdened with a »metaphysics of presence« when endowed with an ontological status and transposed into extra-perceptional realms, are replaced by those of the flesh, with philosophy becoming »Being speaking in us«, and literature being analyzed as an »inscription of Being«.[36] How can »a meaningful human world be constituted out of pure visibility«[37] and how can the quest for the reunification of the subject and object, devoid of an historical perspective as it is, transgress the limits of existentially designated artistic and aesthetic experience? I shall return to this topic in the closing part of this paper.

III

In March 1945 Merleau-Ponty held a lecture on the »Cinema and the New Psychology«, which he ended with an observation similar to that made in 1954 by Forrest Williams; it concerned not Cézanne but the cinema: »If (...) philosophy and the cinema are in agreement, if reflection and technical work go in the same direction, this is so because the philosopher and the cinema maker share a certain manner of being, a certain view of the world

[35] In Merleau-Ponty's late writings such – and similar – issues appear obfuscated, such as in the following note from October 1959: »[T]o paint, draw, is not to produce something from nothing, the trace, the touch of the brush, and the visible work are but a trace of a total movement of the Speech, which comes from the total Being and this movement embraces expression by strokes, as well as expression by colors, as well as *my* expression and that of other painters.« – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Gallimard, Paris 1964, p. 265.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

[37] Robert Burch, »On the Topic of Art and Truth«, in *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 367.

which is that of the same generation.«[38] The »new psychology« from the title of the lecture is equal, or essentially related, to Merleau-Ponty's own philosophical work, for in his early work both psychology and philosophy constitute the same phenomenology. The »philosopher« mentioned at the end is therefore Merleau-Ponty the phenome-nologist who finds congeniality with Cézanne, Matisse, Paul Klee or Rodin whose works explemplify in the highest degree his views on perception, with this perception being our venue into the lived world of which we are an indissociable organic part.

What the art of these artists has in common with the cinema is that now they both represent *traditional art forms*. The cinema today is one of the very few art forms that retains its technically and ontologically distinct status, just as does classical sculpture and easel painting. Much of visual art or visual culture today is incessantly disrupting our established notions of art, limiting the unreserved ascription of the status of »art« primarily to the art of the pre-modernist and modernist period. In *such* art it is not difficult to discover the existential attributes perceived and described by Merleau-Ponty in paintings, sculptures or even cinema. In modernism and high modernism the seen – although in certain cases criticized or opposed, as in Duchamp or conceptual art – is not yet problematic. »Anti-ocular« discourse is only emerging and Merleau-Ponty's »celebration of vision«, supported with concrete psychological analyses and experiments, is a helpful theory which attracts and influences aestheticians and philosophers as well as painters and sculptors. His theory in this respect shares the special place phenomenology in general and existential phenomenology in particular occupies until the advent of structuralism, for the existential phenomenology in particular not only views art as an exemplary but also as a privileged eruption of authenticity in the modern technological world.[39] It hence answers to a deeper need of artists and their public for a discourse that pays attention to what could be called the »specificity of art«: it assigns to art works either a central ontological position or an independent ontological status – a designation of a paramount importance in a century of ideological master narratives. Phenomenology furthermore acknowledges the interchanging role of experience and talent, the interplay between consciousness and subconsciousness and the driftings of the mind between the future, the past, the present and fantasy, the latter being conflated

[38] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, »Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie«, *Sens et non-sens*, p. 75.

[39] A similar position, but emerging from a very different background, is that of Adorno, Marcuse and the line of defenders of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art in post-war Germany, who all view art as a unique locus of authenticity in an otherwise commodified world.

in Merleau-Ponty's notion of the static »Being«. The location of this »primordial« exchange is what is now usually described as the domain of the Imaginary, a distinction which effectively relegated the whole realm of art to this domain. A good example of perception that Merleau-Ponty has in mind and on which he bases the privileged status of painting, is an example he offers in »Eye and Mind«: »When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it *as* it is and where it is – which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place.«[40] It is such scenes that the painter paints and understands beneath the words *depth, space* and *color*, continues Merleau-Ponty. How to capture such a vivid presentation with theoretical notions? It is obvious that the only possibility open to us is to emulate the very nature of such an image, that is to say, render it poetically, »lyrically«, non-theoretically, in short, proving by this very gesture Merleau-Ponty's thesis about the totalizing nature of our experience and showing that the cogito can never exist within the same reflective framework as the perceptual experience just offered by Merleau-Ponty. The opposition to a purely scientific description of this view draws him into a defense of art and into an attack on the Cartesian tradition which would see in the above scene the refraction of light as the only relevant aspect.

