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PAINTING, NOSTALGIA AND

METAPHYSICS: MERLEAU-PONTY'S LINE

There are some criticisms of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting that make sense and some that do not. In this paper, I would like to consider some criticisms that have gained fairly widespread currency, largely through the counter-thought of Jean-Francois Lyotard but also Michel Foucault and Foucault's Belgian surrealist correspondent, Rene Magritte, featured in *This is not a pipe*. The points at issue have to do with the questions of whether Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting falsely valorizes representational or figurative painting over non-representational abstract art, and the related question of whether Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting is therefore the expression of the illusions of nostalgia for a kind of expressionism in art and philosophy of art that belongs to a past age. Along with the nostalgia for an exemplary past age of painting and philosophy goes also a complaint regarding Merleau-Ponty's views apparently devaluing photography in the economy of images representing visual truth.

The key text with which we will be dealing is Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*, a remarkable work of 93 pages that the philosopher published in 1961 as his third and climactic study of modern painting. To summarize it in any detail would delay us from considering the critique, so it will be necessary to assume some points of familiarity with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. However, we

will make Merleau-Ponty's positions as clear as possible as we consider the criticisms.

It is worth pausing for a moment over the meaning of nostalgia itself. Nostalgia is a human feeling of a kind of vast melancholy in the face of loss or dispossession, the heart's affliction that Pascal captured when he described humanity as a "dispossessed monarch" in the *Pensees*, that Camus captured as the atmosphere of *Exile and the Kingdom*. We could hardly agree with a notion that condemns the feeling of nostalgia itself as in some sense "bad," for it is part of the complexity of human emotion. Yet we know that feelings are intimately involved with cognitive judgments about the value of the objects toward which they are directed. To the extent, then, that nostalgia is a *thought* that values the past that is lost in a way that casts a shadow over present and future, we can at least entertain the notion that there is a kind of "bad" nostalgia that damages present life. This bad nostalgia is connected with a false romanticism for the past and a lyricism in expressing adoration for it. Since the criticism based on bad nostalgia is also now made of Heidegger's philosophies of art and X technology, the criticism includes a political edge that involves an accusation of political innocence. It is this political innocence that Milan Kundera has satirized in establishing the conjunction among youth, romanticism and lyric poetry in a novel like *Life is Elsewhere*. This title, taken from the last line of Andre Breton's surrealist manifesto and painted by students on the walls of the Sorbonne during the 1968 student demonstrations, perfectly expresses the nostalgic longing: real life is elsewhere.

There seem to me to be several strands to what critics of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting have in mind when they accuse *Eye and Mind* of a bad nostalgia. A first strand is expressed in Lyotard's sarcastic remark that Merleau-Ponty cannot valorize "Cezanne or Giacometti, without immediately devalorizing other experimentations, such as Marey's, the cubists, or Duchamp's. . . . But Being didn't choose Cezanne to express itself, now did it? Nor Merleau-Ponty, nor anyone. Don't try to re-establish these

ponderous elections, poetic institution, Heideggerian preaching."¹ Rene Magritte seconds the opinion: "The only kind of painting Merleau-Ponty deals with is a variety of serious but futile divertissement, of value only to well-intentioned humbugs."² Oh well, Magritte was Belgian. Nevertheless, it is evident that in *Eye and Mind* Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting remains committed to the view that painting is the expression of the world. This is far from an imitation or copy theory of art, but is also far from an aesthetic oriented toward the picture surface as a play of internal differences independent of worldly reference.

I think that it is relatively easy to show that the claim that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting is selectively skewed toward the expressionism of Cezanne and a few other paradigmatic artists is wrong. The easiest evidence to marshal derives from a close study of the photographic reproductions of art works that Merleau-Ponty selected for inclusion with the written text. These include oil paintings by Paul Klee and Nicholas de Stael, a watercolor by Cezanne, drawings by Giacometti and Matisse, and sculptures by Rodin and Germaine Richier. Of the three paintings that were chosen, the Klee work from 1938 entitled "Park near Lucerne" and the painting by Stael entitled "Corner of a Studio" or "Green Studio" from 1954 are both quite abstract. Stael (1914-1955) was a Russian-born painter, who was a friend of Georges Braque in Paris and whose life and painting had evident affinities with Van Gogh.³ Stael's abstract compositions were built up from large planes and free architecture, which toward the last three years of his career edged back toward representation such as we find in the 1954

¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity," trans. M. Brewer and D. Brewer, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 189. Originally published in *Camera Obscura*, no. 12 (1984): 110-125.

