

An Aesthetics of Nature
Consequences of Merleau-Ponty's embodied ontology

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Abstract

In his courses on *Nature*, the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty clearly does not agree with Kant's antropocentrism. In particular the Kantian notion of the disinterestedness of aesthetic perception is untenable in an aesthetics of nature which is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's thought. Nature and human embodiment are seen as separated in this Kantian tradition.

In Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology on the contrary, we can find the idea of the chiasm of the body-subject and the world: an artist perceives objects and is perceived by them. So, there is no distance, no gap between them. This means that Merleau-Ponty leaves a generally accepted tradition of thought. With its time-honored origins in the work of Plato, the tradition starts from the opposition between what is assumed real and what is considered imaginary, namely the object itself and its representation. Art then, is the manifestation of an idea, and, while the idea had to express a unity, art itself cannot reach beyond the limiting diversity of manifestations. In Merleau-Ponty this 'divided' thinking is evaded by an 'embodied thinking', in which the body is the interaction of sight and movement. For him, the body is the 'axe' of our world.

Keywords: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology, Nature, Aesthetics of nature, Embodied thinking.

In the present paper I want to argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can be interpreted as an aesthetics of nature. This interpretation allows to deepen Merleau-Ponty's questioning of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In *Nature*¹ the author clearly does not agree with Kant's antropocentrism, but I think there are more arguments against Kant's aesthetics than is demonstrated there. In particular the Kantian notion of the disinterestedness of aesthetic perception is untenable in an aesthetics of nature which is inspired by Merleau-Ponty's thought.

In Kant, we can find two conceptions of nature. On the one side, nature is something we only know by the senses and this leads us, following to Kant, to an agnosticism. On the other side, nature is known as a *constructum*. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls Kant's Spinozism. The *Critique of Judgment* can be seen as an attempt to reconcile these two conceptions. But with judgment, Kant reduces the phenomena of nature to our faculties of knowledge. 'By trying to think nature according to the category of finality, we can only have vague concepts. To give a real meaning to finality, we need to return to man. (...) The real home for finality, then, is the interiority of man, as the final end of nature, and in as far as he is not nature, but pure freedom without any ground' (LN 46). Man is, in Kant's thought, *antiphysis* and he completes nature by opposing himself to it. Merleau-Ponty concludes: 'After having invoked the possibility of an understanding which goes beyond the senses, the conclusion of Kant is strictly humanistic. Kant opposes man and cosmos, and grounds finality in the contingency of human freedom' (LN, p. 47).

It is rather surprising that Merleau-Ponty limits his critiques to this item. I think that the notion of disinterestedness in Kant's *Judgment* is a more important point of contrast with Merleau-Ponty's own thought about aesthetics. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant distinguishes three kinds of satisfaction (*Wohlgefallen*): the beautiful, the good and the charming.² The latter two are connected with interest: the good with a merely practical satisfaction, the charming with what Kant calls pathologically determined incentives. In both cases, one is not indifferent to the question whether or not the object under consideration exists: the perceiver *has* an interest in its existence. Judgment of the beautiful, however, is merely contemplative and thus indifferent to the existence of the object.

I quote Kant: 'Interest is what we call the liking we connect with the presentation of an object's existence. Hence such a liking always refers at once to our power of desire, either as the basis that determines it, or at any rate as

1. M. Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature. Notes. Cours du Collège de France*, Paris, Seuil, 1995 (LN). An English translation exists: *Nature. Course Notes of Collège de France*. I have only used the French version. The translations are my own.

2. I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, B 3-B 18. In I. Kant, *Werke in sechs Bänden*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983, Bd V.

necessarily connected with that determining basis. But if the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care, in any way, about the thing's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it (intuition or reflection' (*Critique of Judgment*, Part 1, §2)

According to Kant, thus, an aesthetic judgment does not involve interest for, otherwise, it would be partial and thus not purely aesthetic. In other words, aesthetics is opposed to partiality. Or again, she who judges is not engaged, she stands outside the judged object and can maintain distance without harming her interests. The notion of distance thus plays an important role in this argument. It is related to the spatial metaphor which is also employed in traditional physics. In this train of thought, space is an abstract and impersonal medium in which objects are placed which are considered to be wholly independent from the perceiver. This implies not only a space between the perceiver and the object but, more importantly, a division between them. The perceiver adopts a contemplative attitude towards an isolated object. In the last analysis, the argument relies on a prior acceptance of a severe thesis of dualism.