It was the advent of Derrida's criticism of an ahistorical »presence«, on which hinged phenomenological tradition, and of psychoanalysis, which deconstructed the relatively stable transcendental nature of noematic reflection, which signalled the decline of phenomenology and its privileging of art, be it poetry or painting. As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology contained an inbuilt self-destructing mechanism which emerged only slowly from his early works which offered an insightful analysis of perception and deficiencies of its past theories (and sometimes practices). It is only later, and especially in the posthumous works, that the need of clarifying perception and the overcoming of Cartesian dualism is replaced with an explicit aim of overcoming the split between the authentically experienced and its philosophical reflection – but without offering any historically, socially, empirically and therefore extra-artistically determined reality as its final aim and, at the same time, increasingly revealing itself as a pure form of transcendental philosophy. It is to the discourse of philosophy that is assigned the difficult and yet limited task of endowing the direct and primitive contact with the world (as it existed before the split into subject and object) with a philosophi-

[40] Merleau-Ponty, »Eye and Mind«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 142.

cal status. »I found«, writes Merleau-Ponty in 1952, »in the experience of the perceived world a new type of relation between the mind [*ésprit*] and truth. The evidence of the perceived thing lies in its concrete aspect, in the very texture of its qualities, and in the equivalence among all its sensible properties – which caused Cézanne to say that one should be able to paint even odors.«[41] It appears as if here Merleau-Ponty is primarily concerned with a novel approach to perception. It needs nonetheless be mentioned that this perception is first and foremost experience and that through this notion Merleau-Ponty at the same time introduces phenomenology into his discourse on perception, while simultaneously distinguishing himself from Husserl; for the former experience of phenomena is an evidently empirical and embodied »experience of the perceived world« and its phenomena, while for Husserl phenomena come »from within the immanent history of consciousness«.[42] In his late writings the phenomenological analysis of perception, especially in its relation to painting, is (with a few exceptions, such as most of the »Eye and Mind«, essay) almost wholly replaced by an existential phenomenology in which the author's discourse strives to express the unsayable.

IV

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in practice never disclaimed the traditional belief into a unified subject; although it was not cogito, it remained transcendentally conceived. The problem as such could not really arise within such a philosophical framework, since in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology Husserl's noematic reflection, which the former wholeheartedly accepted, »remains within the object and, instead of begetting it, brings to light its fundamental unity«.[43] The problem of the subject is hence dissolved in the eternal transcendental unity of the subject and the object, a unity, in Merleau-Ponty's view, so well carried out by painting. It is up to philosophy to reveal it, bring this unity to light and continually keep our eyes open to it. Nonetheless, the person perceiving is an empirical and an embodied subject, who retains his/her psychological unity of the *Gestalt*. It is here that psychoanalysis stepped in and deconstructed the actual transcendental ego of Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology: even if Merleau-Ponty enthusiastically quoted

[41] Quoted in Burch, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 357.

[42] Galen A. Johnson, »Introduction to Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting«, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 8.

[43] Merleau-Ponty, »Preface«, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. x.

Cézanne or Klee saying, »Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me«,[44] Jacques Lacan interpreted the relation between the gaze and the perceived world very differently, arguing in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (Seminar XI)*, applying the same Sartre's metaphor of the voyeur which Merleau-Ponty also used, that the gaze and the look are in an incessant exchange, causing the subject to be an unstable and continuously deconstructed and reconstructed entity and that it is the mediating role of language, of the Symbolic, which also determines the visible and the gaze.[45]