² Rene Magritte, "Letter to Alphonse de Waelhens (April 28, 1962)," in Harry Torczyner, ed., *Magritte: signs and images*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1977), p. 55.

³ One of Nicholas de Stael's last works entitled "Les Mouettes" (1955) recalls Van Gogh's "Paysage aux Corbeaux," and Stael's life ended in a tragic suicide as mysterious as that of Van Gogh. Cf. Michael Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, trans. Lionel Izod, John Montague and Francis Scarfe (New York: Paris Book Center, 1958), p. 267.

composition selected by Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty's painting selections indicate the progress of his interest in painting toward more abstract forms of expression in which the integrity of the canvas as a two-dimensional surface is more prominent. This is a quite different selection of illustrations than the list of paintings to which Merleau-Ponty referred in "Cezanne's Doubt," for example.

The direction of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting is also indicated in the choice of a late watercolor to represent the presence of Cezanne, a watercolor of Mt. Sainte-Victoire from 1900. In Cezanne's watercolors the many shifting planes superimposed on top of each other or blended into one another together with their different levels of depth are more prominently visible than in Cezanne's oils. Moreover, the blank spaces of white paper are not filled in, but are surrounded by colors and thus incorporated into the scene as more and less brilliant highlights, unifying visible with invisible. In the watercolors of Cezanne's last years, Merleau-Ponty comments, space "radiates around planes that cannot be assigned any place at all" (PrP, 181; OE, 68).⁴ Without

⁴ Merleau-Ponty's writings will be cited within the body of the text according to the following abbreviations (the English translation first followed by the French):

English:

- PrP *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- HT *Humanism and Terror*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
- S *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
- VI *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

French:

- OE *L'Oeil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
- HT *Humanisme et terreur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).
- S *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960).

losing the objectivity of his oil paintings, both these features of Cezanne's watercolors draw our attention to the surface composition of the painter's late work and its sublimity and spirituality rather than the features of mass, monumentality and solidity Merleau-Ponty had stressed in "Cezanne's Doubt."⁵

In addition to the oils by Klee and Stael and the watercolor by Cezanne, the photograph of an additional fourth painting was included in the first *Art de France* publication of Merleau-Ponty's essay that did not make its way into the Gallimard edition of the book. When I discovered this, for me it finally put the lie to the notion that Merleau-Ponty falsely valorized the representational. It is a painting by Alain de la Bourdonnaye entitled "Composition" (1960). It consists simply of the juxtaposition of several angular planes, and unlike the Klee and Stael paintings, bears no representational title whatsoever: "Composition." The difference between figurative and nonfigurative art, Merleau-Ponty says in *Eye and Mind*, "is badly posed; no grape was ever what it is in the most figurative painting and no painting, no matter how abstract, can get away from Being" (PriP, 188; OE, 87).

There are other points we could make about the progress of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting toward an outlook inclusive of abstract experimentation, especially related to his discovery of the "flexuous line" as a distinct element of composition, whereas earlier he had only criticized the prosaic mechanical line of Renaissance perspective drawing.⁶ Nevertheless, it is the ideas in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of painting in addition to the illustrations

VI *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

⁵ Cf. Gotz Adriani, *Cezanne Watercolors*, trans. Russell M. Stockman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1983), pp. 81-94. To my knowledge, the only commentator who has discussed Merleau-Ponty's choice of a Cezanne watercolor rather than an oil painting is John M. Carvalho in his essay entitled "The Visible and the Invisible in Merleau-Ponty and Foucault," forthcoming in *International Studies in Philosophy*. I am grateful to Prof. Carvalho for sending me an advance copy of this essay.

