

La compatibilité entre l'esthétique picturale et la sensibilité de Merleau-Ponty

Liu Mengyao

Résumé Cet article tente de prendre les essais de peinture de Merleau-Ponty comme texte de base, et utilise le terme "sensibilité" pour résumer la discussion de Merleau-Ponty sur l'expérience perceptive au cours de sa vie : du stade initial de "récupération du statut de la perception et du monde perçu" au stade ultérieur de "récupération du statut ontologique du sensible", la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty se reflète généralement dans un effort cohérent pour restaurer le statut de la sensibilité. Sa philosophie a toujours montré une affinité avec l'art moderne (en particulier la peinture, la poésie et la fiction modernes), non seulement dans ses nombreux essais artistiques, mais aussi dans ses œuvres philosophiques majeures (telles que la *Phénoménologie de la perception* et *Le visible et l'invisible*) où l'artiste moderne et son œuvre servent non pas d'exemples de sa pensée philosophique, mais d'interlocuteurs et même de révélateurs de cette pensée. Car, par rapport à l'art classique, l'art moderne met davantage l'accent sur la fidélité à l'expérience perceptive. Par conséquent, "Sensibilité" peut aussi résumer la philosophie de l'art de Merleau-Ponty.

Mots clés: sensibilité, corps, chair, peinture

The Compatibility of Merleau-Ponty's Painting Aesthetics and Sensibility

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Abstract: This article attempts to take Merleau-Ponty's painting essays as the core text, and use "sensibility" to summarize Merleau-Ponty's discussion on perceptual experience in his life: from the early stage of "recovering the status of perception and the perceived world" to the later "recovering the ontological status of the sensible", Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is generally reflected in a consistent effort to restore the status of sensibility. His philosophy has always shown an affinity for modern art (especially modern painting, poetry, and fiction), not only in his several artistic essays, but also in his major philosophical works (such as *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*) wherein the modern artist and his work serve not as examples of his philosophical thinking, but as interlocutors and even revelators of this thinking. Because compared with classical art, modern art puts more emphasis on faithfulness to perceptual experience. Therefore, "Sensibility" can also summarize Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art.

Keywords: sensibility, body, flesh, painting

Part I

As an important French philosopher in the twentieth century and a typical French academic intellectual, Merleau-Ponty has multiple thought dimensions. We define him phenomenologist, existentialist, and child psychology in different fields, scholars and even political commentators. But we seldom call him an esthetician. Although domestic and foreign academic circles recognize Merleau-Ponty's unique contribution to aesthetics, compared with other phenomenological aestheticians (such as Dufheiner and Ingarden), there is a lack of typical terms like aesthetic object, aesthetic experience, and even the word "aesthetics". Therefore, in what sense to understand Merleau-Ponty's thought as an aesthetic theory involves the position of Merleau-Ponty in the history of modern Western aesthetics, which is the first thing to be clarified in the study of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics.

Almost every researcher will face this problem when summarizing his art theory. Due to the atypical nature of this theory, we either exclude him from the history of aesthetics, or make a separate territory for him in this field. Some French historians of art philosophy believe: "In the sense that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is a *Phenomenology of Perception*, we can say that his

philosophy has fully revived an aesthetics¹." It is necessary to replace Merleau-Ponty's theory of "perception" with "sensibility" to understand this sentence, which is the identity of the discipline of aesthetics when it was born. If we refer to it as a useful way of thinking, then we may be able to talk about "Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics" more conveniently without losing conceptual rigor. If this line of thinking is correct, we can directly use "sensibility" as a basic summary of Merleau-Ponty's overall thinking, and thus put this thinking into the typical context of aesthetic discussions.

In my opinion, Merleau-Ponty actually composes "sensibility" consistently, from the early phenomenological theory of perception to the universal body (*chair*) as the "element" of existence built by the body in the later period, what he has always been doing is the perfection of sensibility. In his view, sensibility need to restore richness and vitality by combining the two key words of "body" and "flesh", which belong to Merleau-Ponty's early and late philosophy. Whether it is 'my body', 'other's body' or 'body as expression', and whether it is the "flesh" of the body, the "flesh" of language or the "flesh" of the world, what we understand is Sensual glow. The "sensibility" mentioned here is a kind of "ambiguous poetics" that opposes the traditional rationalism of Cartesian; Overall academic approach. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology aims to reconstruct the status of sensibility. This goal is rooted in Merleau-Ponty's painting theory, which does not explain aesthetic experience through a philosophical conceptual framework, or provide a general meaning for the aesthetic experience; on the contrary, the aesthetic experience is directly understood as the perceptual experience itself, and Merleau-Ponty's new ontological thought is based on this perceptual experience itself—this is The new ontology is the ontology of the flesh (*ontologie de la chair*), and the so-called flesh is the Sensibility-in-itself, which is the source of various idealities.