Lacan's interpretation of the gaze and the look from this 1964 seminar has been subjected to innumerable and divergent interpretations. In it Lacan gives his due to Merleau-Ponty and to his insistence that objects return the gaze, but he ascribes to the object the function of the »look« which imaginarily looks at us from the position of the Other. Lacan furthermore points out what Merleau-Ponty has also insisted upon, that is, that the geometral space of our perception – not necessarily a visual one – differs from that of our gaze which conceives its specific visual field on the basis of which we perceive the world and objects in it. It is for this reason that, as Merleau-Ponty shows on innumerable occasions, in paintings the visual field causes Cézanne's tables to spread out or curve, or that the painter shows to us the interior of an ashtray, although normally it would be invisible to us, etc. The picture, to represent in such a way that our visual perception will abide by perception proffered by language, must show presence through absence, must represent or render it visible indirectly. Merleau-Ponty twice[46] approvingly cites Cézanne explaining how he must paint a motif from Balzac's novel: not by showing the most eye-catching element and its traits, but those that surround it. The invisibility thus rendered, will bring forth the »tablecloth white as a layer of fresh-fallen snow«. This may be the same kind of mediating visibility as that to which François Cheng was referring.[47] In other words, and as already observed, Cézanne's or Rodin's works (or those of Francis Bacon, for example), reveal similar »deictic markers« as those that Bryson pointed to in the case of Chinese brush painting. This similarity points to a changed relation between the world and the transcendental ego than was the one that existed within the Cartesian tradition. In other words, the previously mentioned similarity be-

[44] Merleau-Ponty, »Eye and Mind«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 129.
[45] Cf. also Bryson, *Tradition and Desire*, pp. 66-67.
[46] *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 197-198; »Cézanne's Doubt«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 66.
[47] Cf. above, note 18.

tween Cézanne's work and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology reveals a deeper similarity between the work of some of the key figures of modern European art and phenomenology to which Bryson ascribes »the greatest maturity«[48] when it comes to what he calls »the *human* dimension of visuality«. The reason for Merleau-Ponty's description of Cézanne's work in terms which so much resemble those of Chinese painting, is his understanding of the relation between the transcendental ego and the world, for they both represent a whole which is, at least in this respect, very similar to the Chinese perception of the world and of our own place within it. It therefore appears that Bryson could well discover examples of art as »material practice« already within the modern and modernist tradition of European painting and sculpture.

It is at this point that I would like to introduce the question of authenticity of seeing. Bryson is correct in stressing the »Western myth of seeing«[49] and its historical construction, which were both also so forcefully criticized by Merleau-Ponty. What Bryson finds lacking in Merleau-Ponty is what Lacan introduced into his analysis of the gaze, namely the social dimension of seeing, the vehicle of which is language. »We can never directly experience the visual field of another human being – that much is certain: the only knowledge of another visual field, which we are able to acquire, is that which comes through *description.* Such description proves that others also see what we see, but the definition of what *is* seen originates, therefore, not in the visual field itself, but in language: originates outside sight, in the signs of the description (...).«[50] The »conscious experience ha[s] a strictly *individual* character, in the double sense that it is the experience of a situated and dated individual, and that it is itself an experience which cannot be reproduced.«[51] Could not the desire to achieve a perfect copy, to achieve »the pleasure of recognition« be at least partly explained also by the consciousness of the impossibility to achieve such an aim? The inability to »directly experience the visual field of another human being« in no way prevents identification and an essentially similar or »shared« experience. What I therefore see with my own eyes is even within my own experience a fleeting event, but one which can nonetheless be, within such an individual or even collective experience, immediately and eternally *recognizable.* The gaze or the glance of my own eyes is determined by the specific features of sight and our shared visual history. It is within these that our common experience – of painting, for example – is

[48] Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[51] Jean-François Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1991, p. 77.

perhaps, when it comes to more recent art, not dissimilar to that offered for example by Chinese art. If this is true, this signifies some broader common denominator which transgresses culturally determined borders. It may be time, once again, instead of seeing differences, to distinguish certain common features in art.