⁶ For his new insights regarding line, Merleau-Ponty simply lists the author and title, Henri Michaux, "Aventures de lignes," without further citation. The work was published as the preface to the French translation of Will Grohmann, *Paul Klee*, trans. Jean Descoullayes and Jean Philippon (Paris: Librairie Flinter, 1954), pp. 5-8.

that must finally decide the issue, so let us turn to these and a second strand often implied in the critics' accusation of bad nostalgia.

The essay's task is to "interrogate painting itself" regarding the nature of what exists, in order to return "to the 'there is,' to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body" (PriP, 160; *OE*, 12). Merleau-Ponty is explicit about granting painting and the plastic arts such as sculpture an ontological privilege over other arts such as music, over science, and over philosophy. Painting is closer to the palpable life of things than these, Merleau-Ponty says, joining a line of philosophers originating in Schelling and coming forward through Nietzsche to Heidegger who accord special prominence to artistic work in tracing the ribs and joints of Being. The quotation from Cezanne's conversations with Gasquet that prefaces *Eye and Mind* expresses equally the goal of the painter and the philosopher: "What I am trying to translate to you is more mysterious; it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the impalpable source of sensations" (PriP, 159; *OE*, ix).

Against this task, Lyotard wrote in 1984: "The arrogance of philosophers is metaphysics. Merleau-Ponty, one of the least arrogant of philosophers, still [says] that the eye's relation to the visible is the relation of Being to itself in its primordial 'enfolding.'"⁷ Rene Magritte wrote that: "Merleau-Ponty's very brilliant thesis is very pleasant to read, but it hardly makes one think of painting--which he nevertheless appears to be dealing with."⁸ Earlier in his doctoral thesis published as *Discours, Figure*, Lyotard had written:

Phenomenology cannot reach the donation [the pre-reflective event] because faithful to the philosophical tradition of the West it remains a reflection on knowledge, and the function of such a reflection is to re-absorb the event, to retrieve the Other in the Same. . . . On the basis of a euphoria Merleau-Ponty has attempted to build a pagan philosophy. But his paganism remains

⁷ Lyotard, "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity," p. 189.

⁸ Magritte, "Letter to Alphonse de Waelhens (April 28, 1962)," p. 55.

caught up in a problematic of knowledge; this produces a philosophy of intelligent flesh, which is a happy philosophy, but which misses the significance of dispossession.⁹

Later in *Discours, Figure*, Lyotard connects Merleau-Ponty's nostalgia for the lost origin of Western metaphysics with what he takes to be a related psychological nostalgia for the origin of the Self in the search for the Mother: "There is no Father in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, or else there is too much: in short, this throws his discourse into an insatiable demand for the Mother."¹⁰

We have now reached a second layer in the accusation of bad nostalgia, namely that *Eye and Mind* expresses the search for a oneness or principle of envelopment that satisfies the desire for cognitive, theoretical unity and psychological healing of the wound between subject and object. We cannot comment fully here in evaluating this accusation, but must restrict ourselves to a few remarks. On the one hand, I think that Lyotard's reading of Merleau-Ponty's metaphysics of painting as a pagan philosophy is a rich and profound one, for I too believe that its basic terms are informed by Greek pre-Socratic philosophy. On the other hand, I want briefly to demonstrate that these very pre-Socratic themes lead Merleau-Ponty away from a philosophy and psychology of unity and toward a philosophy of difference and desire, very much like Lyotard's own outlook.

By the time of *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty recognized that his earlier phenomenology and thesis of the primacy of perception and lived-body had remained too closely tied to the unity of the subject as transcendental ground of the unity of the world.¹¹ *Eye*

⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*, 4th edition (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1985), p. 21-22. Translation by Michael B. Smith for *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Painting: A Reader with Criticism*, edited by Galen A. Johnson (Northwestern University Press, forthcoming, 1993).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹¹ In a Working Note from *The Visible and the Invisible* dated July, 1959 and entitled "Dualism—Philosophy," Merleau-Ponty wrote: "The problems posed in *Phenomenology of Perception* are insoluble because I start there from the 'consciousness'-'object' distinction" (VI, 200; VI, 253).