However, to say that Merleau-Ponty's sensibilism has revived an aesthetic, clearly implies a return, or at least a revival. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is aimed at the rationalist tradition of modern European philosophy (especially the tradition of Descartes and Leibniz²) and the "European scientific crisis" caused by this tradition, trying to rethink the sensibility itself, freeing it from its subordination to reason, and gaining its own value and status. Therefore, what Merleau-Ponty's "sensibility" tries to revive is the perceptual branch covered by the rational tradition in the history of Western philosophy, or the non-rational or even non-philosophical that has always been hidden under the rational tradition which reminds the boundaries of certainty in an ambiguous way. Therefore, this kind of revival is not a return to a specific period in the history of philosophy (of course, any revival is not a restoration), but a restoration of status (*r habilitation*) and revelation (*r v lation*).

Merleau-Ponty's sensibility is a kind of "ambiguous philosophy". It distances itself from both empirical mechanism and rationalism. In fact, this theory tries to find the perceptual basis that has been forgotten by the science dominated by mathematics and idealization since Descartes. This perceptual basis has a series of original characteristics-pre-scientific, pre-theoretical, pre-objective,

¹ Marion Lefeuve, *Merleau-Ponty au-del  de la ph nom nologie*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1976, p. 353.

² Barbaras Renaud, *De l' tre du ph nom ne: sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, J rome Millon, 1991, p. 103.

pr épr édicatif... These "pre" indicate that there is no distinction between nature and culture in the world at this level, so it is impossible to talk about approaching sensuality or even primitivism.

Merleau-Ponty emphasized perception, gaze and the physical connection between the subject and the world. Compared with the ability of the mind to acquire certainty, the ambiguity of the body is not regarded as a defect here. On the contrary, this ambiguous embodied experience is something more primal than the certainty of the mind: before our primordial relationship to the world is already at work before we recognize the world and stand opposite as objects for analysis. This relationship is inextricably ambiguous, but the inescapable foundation of all our human experience of existence. Our body is seeing, listening, speaking, and thinking, the world is firstly the time and space in which our body lives before it becomes our analysis object. In the ambiguous experience of bodily nature, the world is neither purely disordered—because a meaning has been born here; but it is not completely definite—because it has not to deal with the world face to face.

Embodiment, ambiguity, and prioritization of perception all show an affinity for art. Art, whether it is the original art or today's art, is inseparable from human physical manipulation, because it is first of all a "craft". A painter needs to operate a paintbrush with his hands, a musician touches keys or strings with his hands, and a sculptor must feel the hardness, lines and temperature of the raw material at the fingertips, the primacy of sensibility in art is beyond doubt. Today, with the prosperity of science, no technological means can replace the painter's "personal" operation, and any precise calculation can't help the painter form a good "hand feel". This is why, we have profound philosophy and superb science, but it does not prevent this ancient category from having its own territory since the Lascaux paintings, and even, compared with the above two, it sometimes seems more inexhaustible. Although people began to talk about the "end of art" after the "end of philosophy", Merleau-Ponty believed that: "The world may last for thousands of years, and for the painter, it remains to be painted as long as it exists, it will end but not be completed³."

Generally speaking, on the one hand, "Sensibility" can summarize Merleau-Ponty's discussion on perceptual experience throughout his life, from the early stage of "restoring the status of perception and the perceived world⁴" to "restoring ontological status of the sensible thing⁵". Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is generally embodied as a consistent effort to restore the status of sensibility. On the other hand, his philosophy has always shown an affinity to modern art (especially painting, poetry, and fiction), in his philosophical works, modern artists and their works serve not as examples of their philosophical thinking, but as interlocutors and even enlighteners of this thinking. Compared with classical art, modern art puts more emphasis on faithfulness to perceptual experience. From this perspective, "Sensibility" can also summarize Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art.

³ Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, p. 90.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Causeries 1948*, Seuil, édition S. Mánas é 2002, p. 14.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Eloge de la philosophie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1953, p. 257.

Part II

It should be said that Merleau-Ponty's painting essays is a convenient shortcut into Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. There are two reasons: on the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's painting essays are just in the three periods of his thoughts, and have natural landmarks in the time coordinate; The problem of philosophizing has always accompanied Merleau-Ponty's thinking, and this relationship has become even closer, until the visual problem and the philosophical problem finally converge.

At the stage of "The Doubt of Cézanne", Merleau-Ponty's main interest lies in Cézanne's way of seeing. Cézanne's dilemma and exploration in painting show how the painter's vision overcomes the dualism of traditional philosophy: what works there is neither the mind that controls things nor the eyes that can't tell the truth from the false, but the vision opening to the world, which allows order and meaning to emerge in the experience of natural vision. The problem here is that the distinction between the watcher (perceived) and the watched (perceived) still exists, which is contrary to the original state before the dualistic situation pursued by Merleau-Ponty. "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" continues the two clues established by Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy: perception and body, while seeking to break through the "bad ambiguity" in this theory. This path does not lead to the opposite of ambiguity philosophy, that is the Cartesian tradition that emphasizes a clear and distinct grasp of the world----the philosophy of immanence. The core term "style" in this essay on the one hand reflects the effort to transcend the world of perception to the field of truth; on the other hand, it is derived from Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception, reflecting his attempt to transform the previous philosophy, which heralds a new philosophical angle. Merleau-Ponty researcher Madison believes that Merleau-Ponty's ontology developed along three paths: painting, language and philosophy. This was echoed by Ricœur, who considered painting to be the most successful of these paths⁶. From "Cezanne's Doubt" to "Eye and Heart" via "Indirect Language and Silent Voice", Merleau-Ponty's painting aesthetics (sensibility) has developed to its final form, and it is also the culmination of this aesthetics: A visual ontology of painting. The ambiguity of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy thus becomes the legitimate form of this new ontology. Tamiaux once used the term "intertwining"(*entrelac*) to summarize Merleau-Ponty's final image theory into three aspects: the intertwining between the visible world and the viewing individual; the intertwining between the real and the imaginary; The intertwining between the personal and the public⁷. The first "intertwining" blurs the boundary between subject and object, and summarizes the entity as visibility (*visibilit *); the second establishes the ontological identity of the image, and promotes the illusion of "seeing" to the realm of reality; the third incorporates the existence of the Other into the

⁶ Madison, Gary Brent, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, a research for the Limits of Consciousness*, translated from the French by the Author, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981, p. 16.

⁷ Jacques. Taminaux, *The Thinker and the Painter*, in Dillon, M.C., ed., *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, pp. 206-208.

definition of the ego.

So far, the vision that painters rely on for artistic creation has finally become a kind of philosophy and become the real name of this philosophy. Barbaras said: "Through painting, vision makes itself philosophy. The role of the philosopher, then, is not to subject the painter's silent speech to the domination of the intellect, but to extend the silence of its own speech to the painter⁸." Through the image analysis of modern paintings, Merleau-Ponty transformed the objectification of traditional rational philosophy into a non-philosophical interrogate.

Part III

This is Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as sensibility. Next, we are willing to discuss the three propositions contained in this painting aesthetics, with the purpose of showing the overall theoretical structure of his "Sensibility". These propositions embody Merleau-Ponty's attempt to philosophize under the general name of "Sensibility." They are respectively: a reinterpreted perception theory, a generalized expression theory, and a unique vision theory. At different stages of the development of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts, these three aspects correspond to the corresponding core texts and show different degrees of importance. They are interpenetrating three aspects, and it is impossible to speak of one without the other two, each involves fundamental issues and runs through the whole. Neither in Merleau-Ponty's texts nor in his thoughts can the "one" and "the other" be separated. This is why we do not do a separate analysis of the core text, but directly enter from the propositions within the theory.

