

Merleau-Ponty

Lecture 10

Painting, Poetry and the Perceived World

From (i) 'Cezanne's Doubt' (1945) CD

(ii) *The World of Perception* (1948) PW

Main themes

Painting (esp. 'modern art') vs. Science

Painting and Language

(Life and art)

Painting & Science

'One of the great achievements of modern art and philosophy .. has been to allow us to rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget' (PW 39)

'.. to hold science and knowledge in such high esteem that all our lived experience of the world seems by contrast to be of little value' (PW 40)

Back to PhP

Objective world of science ('The real world is not this world of light and colour; it is not the fleshy spectacles which pass before my eyes. It consists rather of the waves and particles which science tells me lie behind these sensory illusions' PW 41)

vs

Phenomenal world of philosophy (esp. 'phenomenal field' PhP 60 ff.)

cf. crucial role of the body, as not just an 'object', but as playing a constitutive role with respect to the perceived world (PhP 83)

But what's the connection with painting?

Painting and the perceived world

'Classical art' and the 'scientific' conception of the perceived world as wholly objective

vs.

'Modern art' and the phenomenal conception of the perceived world

'Classical art'

What's this? – M-P is not specific but it appears to be early Renaissance art – e.g. Botticelli, Filippo Lippi

M-P emphasizes the rediscovery of perspective to represent space? (PW 52-3)

Yes: there is a break with earlier Byzantine and gothic art; but what about Michelangelo? (New ways of painting the body and emotion)

Titian? (New ways of painting movement and portraits)
Caravaggio (New ways of painting shade and figure)
or again, from a completely different tradition
Turner – neither ‘classical’ nor ‘modern’.

‘Modern Art’

Cezanne as paradigm

Contrast with ‘impressionism’ (Monet?) Contrast concerns the use of colours to emphasize the effects of light, contrast and shade; Cezanne uses more colours and does not try to emulate light.

But is Cezanne unique? What of other painters – Van Gogh, Gauguin?

M-P refers to Braque, Matisse and Picasso. But their techniques are very different from Cezanne’s

So: the contrast between ‘classical’ and ‘modern’ painting breaks down very quickly.

Does this matter?

M-P starts from the philosophical contrasts between the phenomenal and objective worlds, and between phenomenology and science as modes of inquiry and explanation. The trouble is that these dualisms don’t readily map onto a duality within painting between ‘classical’ and ‘modern’ art.

M-P on Cezanne (i)

Colour doesn’t fill in well-defined, antecedent, shapes: instead, colours form the shapes of the objects depicted – e.g. apples on a dish

Instead of a single detached perspective, Cezanne paints as if from a plurality of connected, but enraged points of view (CD 14-5)

Object is painted as a unified totality of properties (honey, lemon) (PW 60-1, 64)).

But can one paint the sugary taste of sugar? (contrast painting the texture of materials – e.g. silk, velvet, fur; but all achieved in ‘classical’ painting).

M-P on Cezanne (ii)

Achieving spatial organisation indirectly (CD 16; nb compare this with PhP 230-1)

Catching the ‘motif’ of a landscape (CD 17)

So painting is a way of depicting ‘matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation’

My anxiety: M-P is ‘using’ Cezanne to vindicate his own Gestaltist phenomenological psychology of visual experience.

Pictorial representation

Not a matter of imitation

The illusion of transparency – contrast: photography and painting

But does there need to be some visual resemblance? How can there be a portrait without any such resemblance? But it can be expressive, rather than literal (PW 95-6)

Language and painting

M-P frequently compares painting and language (PW 100, CD 19).

One side of the comparison is that between classical art and the illusion of 'pure' language, a language which 'directly' represents objects and properties, inherent in scientific language.

So, on the other side, the comparison needs to be between creative, original, language ('poetry') and modern art such as that of Cezanne. In both areas M-P suggestion seems to be that painting and speaking speech are similar expressive 'gestures'.

But how is this to work?

In the case of language, M-P's thesis is that original language 'accomplishes' thought – it does not just 'clothe' a thought which we are capable of thinking anyway.

So what does modern art (Cezanne) accomplish?

It cannot be visual perception – since that happens anyway.

Maybe, for M-P, we might think of a mode of thought which is essentially pictorial, - the visual imagination, or visualisation.

Words as verbal images and paintings as visual images?

Then the hypothesis will be that modern art 'accomplishes' (maybe 'realises' is a better term) visual imagination better than classical art.

But once one starts off down this route, it becomes clear that it won't really work – since it suggests that the visual imagination is only realised through modern art. But that is absurd – the visual imagination is as old as human culture.

Hence it looks as though one should say that classical art is just as creative as modern art – but just in a different way (which must be right).

Conclusion: in order to make M-P's painting/poetry comparison work, a more complex network of distinctions is needed.

Art and life

In CD M-P briefly describes Cezanne's personal problems – the difficulty he had in engaging with others. The implication, however, is that we get little insight from his biography into the significance of his painting or the sources of his artistic genius. In this context M-P repeats his critical stance towards the Sartrean account of freedom and sketches his own alternative (CD 21).

M-P compares this conclusion with Freud's famous study of Leonardo da Vinci's childhood and life, with the suggestion that Leonardo's art is profoundly influenced by his childhood.

As usual M-P is sceptical about the scientific aspirations of Freud's theory, though not sceptical about the significance of Freud's suggestions for the course of Leonardo's life.

M-P's conclusion

'We never see our ideas or freedom face to face'

This is applied to Cezanne; but M-P intends it to apply also to Leonardo.

And I think we might also apply it to M-P himself.