For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, in the arts, the chiasm of the body-subject and the world is eminently present: an artist perceives objects and is perceived by them. So, there is no distance, no gap between them. This means that Merleau-Ponty leaves a generally accepted tradition of thought. With its time-honored origins in the work of Plato, the tradition starts from the opposition between what is assumed real and what is considered imaginary, namely the object itself and its representation. Art then, is the manifestation of an idea, and, while the idea had to express a unity, art itself cannot reach beyond the limiting diversity of manifestations. Hence perception can never be an adequate expression of an idea. To think is to renounce pure perception: mind and body are strictly separated.

It is clear that the thesis of the disinterested nature of aesthetic perception follows logically from the argument above. At the perception of a work of art, the spectator withdraws into a contemplative attitude of disinterested satisfaction. This thesis, which has dominated philosophy since the eighteenth century, has received its theoretical culmination in the work of Immanuel Kant. Until Adorno, aesthetic theory has been confined to the works of art that apparently obtained an existence autonomous from society and nature. This conception results from two types of dualism: that of nature versus culture and that of body versus mind. By rejecting both kinds of separation, it becomes possible to proceed towards a conception of aesthetics as a general theory of perception, one which is not restricted to the arts, and which ascribes an eminent role to both body and nature.

The author's comparison in *L'Œil et l'esprit* (*Eye and Mind*) of the relation between the lived body and the world with that of painters with their objects is thus not coincidental. In his preface to this essay, Claude Lefort writes that it was art which persuaded Merleau-Ponty of the quasi-impossible play of the vision and the visible. It thus becomes a never ending questioning, which necessarily starts

again with each work of art. We will never find a solution; we can however, obtain a kind of recognition.

Merleau-Ponty has intended this essay as a critique of, or a counterweight for, a theory that takes science as its paradigm. In his view, science manipulates things and refuses to inhabit them. What is important for my subject: science confronts itself only *as distanced* from things and treats the latter as *objects in general*. In the scientific model, thought is reduced to tests, operations and transformations, in which solely manipulated objects have a place. This operational thought then becomes a kind of absolute artificialism: human creations are considered only within the model of the machine.

In Merleau-Ponty this 'divided' thinking is evaded by an 'embodied thinking', in which the body is the interaction of sight and movement. It suffices to see something to be able to know how I have to join and reach it. Indeed, my body is part of the visible world and that is the reason I can direct it in the visible. Seeing, then, is impossible without movement; equally, movement is impossible without the seeing that precedes it. The visible world and my material acts are part of one and the same being. Merleau-Ponty himself calls this an extraordinary appropriation which is generally insufficiently considered. For, in his argument, seeing cannot be defined as a pure act of thought. She who sees is, through her body, embedded in the visible. She does not appropriate what she sees, rather she approaches it through her seeing and opens herself to the world. At the same time, this world is neither matter, nor *in itself*. Again, it becomes clear how Merleau-Ponty avoids every dualism of subject versus object, mind versus body: our movement is not the effect of an intellectual decision; rather, it is the effect of the seeing, the maturing of it. This movement is not blind, however. Objects can be said to be moved; our bodies, on the other hand, move themselves, they unfold themselves. In this movement, the body is not unknowing of itself, rather it is the emanation of a self. Again, a double movement emerges: the body sees and is seen, and it is visible and palpable for itself. 'The painter takes his body with him, says Valéry. Indeed, we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body—not to the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement'.³

It follows that, for Merleau-Ponty, aesthetics always and necessarily is an embodied aesthetics, although he does not employ the phrase himself. Or, pushing the point, it becomes possible to challenge the scope of aesthetics, that is, to question whether it is possibly more than just a theory of the arts. In addition, and following from the relation with the body - nature which we are ourselves, the

3. M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, p. 162.

question arises whether aesthetics of the arts and aesthetics of nature cannot be brought together.

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can thus be understood as a philosophy of nature. Not coincidentally, his name is cited in recent works about an aesthetics of nature, in which it is attempted to think nature and art in a single movement, with the body as its axis. The most important element in this argument is that it is a movement of non-appropriation, of enabling objects to be born and of being born oneself in objects. Man and nature are one, or, with our body we think nature, and nature thinks itself in our body. As our bodily existence functions as an intermediary for our relation with objects, it ultimately mediates our relation with nature. As Rudolf Bernet has argued, we can talk about a naturalisation of the subject which is accompanied by a subjectivization of nature.⁴ It is precisely because both subject and nature are considered in a new way that the works of Merleau-Ponty open new perspectives for a theory in which nature, body and aesthetics are brought together.