(1) The Perception: an attempt to return to the "living world"

"Cezanne's Doubt" is based on the perception theory of Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy, and explores the similarities between the body and works of art through the elaboration of the case of Cézanne, the "father of modern painting". The philosopher Merleau-Ponty and the painter Cézanne faced the ignorance and belittling of visual experience by the prejudice of traditional Western thought, and Cézanne's breakthroughs in color and perspective inspired Merleau-Ponty. In Merleau-Ponty's own academic planning, the theory of perception is the theme of his early philosophy and the general starting point of his entire philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's student, follower, and collator of his manuscripts, Lefort, believes that in Merleau-Ponty's view, perception (*percevoir*) implies all of associations from the subject to the world and all sensible things⁹. First of all, it is necessary to understand the perception theory established by Merleau-Ponty in the dual rejection of empiricism and intellectualism. Empiricism regards perception as a combination of sensations, believes that sectional sensory stimulation is the basic form of perception, and believes that "pure sensation should be an undifferentiated, fleeting dotted shock¹⁰".

⁸ Barbaras, Renaud, *De l'être du phénomène: sur l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Jérôme Millon, 1991, p. 238.

⁹ Lefort, Claude, *Sur une colonne absente, Ecrits autour de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, p. 140.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 9.

Gestalt psychology experiments have proved that our perception is primarily holistic, and the so-called "pure feeling" cannot be formed. On the other hand, empiricism pays too much attention to the perceived side of the perceptual experience, while ignoring the act of perception and the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. It only describes the natural world after removing the human world or the cultural world, so this description of the natural world is also inappropriate: what empiricism talks about is the sum of stimuli and qualities¹¹. This kind of natural world is rather the object of scientific research, the residue after science abstracts and extracts the original nature, rather than the nature that appears in our perceptual experience.

Contrary to the fact that empiricism lacks the inner connection between objects and the activities caused by them, intellectualism is so concerned with illustrating this inner connection that it ignores the contingency of thinking causes¹². Intellectualism's refutation of empiricism makes it appear to have a clear and reliable theory of perception. For example, Descartes' famous analysis of wax blocks tells us that perceptual experience ultimately requires a spiritual "judgment" to ensure its authenticity: here, "seeing" is replaced with "thought about see". Thus, perception eventually rises to an act of interpretation of the world. In this way, intellectualism deviates from the real perceptual activity itself, and becomes the constitution and possession of the world by absolute consciousness.

It is necessary to deny the atomistic perception view of the empiricists and abandon the idealist perception view of the intellectualists. Nor is this double negation meant to take a middle line. Like the painter Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty faced the traditional conflict between reason and nature, and at the same time did not wish to make a simple reconciliation between the two. Merleau-Ponty said: "The antithesis of intellectualism is exactly the same as that of empiricism. Both regard the objective world, which is not the primal in terms of time and meaning, as the object of analysis, and neither can express the formation of consciousness consciousness. The particular way of its object. Both distance themselves from perception, rather than participate in it¹³." Merleau-Ponty, who made good use of Hegel's dialectic, hoped to arrive at a synthesis after his critique of empiricism and intellectualism problem, the return to actual perception itself.

For him, the perceived world is the presupposed basis of all rationality, all value, and all existence. Such views neither destroy rationality nor ration, but seeks to bring them down to the ground. The reason why the perceived world can play such a basic role in the rational world is that its analysis of perception is relatively new compared to traditional philosophy. His theory of perception is not about returning to a naive trust in the human senses (the "natural attitude" that Husserl objected to): from the figure-ground example of the Gestalt theory he cites, he emphasizes that primary perception does not simply come from external stimuli, but is generated from a distinctive relationship, which render the perceptual experience acquires a certain meaning. Because the background is always in a position that cannot be clearly viewed (when it is clearly viewed, it becomes a figure, and the previous figure becomes the background again), so this kind

¹¹ Ibid. p. 33.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 36.

¹³ Ibid. p. 34.

of perceptual experience inevitably carries some uncertain factors, which is an opening, ambiguous quality that the Cartesian tradition of pursuing "clear and distinct" wished to avoid.