Merleau-Ponty's account of painting leaves one thing unaccounted for and that is how to establish any qualitative relationship within the fine arts or painting as such, even when it comes to an individual painter. Since he ignores the historical and the social dimensions of art, the only aesthetic evaluation possible is one that is based on existential experience of us being one with the world. For this reason, and since in his works he mostly talks about art either in very general terms or comments upon individual artists, mostly when they support his phenomenology of perception and related philosophical theses, it would be actually difficult to call his phenomenology aesthetics in the traditional sense. We cannot dispute though, that his presentation of visual and pictorial representation and perception strongly influenced artists and aestheticians (from early Lyotard to Mikel Dufrenne) and that in spite of his theory being mainly concerned with art as a means of accentuating his philosophical theses, and his statements about the unique place of art within the lived world being primarily statements to be accepted at their face value, his theory remains strongly dependent upon perception of art as a paramount example and venue of begetting the consciousness of our place in the world and our embodiment therein. But, again, this is done by hypothesizing the existence of a unified subject – or transcendental ego – which perceives art. While Merleau-Ponty strongly admonishes the thesis of classical perspective being the most appropriate one,[52] he nevertheless puts forth the claim that it »is nonetheless possible that Cézanne conceived a form of art which, while occasioned by his nervous condition, is valid for everyone«.[53] It remains open what weight this statement carries and in which ways can it be universalized as I suggested above, but it does reveal that Merleau-Ponty had in mind a unified subject as a prototype of the perceiving transcendental ego. Lacanian psychoanalysis thoroughly deconstructs the notion of such a unified subject. Or as Jean Hyppolite has commented in Lacan's seminar in 1954/55 about the Gestalt when discussing Merleau-Ponty, this is, »basically a phenomenology of the imaginary in the sense in which we employ the term.«[54] No won-

[52] Cf. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 86 and above, note 21.

[53] »Cézanne's Doubt«, *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 61.

[54] Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire II. Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, Seuil, Paris 1978, p. 100.

der, therefore, that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological interpretation of the transcendental ego, in spite of it being conflated with the world in its different guises, suffered the same destiny as the notion of art itself, i.e., being proclaimed to be a remnant of humanist (and basically ideological – or »idealist«) way of thinking.

Does the fact that Merleau-Ponty never attempted to establish any normative hierarchy within art which would exceed that which is common to existential phenomenology as a whole, represent a deficiency of his philosophy or, to the contrary, a consciousness of the impossibility or obsoleteness of such an endeavor? Or does his incessant linkage of the perceptual and the artistic (the visually perceived and painting) simply show that art is but a special or privileged aspect of the lived world as such? Does the fact that Lyotard in his 1971 book *Discours, figure* attempted to continue Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological presentation of art and of the visible, so as to counter Lacan's privileging of the Symbolic at the expense of the Imaginary, but then gave up such an endeavor, witness to its impossibility?

All of these questions require complex answers, all of which are crucial not only for a theory of perception, but especially for any contemporary discussion of art. Authors in other areas have come to the conclusion that some of the traditionally »unscientific« and disregarded notions, similar to those of art, not only deserve but warrant scrutiny. One such notion is that of »love« which Kaja Silverman has recently put forth as a notion worth revisiting from a new perspective, that of idealization. Although art falls within a very different category from love, they both are related to the Imaginary and to idealization. Love has been declared, in various moments of history, to be defunct or to be a transient category. It has furthermore »always seemed to lack respectability as an object of intellectual inquiry – to represent the very quintessence of kitsch.«[55]

From our contemporary perspective it may be theoretically valid and practically relevant to reexamine the notions of aesthetic and artistic experience and to reevaluate the notion of art – not as an ontological entity but as a part of continued human practice and need. By arguing for such a reintroduction of a rather traditional notion I don't intend to disclaim distinctions and notions introduced primarily by psychoanalysis (and then applied or transposed into other realms mainly by various theories of ideology), but would like instead to point out that art, and the experience it offers, possess an important place in our lived world. While their continuous emergence may be contingent, this contingency in no way diminishes their relevance, as

[55] Silverman, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

the aforementioned comparisons of Chinese art and that championed by Merleau-Ponty show. From this perspective (and this is a perspective determined also by the »postmodern« turn toward art which excludes the premodernist as well as modernist belief into a unified subject) the need to reevaluate the Imaginary and reevaluate art as a crucial human activity and value appears increasingly warranted.