and Mind sought to explore and articulate a depth or laterality of the self that is at a distance from itself, from things and the world, and from the significances given things in language. Merleau-Ponty conveyed these distances, gaps, or spreads in the word *écart*. It is as if Merleau-Ponty had decided his earlier work had enunciated themes on the surface of painting and expression, and now he wanted to get to the heart of the matter. Earlier themes--such as the lived perspective, gesture and expression, the primacy of the secondary quality of color, and the institution and overdetermination of meaning in the art work--are now set in motion around the central question of *depth*, depth in painting, depth in space, depth in self and in Being.

Why is it that painters have so often said, in the manner of Klee, that the forest was speaking in them, or the trees were looking at them, or why did Cezanne say that "nature is on the inside?" It must be that there is a system of exchanges between body and world such that eye and hand become the obverse side of things, the inside of an outside in which are both enveloped. This extraordinary overlapping or envelopment is one in which seer and seen are capable of reversing their roles as subject and object, and the maturation of vision in the life of a painter is this opening up of self to the world as "the other side" of its power of looking. The body seeing becomes the body looked at; the body touching becomes the body touched. Things, for the painter, become an annex or prolongation of self, encrusted in its flesh, necessarily "made of the same stuff as the body" (PriP, 163; *OE*, 19). Merleau-Ponty refers to this as a good or profound "narcissism" in which the seer is caught up in the seen, not to see in the outside the contour of one's own body, but to emigrate into the world, to be seduced and captivated by it, "so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (VI, 139; *VI*, 183). It is this generality, this anonymity that is called *Flesh*. Painting expresses nothing other than these "inversions" (*ces renversements*) between vision and the visible. It is "the genesis, the metamorphosis of Being in vision" (PriP, 166; *OE*, 28).

Merleau-Ponty's notion of the reversibility of *Flesh* does not mean the absurdity that the trees and things we see also see us in return, thus imputing consciousness and vision to inanimate things as a heightened and exaggerated Leibnizian panpsychism. Rather

it means that the seer is caught up in the midst of the visible, that in order to see, the seer must in turn be capable of being seen. Merleau-Ponty's thought is here driving toward the fact that our body announces a kind of "natural reflection."¹² Thus, reversibility is an aesthetic rather than a logical phenomenon and does not imply the symmetry of subject and object, their substitutability in meaning, as would be implied by the logical biconditional. In the mirror, the reflection of the right hand is transposed as the left hand. There is asymmetrical reversibility, reflexivity with difference. The world is essentially a genesis in the crossing over between subject and object. The artist bears bodily witness to this genesis in the metamorphosis of world into art work, thus conferring memory and duration upon genesis.¹³

We can now see that the ontology Merleau-Ponty finds implicit in the work of painting is very far removed from a metaphysics of substance and sameness, a monism of the One. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty wrote that Flesh "is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire . . . a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being" (VI, 139; *OE*, 184). Merleau-Ponty's account of Flesh in terms of strife as a unity of opposites should have already signalled the influence, not only of Heidegger's essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art," but of Heraclitus. This important direct reference to the Greek PreSocratic philosophers alerts us to figures like water, air and fire that occur throughout *Eye and Mind*, and point us on from depth to desire as an *ontological*, not merely psychological, feature of the world. Being itself, for Merleau-Ponty, as the incarnate principle of Flesh, is imbued with a kind of energy, longing, desire or *conatus*.

In speaking of Flesh, Merleau-Ponty remembers the element of air in *Eye and Mind*. "We speak of inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes

¹² Cf. Gary Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), pp. 98-99.