But we can't understand Merleau-Ponty's path as Gestalt psychology. Although Merleau-Ponty used the conclusions of Gestalt psychological experiments extensively in *Phenomenology of Perception*, this does not mean that he fully agrees with these psychologists. In fact, he believed, the descriptions given out help us return to the phenomenal world, but it does not give up explaining the ideal form of psychology, and thus does not break with naturalism¹⁴. That is to say, Gestalt psychology itself has not got rid of the natural science causality that Merleau-Ponty opposes, which uses physical causes to dominate psychological phenomena. What triggers and supports Merleau-Ponty's view of perception is neither the philosophical debates between empiricism and rationalism, nor the new achievements in the development of psychology, but Husserl's "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*). theory. In his later works, Husserl has shown that the life world is the foundation of meaning forgotten by natural science: since Galileo, the idealized nature gradually replaces the pre-scientific intuitive nature, while forgetting that reality is the precondition of all idealization. He believes that only "the world that is given, experienced and can be experienced as the only reality, through actual perception¹⁵" is "the source of truly direct and original intuitive thoughts¹⁶". In this foundation of meaning recovered by Husserl, "perception" is at the core, and it is it that causes the formation of the life-world. Only by starting from the life-world theory can we find the key to interpret Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception.

Husserl's "life-world" theory was put forward in response to the crisis of European science. For Merleau-Ponty, with the reinterpretation of perception, what he hopes is to return to the living perceptual experience of the world behind scientific analysis and philosophical reflection, where he can find the origin of science and philosophy. As Spiegelberg puts it: "...perception, in his view, is the cradle of science and philosophy. The perceived or experienced world, with all its subjective and objective features, is the common foundation of science and philosophy. Clarifying this foundation is the first task of the new phenomenology¹⁷." Only by noticing this basic status of perceptual experience can we accurately distinguish the emphasis on perception in *Phenomenology of Perception* from "pre-reflective" "natural attitude": In the natural attitude, people are often influenced by the scientific explanation of the world and forget the comprehension of the life-world, which is also the forgetting of the perception itself. On this point, Spiegelberg's summary is accurate: "As a preliminary summary, we can say that the first phenomenological reflection of Merleau-Ponty consists in the attempt to observe and describe the perceived world, without scientific explanations and operation, without philosophical

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 58-59.

¹⁵ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970. p. 78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 80.

¹⁷ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, Minnesota, The Hague, 1960, p. 715.

preconceptions, or in brief, it consists in the study of the life-world in Husserl¹⁸." Therefore, we can think that Husserl's phenomenon slogan "Back to the thing itself" is understood by Merleau-Ponty as a return to the "life- world", as it expresses in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*: "Back to the thing itself is to return to the the world before cognition, relative to this world, the whole science is abstract, symbolic and unable to exist independently, just like geography is relative to the natural scenery, in the latter , the first thing we know is a forest, a meadow, and a river¹⁹."

Perception was the subject of Merleau-Ponty's early theory, which continued until around 1950²⁰. Merleau-Ponty was not a physiologist or a psychologist, and his task was not limited to clarifying the true nature of the phenomenon of perception. As a philosopher, the purpose of returning to the perceptual world is mainly to find a solid foundation for reflective activities (he believes that "a new relation between mind and truth is found in the experience of the perceived world²¹"), he does not stop here, but has to move from the world of perception to the world of culture, and start discussing truth and its associated language, history, and art. The theory of expression begins within the theory of perception and leads towards a theory of meaning in the cultural world.

(2) Expression Theory: The Parallel Between Philosophy and Art

The question of "expression" connects the core of Merleau-Ponty's early and late work. In the Merleau-Ponty vocabulary summarized by Dupond, the word "expression" runs through Merleau-Ponty's philosophical thoughts in various periods. In 1945, expression revealed a metaphysical structure of the human body, an open and indeterminate capacity for signification; starting with *Indirect Language and Voices of Silent* in 1952, the expression was divorced from the metaphysics of the body structure, under the influence of linguistics, began to examine the differential structure of meaning; finally, in the later texts, an "*ontologie de l'expression*" emerged: the phenomenon of expression no longer be understood starting from the category of meaning, but to be grasped starting from the reversibility of the *le voyant* and the *le visible*, that is, understanding expression as the ontological capacity of nature and life. Therefore, one of the best witnesses of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical process is concept of "expression" as the core of meaning , which is reject the internal (thought) and external (body, extension)²².

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 726.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 3.

²⁰ In his 1951 teaching plan he said: "Since perception lies at the intersection of two orders, it should be our subject. My first two books were devoted to this. *The Structure of Behavior* investigated the perceiving person from the outside, and seeks to elicit valuable meaning from those experimental studies that derive it from the point of view of the unfamiliar spectator; on the other hand, *The Phenomenology of Perception* is placed within the subject, first to show how existing knowledge compels us to conceive its various relations to its body, to its world, finally to outline a theory of consciousness and reflection that makes these relationships possible. "(PII, 13)

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Prose du monde*, Gallimard, Edition Lefort, Paris, 1969, p. 2.