In the first instance, this requires a new formulation of our conceptions of aesthetics. Until Adorno, aesthetics has been considered as a theory of works of art, stipulated from an assumed autonomy from social and natural reality. With Merleau-Ponty, we can return to the original meaning of aesthetics, namely a general theory of perception. Perception, the *aesthesis*, then, refers to our sensorially being in environment. In other words, the spatial metaphor of distancing—as in Kant—can be abandoned: subject and object of perception are no longer separated.

For the theory of nature, this abandonment accomodates an important point of view. For, if we accept that the subject is indeed affectively touched by the condition of her environment and, moreover, that we experience in our own body the state of nature around us, an ecologically orientated aesthetics of nature positions our bodily-sensorially being in nature at the centre of its argument. Such a theory demands a new ontology, the contours of which we find in Merleau-Ponty. For the reconstruction of the argument as has been stated above, allows for the realisation that traditional metaphysical aesthetics and 'the modern mechanistic conception of science have, in fact, the same premise. Both define man as a merely *Vernunftwesen* that demarcates itself from both the body-subject and nature: the latter two are situated at the exterior of our rational existence. Hence, nature as our environment and nature as our being embodied have to be civilized and cultivated. The natural sciences aim to inquire nature in a distanced way, and starting from that same distance, man discovers nature in works of art. The German philosopher Gernot Böhme describes this process as follows: 'Wie die neuzeitliche Naturwissenschaft Schritt für Schritt den menschlichen Körper aus

4. R. Bernet, 'The subject in nature', in P. Burke, J. Van der Veken (ed.), *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Perspective*, Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer, 1993, p. 67.

dem Prozeß der Erfahrungsgewinnung eliminierte und dem Beitrag der Sinne schließlich auf das Feststellen von Signalen reduzierte, so disziplinierte die neuzeitliche Ästhetik als Kritik des Geschmacks von Anfang an die Sinnlichkeit, bis sie schließlich, heute zur Semiotik verkommen, nur noch mit Zeichen und ihren Bedeutung zu tun hat'.⁵

Such a viewpoint hardly allows for the consideration of an emotional involvement with nature or art. In a contemporary aesthetics of nature, on the other hand, it is the reintegration of that piece of nature in man himself, our body as our primary way of being-in-the-world, which is posited as the central issue.

Does that necessarily lead us into an Arcadian contemplation of nature in a supposedly 'virgin' state? Clearly not. First, although a mere contemplative consideration of nature is perhaps not excluded, it is evidently insufficient. For that reason, Kantian aesthetics can be incorporated, precisely because it is not purely passive: we can talk about a *Leistung*. In more general terms, active involvement and an aestheticizing contemplation do not exclude one another; in the present argument, the latter even presupposes the former. What is more, involvement with nature is always an active process. Nature as an untouched archetype does not exist and is not even desirable. I disagree, however, with authors who believe that speaking about an 'environment' is already problematic. Monika Langer, for example, states that: 'The common meaning of 'environment' is particularly illuminating in this regard. The term signifies something surrounding, surrounding objects, surroundings. It connotes a physical thing rather than a 'network of relations' and frequently invites images of so-called scenery'.⁶

Of course, she is correct: this is the common meaning. But I consider it to be one of Merleau-Ponty's achievements that he has enabled us to think in an new way about the meaning of what is called 'environment'. For him, man is an active participant in nature. This implies that nature is always cultivated nature. It also follows that Langer's identification of an implicit ecocentrism in Merleau-Ponty's work, must be rejected. Neither Merleau-Ponty nor someone like Heidegger accept the centrality of one of the issues under discussion: there is neither *antropocentrism* nor *ecocentrism*. To appreciate their thought, we have to position it beyond this terminology. Failure to do this, is inviting yet again a dualism of nature versus culture. Nature is not a metaphysical or idealistic category; it is something that is socially constituted and conditioned. And that is precisely why the introduction of aesthetics in our thinking is so important for our dealing with the environment in which we live. In virtue of aesthetics and our embodiment, we

5. G. Böhme, *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989, p. 32.

6. M. Langer, 'Merleau-Ponty and Deep Ecology', in G. A. Johnson, M. B. Smith (ed.), *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1990, p. 118.

can comprehend that man and nature are not separable, that there is an intertwining and a reversibility of both.