¹³ Cf. Paul Klee, 1924 lecture at Jena, in *Paul Klee: His Life and Work in Documents*, ed. Felix Klee (New York: George Braziller, 1962), pp. 176-177.

impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted" (PriP, 167; OE, 31-32). Merleau-Ponty also conveys the binding synergy in the heart of Being with images of water. He speaks of the froth and crest of waves, the water's thickness as it bends the tiling at the bottom of a pool, and the longing for "that place where there persists, like the mother water in crystal, the undividedness of the sensing and the sensed" (PriP, 179, 182, 163; OE, 62, 70, 20). Nevertheless, through repetition of terms like spark, fission, explosion, and dehiscence, it is the figure of Fire that dominates *Eye and Mind's* account of the element called Flesh, and fire speaks to us of desire. "There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place--when the spark is lit between sensing and sensible, lighting the fire that will not stop burning" (PriP, 163, OE, 21). Flesh is an "incarnate principle" of doubling, difference and desire crocheted into all that is *there*. Jean-Francois Lyotard, whose *Discours, Figure* is helpful about so much in *Eye and Mind*, completely missed both the difference and the desire in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of depth in *Eye and Mind*. Merleau-Ponty's account does not overlook the gaps, splits and disunities within world and self, eliminating what is strange, foreign and Other in favor of conceptual sameness, and Merleau-Ponty's account has much to do with desire, dreams and Eros. It was Merleau-Ponty who said that painting mixes up the imaginary and the real "in laying out its oneiric universe of carnal essences" (PriP, 169; OE, 35).

The figure of fire and the notion of desire it indexes refers us to genesis and growth, the possibility for new and renewed expression of the visible *simpliciter*. The longing within the Flesh is the longing for vision, new and renewed comprehension and self-comprehension. This is not some new "end" or "teleology of history," nor is it a nostalgic quest to return us to a lost origin, as Merleau-Ponty makes clear in the last section of *Eye and Mind*. The idea of a universal painting and history of painting, of "a totalization of painting," and the idea of a perfect painting found either at a "beginning" of history in a pagan or primitive origin like the caves at Lascaux or at an "end" of history in some misty future, are ideas that make no sense. In terms of the ontology of painting and the expression of what exists, the very first painting "went to the

farthest reach of the future" (Prip, 190; *OE*, 92) and every painting stands on its own as an expression, exaltation and re-creation of the visible world. The desire or *conatus* of the Flesh is the demand for expression, the demand that the world be brought forth over and over again into visibility. The history of Being is the generous explosion of the world into ever new and renewed forms. The history of cultural expression is intensifying, deepening astonishment in the face of this "there is." This is the desire within the difference which is Flesh.

Having now been able, we believe, to exonerate Merleau-Ponty against the accusation of nostalgia on these first two levels, we now approach a line of questioning that leaves us with a sense of ambiguity. Merleau-Ponty built up this remarkable metaphysics through a study of modern painting and related plastic arts such as sculpture, to the specific exclusion of other art forms. It is customary to take note of his rather odd reasons for excluding music, but a different exclusion leads us to a third and final strand in the nostalgia problematic, namely photography, the problem of visual truth and Merleau-Ponty's apparent nostalgia for non-technological art forms. To cite Lyotard's pungent sarcasm one last time, he refers in 1984 to "the banalities the philosophers of the decline of the *aura* or of the institution of Being have managed to peddle concerning photographic art."¹⁴ Fundamentally, what I want to know is whether Merleau-Ponty would be philosophically comfortable at EuroDisney strolling through Tomorrowland.

The particularly troubling section of *Eye and Mind* that pits painting against photography occurs in a discussion of the painter and sculptor's ability to portray motion. Reader's of *Phenomenology of Perception* will recognize how important this passage is, since movement is the key element in Merleau-Ponty's development of the concept of the intentional arc of the lived-body. For bodily spatiality, movement is even more fundamental than touch, which is shown to depend upon it. The stationary, unmoving bodily contact with another body loses its sense of touch, and the intentional arc goes limp. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty praises

¹⁴ Lyotard, "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity," p. 535.

the paintings of Gericault for capturing the movement of horses running at full gallop and criticizes the camera's eye for freezing movement, making a leaping horse look as if it is leaping in place in a Zenonian reverie. Following Rodin, Merleau-Ponty writes that "it is the artist who is truthful, while the photograph is mendacious" (PriP, 185; *OE*, 80). Merleau-Ponty's criticism of photography as incapable of capturing the visual truth of movement is consistent with his similar devaluation of the film camera that displayed in slow motion Matisse painting, making it appear as if his hand made ten or so hesitant movements before lighting on the canvas. "There is something artificial" in the slow motion camera's eye, Merleau-Ponty wrote, and "Matisse would be wrong to put his faith" in the film (S, 45; S 57).