²² Dupond, Pascal, *Le vocabulaire de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Ellipses Edition Marketing S.A., 2001, p. 25.

Merleau-Ponty's perception theory realizes a philosophical shift: the subject is no longer a strange observer to the world, but an embodied intervener. And this does not prevent Merleau-Ponty's philosophy from still being a theory of truth; it's just that this theory of truth can accommodate the meaning generation of art works. The concept of expression communicates the fields of philosophy and art. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty even made an analogy between the body and works of art, which is based on the similarity of the two in expressive activities. Expression is symbolic or symbolic activity. We tend to talk about verbal or artistic expression. Merleau-Ponty's original idea is to extend the act of expression to the field of the body, and regard the act of expression as the general activity of the body-subject's "being-in-the-world" (*être au monde/être dans le monde*): "Because our body moves by itself, that is, because it is inseparable from a view of the world, which is this realized view, our bodies are not only the possible conditions for geometrical synthesis, but also for all the expressions and acquisitions that constitute the cultural world²³." This generalized theory of expression makes all bodily acts expressive, and the body thus become the basic subject of expressive acts, and it therefore is a necessary basis for opening to the world of nature and culture: "In fact, expression begins with bodily movements, gestures, and understanding its least ambiguous version in a mathematical algorithm, which is how we arrive at truth²⁴." Expression Adding the dimension of consciousness to the embodiment of the body-subject: "To express (*exprimer*) for a speaking subject is to adopt consciousness; To express oneself to the person²⁵." Therefore, expression not only has the function of communicating the self and the external world, but also the starting point of self-awareness.

The theory of expression is primarily concerned with the relation between signs and ideas, without some prior one-to-one correspondence between the two, according to Merleau-Ponty. Expression is not the placing of self-evident meanings into a fixed system of signs. "Expression is creative in every case, and what is expressed is always inseparable from the expression²⁶." Thus, there is no pure thought or independent signified; speech is not a mere shell of thought, there is no definite deadline for the generation of meaning, and meaning is always floating between the signifier and the signified. There is not merely an external connection between thought and speech, they are mutually overridden. This idea developed into a theory of reversibility in the sense of ontology in the later Merleau-Ponty. Several distinctions within the expression can make us more clear about the intention of Merleau-Ponty to introduce the concept of "expression". In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty distinguished between "*la parole parlante*" and "*la parole parlée*". The latter is formed in the long-term accumulation of daily experience, it has "disposable meaning like possessing acquired wealth²⁷", it makes communication with others

²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 445,487

²⁴ Bonan, Ronald, *Premières leçons sur l'esthétique de Merleau-Ponty*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p.6.

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 113.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945, p. 448.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 229.

possible, and makes true expression activities--literature, art and philosophy--possible. These real expressive activities are "*la parole parlante*", they are "speech in the initial state of meaning intention"²⁸. Within the "*la parole parlante*", Merleau-Ponty did not continue to subdivide. He did not place language expression above other expressions from the convenience and clarity of expression, and even repeatedly exemplified the importance of successful expression with aesthetic expression²⁹. This means that he does not believe that there is a clear and distinct signified world separate from the act of expression, which means that meaning is often generated indirectly and laterally. This important inference will help us understand the "*impens é*" that Merleau-Ponty valued later: the unspoken things at the edge of words may be more meaningful than the words themselves. In the theory of vision we are about to talk about, this "*impens é*" is the invisible (*l'invisible*) surrounding the visible (*le visible*).