It can be argued that recent publications on an aesthetics of environment confirm the present argument. The work of Arnold Berleant is only one case in point. It may therefore be useful to quote the American aesthetician at length: 'For we discover in the aesthetic perception of environment the reciprocity, indeed the continuity of forces in our world—those generated by human action and those to which we must respond'. And he continues: 'To think of environment in the usual sense as surroundings suggests that it lies outside the person, a container within which people pursue their private interests. (...) 'The' environment, one of the last survivors of the mind-body dualism, a distant place which we think to contemplate from afar, dissolves into a complex network of relations, connections, and continuities of those physical, social and cultural conditions that describe my actions, my responses, my awareness, and that give shape and content to the very life that is mine. *For there is no outside world. There is no outside.* Nor is there an inner sanction in which I can take refuge from inimical external forces. The perceiver (mind) is an aspect of the perceived (body) and conversely; person and environment are continuous'.⁷

This is what is meant here by the rethinking of 'environment': it is the expression of the way we experience and live nature. Man and nature flow into one another reciprocally, they move with and in each other. Giving up a dualistic thinking thus has important consequences for our thought about the relation of nature and culture: there is no distance between them. We no longer talk about the city in which we live and nature somewhere outside. The city, or culture in general, is rather the way in which we live nature. Gernot Böhme, the German philosopher I already quoted, introduces in his *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* the term 'ecological system' (*Gefüge*). 'Ein ökologisches Gefüge ist ein Stück Natur, dessen Grenzen und dessen Einheit sozial definiert sind und dessen Zustand durch menschliche Nützung und Arbeit reproduziert wird. Dieser Art ist natürlich jeder Wald und jeder Acker. So gesehen wird auch die Stadt im ganzen ein bestimmtes ökologisches Gefüge' (G. Böhme, o.c., p. 73). Thus, we have to reconsider our use of the word environment. As already mentioned above, it refers to the way in which we experience and live nature. Man and nature flow into one another in a reciprocal way. They move with and within each other. This is why nature always is cultivated nature. The Arcadian, virgin nature does not exist. We can only know an experienced and lived nature. And we experience nature with our conscious body, which gives meaning to what surrounds it. Thus, an engaged, and this means non-Kantian, experience of nature always bears an aesthetic component in itself.

7. A. Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992, pp. 3-4, my italics.

This experience of nature is one of reciprocity of man and nature. And we know that this idea of reciprocity is arguably the most eminent aspect of Merleau-Ponty's non-dualistic thought. It is also the precise reason for the importance of his phenomenological thought for an environmental aesthetics. For the experience of space is a crucial issue for Merleau-Ponty. To sense is to sense something but, perhaps more importantly, what we sense is always situated in space and coordinated out of it. We comprehend space by moving within it. This movement, the experience of it, is primordial, and not a collection of sensory data which we put in afterwards. Man does not approximate nature as a rational being that meets something of which he had an *a priori* idea. When we move our body towards something, that something was already there. In the terms of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, our body is not *in* space and time, it *lives* them. Again, we live nature with a body which is aware: it is the body-subject that gives content to nature, to our environment. And in this engaged participation in nature, an aesthetic aspect is always present. Certain, far-reaching philosophical consequences follow from this. To speak with Berleant: 'If *everything* has an aesthetic dimension, then so does every *experience* of everything, since things stand for us only in so far as we experience them, and an aesthetic dimension is inherent in all experience' (o.c., p. 11).

The implication is that aesthetics becomes a universal category, since we meet things only by experiencing them, by dealing with them aesthetically. Very different, then, from traditional aesthetics in which sight and hearing were considered the sense-organs *par excellence*, the conception presented here reaches much further. Whereas in the former, sight and hearing were the instruments for a contemplative encounter with both nature and art, Merleau-Ponty has shown that our sense-organs cannot be separated. As we have seen, there is a sensorial unity that cannot be reduced to a so-called primary consciousness. The process of experiencing is always a unity, something which proceeds in me, or, more precisely, in my body. Hence Merleau-Ponty's statement that our body must not, cannot, be compared with a machine; it is rather like a work of art. Perhaps the present argument can best be summarized through the following quotation: 'A novel, poem, picture, or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal and spatial situation'.⁸

A little further in the *Phenomenology*, the author states that it has always been his aim to demonstrate how we can enable space and things to exist for us, and how it is in the space of our body that this is possible. The body is therefore our affective environment of the genesis of being. Merleau-Ponty adds that being is

8. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated from the French by Colin Smith, London and New York, Routledge, p. 151.

revealed by desire and by love, whereby this affectivity is no longer understood as an original consciousness, and hence, increasingly less touched by the objective world.

Whereas Heidegger pleads for a considerate thought which he opposes to calculating thinking, I hope, with Merleau-Ponty, to extend this consideration with the capacity of being affected. As with Heidegger, this has consequences for our thinking of nature and art. Most importantly: these domains can no longer be confined to the domain of the irrational. On the contrary, they demonstrate how our conception of reason itself has become confined and confining. The alternative conception of reason presented here does not aim to banish thought defined by a scientific model. For it is possible to continue to appreciate the latter's achievements, while broadening its definition and scope and while questioning its claim of absoluteness.