To understand Merleau-Ponty's criticism of photography, we must first remember that it is his view that visual truth in painting requires that the painter lie. Citing Sartre, Merleau-Ponty wrote: "As always in art, one must lie to tell the truth" (S, 57; S, 71). This is what the painter of movement can do that the camera cannot. The painter is able to express movement by portraying trunk, head and limbs at different instants of time, and through this imaginary linkage of impossibles make transition arise on the canvas or in bronze. The critique of the camera is that it is too much the eye of split-second realism and too little the human eye of imagination that sees visible together with invisible.

Of course, any decent photographer knows well how to capture movement on film simply by slowing down the speed of the shutter or by changing the depth of field. Moreover, it has sometimes been photography that has shown the errors of painting. Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographs of horses in motion showed that the "flying gallop" position with all four of the horse's legs off the ground at once depicted in many paintings simply does not occur.¹⁵ Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty could not have created his own gallery or "musee imaginaire" in *Eye and Mind* without the service of the camera and photographic reproduction. We add to this the fact that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical writing often

¹⁵ Cf. William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 26.

incorporated the terminology of the latest technologies: television, computers, even space travel. In all these ways, Merleau-Ponty's critique of the camera strikes us as odd and out of tempo with the best of his philosophy of art.

Nevertheless, I think that what Merleau-Ponty is driving at can be restated with some validity. The photograph is tied to causality in a way that painting is not. When William Henry Fox Talbot perfected the art of chemically fixing an image through the camera obscura in 1839, and nearly simultaneously in France daguerreotypes made their appearance, Talbot announced to the Royal Society that he had invented a way to record images on paper "by the agency of light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil."¹⁶ Many believed that painting was dead. This causality of light on film remains inescapable in photography, and this does not denigrate the artistic, intentional acts of the photographer in selecting a station point, framing the scene and choosing the moment to expose the film, as well as the darkroom acts of developing, enlarging, cropping and printing. There is an irremedial element of realism in the photograph that bonds image to referent "with superglue."¹⁷ A photograph is fossilized light that is a direct physical imprint like a fingerprint. In his landmark essay on "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Andre Bazin compared photographs to death masks such as the Holy Shroud of Turin that transfers the reality of the thing to its reproduction.¹⁸ The nonexistence of angels does not prevent one from painting a picture of angels, but you cannot take a picture of an angel.

This causal realism in photography means that this art represents the intrusion of science into art, and this must be a large measure of what undergirds Merleau-Ponty's distress with photography. It is extremely difficult to fake a photograph. There have been famous episodes of efforts to fake photographs by

¹⁶ Fox Talbot, "A Brief Historical Sketch of the Invention of the Art," in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), p. 27.

¹⁷ Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye*, p. 28.

¹⁸ Andre Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

airbrushing and other techniques, as well as combination photographs and photomontages. Such seamless transformations and combinations are technically difficult and time-consuming, and as long as the original negative is available for inspection, the transformations can be found out. The modernist photographer Edward Weston took this integrity and closure of the photograph as the hallmark of photography in contrast with painting. "The photographic image," he wrote, "partakes more of the nature of a mosaic than of a drawing or painting. It contains no *lines* in the painter's sense, but is entirely made up of tiny particles . . . by the intrusion of handwork, by too great enlargement, by printing on a rough surface, etc., the integrity of the photograph is destroyed."¹⁹ Weston regarded the introduction of hand work and manipulation in photography as the expression of the desire to paint. This illuminates Merleau-Ponty's position as well, for it contrasts the technological art of camera eye and emulsion coated film with painting's more embodied art of eye and hand.