(3) Vision: The Priority of Painting

Merleau-Ponty's painting aesthetics showed a mature style during later period. Eye and Mind is profound in conception and rich in content. On the one hand, it is the continuation and development of the inherent problems in the first two texts on painting aesthetics; On the other hand, it reflects the basic features of Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy in a condensed form (including core concepts, clues and preliminary conclusions). Therefore, this is an article that combines aesthetics and philosophy well and can be used as a synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetic thoughts on painting. As a "*la parole parlante*", a genuinely expressive activity, painting differs from both literature and philosophy. Compared with the "ability to speak" of the latter two, painting is silent. A painter deals with the world with his eyes and expresses on the canvas with his hands and brush. The communication between the viewer and the painter is also carried out in silent eyes. Merleau-Ponty has repeatedly emphasized this "mute" (*muet*), for example: "Painting confuses all our categories by presenting an effectively analogous dream universe of its corporeal essence, silent signification"³⁰. "It is the silent existence itself that finally reveals its own meaning (*sens*)"³¹. This "voice of silence", "words without words" is meaningful for Merleau-Ponty. "Silence" is also a feature of bodily experience, he once said that the body is "the silent guard under my words and actions"³². Then, we may understand this "silence" as the "pre-reflective" muteness relative to the clamor of reflection. In this way, not only does silence not constitute a defect in the expression of painting, but it confers privileges on it: when intellectual philosophy pursuing certainty and modern scientism tinged with cybernetics have declared the superiority of

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "The expression of aesthetic feeling gives existence-in-itself to what it expresses, places existence-in-itself in nature as a perceived that everyone can understand, or, on the contrary, deprives the symbols themselves of their empirical existence- the body of the theater actor , the colors and canvases of painting—and take them to another world." (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945, p. 213)

³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit*, Gallimard, Paris, 1961, p. 35.

³¹ Ibid., p. 87.

³² Ibid., p. 13.

their own "knowledge", painting, however, regards itself as the unknown and the inquisitor, and has not been belittled or despised; this may imply that a pre-reflective field that returns to perceptual experience needs to be re-examined.

The question of "seeing" has always been a clue lurking in Merleau-Ponty's whole thought, and it develops to its peak in the "Visible and Invisible". Claude Lefort once summarized Merleau-Ponty's thought process with the title "What is Seeing" (*Qu'est-ce que voir?*). At the beginning of this article, he said: "From "Cezanne's Doubt" to "Eye and Mind", from *Phenomenology of Perception* to *Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty constantly pondered vision. On the night when he suddenly fell down in May 1961, a book he kept flipping open was open, witnessing his final work: this book was *Dioptrics*. Until the last moment, the philosopher still cherished this question—'what is to see'—has been given a new answer in his works³³." In Lefort's view, Merleau-Ponty's thought, although extensive, can be attributed to the Exploration of the "mystery of visibility": when he studies language, he finds the secret of language from the painter's vision and the "silent voices" of painting; when he studies politics and history, he often returns to perceptual experience in order to reopen the definition of politics and history; he studies truth, but obtains certainty by returning to the truth of perceptual experience. The eye, as the general metaphor of the opening of the sensuous subject to the world, played a key role in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical journey. Especially in the late Merleau-Ponty, vision is even independent from perception to undertake the task of establishing a new ontology.

Regarding the question of "what is seeing", Merleau-Ponty did not give the final answer, and we can get some clues from his discussion on painting. True painting not only allows us to see the visible world, but also incorporates the invisible into the visible world. "Seeing" here is neither an experiential process in the physiological-physical sense nor a metaphor for the purely inner mind's eye. Great painters devoted their lives to the study of this superpower of vision. But in the final analysis, this ability is not exclusive to painters. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the potentiality of our general vision, the general state of being that lies behind the shadows of everyday experience.

"Learning to see the world again" is Merleau-Ponty's standard for "true philosophy"³⁴, the verb "see" has a double meaning: it is both a "understanding" and a perceptual experience. It means that philosophy should constantly return to our actual experience and find the perceptual basis of human existence in order to verify and examine the intellectual categories. His philosophy of perception is devoted to this point. In this respect, painting has a natural priority, visual experience embodies the interaction between painting as the visible (the Eye) and philosophy as the invisible (the Mind). This interaction is an important dimension of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity. The distinction between *The Visible and the Invisible* can avoid some of the traditional dilemmas of phenomenon and essence, appearance and connotation, and make these traditionally opposing fields appear intertwined and reversible. From the perspective of painting art, the visibility (color, line, composition, etc.) of a painting and the invisibility on two levels are intertwined: one is the light, shadow, brightness, depth and other elements that make the painting

³³ Lefort, Claude, *Sur une colonne absente, Ecrits autour de Merleau-Ponty*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, p. 140.

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris, 1945, p. 16.

effective representation. The second is the spiritual meaning of the works, which establishes the ontological status of the paintings.