With all this said, however, photography has very recently entered a new age, an age that some are going so far as to call a "post-photographic era," and an age that seems to me to give Merleau-Ponty exactly what he found in painting and what he wanted from photography, the ability to lie, more properly, the ability to interweave the visible and invisible, the imaginary and actual, daytime and oneiric images. Computer digital imaging has freed the photograph from the realism of causal imprinting. The elementary operation of digital imaging is assignment of an integer value to a pixel or cell on a grid in order to specify its tone or color. This is done with scanning devices that are digital "cameras" such as are carried by satellites and many of us have used on a smaller scale in Mac Labs, or it is done with personal computer programs known as "paint" programs. Once the visual information is stored, none of the photo negative's recalcitrance is present. The digital information can be manipulated rapidly and easily by computer, simply assigning new digits for old. Digital imaging blurs the customary distinctions between painting and photography, between

¹⁹ Edward Weston, "Seeing Photographically," in Trachtenberg, ed., *Classic Essays on Photography*, p. 170.

handmade and mechanical images.²⁰ Through digital imaging we can approximate the juxtapositions and contradictions in paintings by Magritte and Escher.

Digital imaging technology has now permeated the communications industries. In 1989, the *Wall Street Journal* estimated that ten percent of all color photographs published in the United States were being digitally retouched or altered.²¹ We can now see images of the dead Elvis voting in the '92 Presidential election and Teddy Kennedy replacing Al Gore as Governor Clinton's running mate. After the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion, a video clip of an Italian cement factory was passed to American television networks as footage of the damaged reactor. In 1989, *Time* magazine's retrospective on 150 years of photojournalism showed not the solitary image of one Astronaut Aldrin on the moon, but a veritable lunar invasion by seven astronauts, through the computer manipulation of Quantel Graphic Paintbox. In a dark and sinister version of the new power of electronic photo imaging, America watched the Gulf War through carefully selected, electronically captured, sometimes digitally processed images of distant and impersonal destruction. Slaughter became a video game.²² News pictures must increasingly be viewed more as illustrations than evidence and photographs are not as real as they once seemed.

It may seem paradoxical that when Merleau-Ponty held photography up to the standard of painting and seemed thereby to evidence a nostalgia for the pre-photographic age, it turns out that his philosophy of painting looked forward to the post-photographic age of the blurring of painting and photography. This result leaves us with all the ambiguities, contingencies, and dilemmas of ethical decision and action that Merleau-Ponty believed to comprise the very substance of the human world. He once wrote that his was "a philosophy that arouses in us a love for our times which are not the

²⁰ Cf. Williams, *The Reconfigured Eye*, Chapter 1, pp. 4-8.

²¹ Clare Ansberry, "Alterations of Photos Raise Host of Legal, Ethical Issues," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 26, 1989, B1. Cited in Williams, *The Reconfigured Eye*, p. 16.

²² Cf. Williams, *The Reconfigured Eye*, Chapters 2 and 3.

simple repetition of human eternity nor merely the conclusion to premises already postulated. It is a view which like the most fragile object of perception--a soap bubble, or a wave--or like the most simple dialogue, embraces indivisibly all the order and disorder of the world" (HT, 188-189; HT, 310). Perhaps we can find in Merleau-Ponty's account of the work of the painter and of "polymorphous Being" some of the germs of a "postmodern metaphysic" that does not succumb to either the excesses of philosophical totalization or sceptical negation. Upon his return to Paris after completing *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty wrote in the Preface to *Signs*: "Underneath the clamor a silence is growing, an expectation. Why could it not be a hope?" (S, 23; S, 32). Merleau-Ponty would no doubt be disturbed by the threats to privacy offered by digital image surveillance, and the burgeoning alliance between capitalist image-making and the confusions it engenders between the ideology of entertainment and the real injuries of poverty, war, class, race and sex. Yet as far as photography and art are concerned, one must imagine Merleau-Ponty happy in Tomorrowland.²³

University of Rhode Island

GALEN A. JOHNSON

²³ The ambiguity of this outcome is reflected in the last line of the essay. Cf. the last line of Albert Camus, "The Myth of Sisyphus," in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Random House, 1955): "One must imagine (il faut imaginer) Sisyphus happy."