

Art, Romanticism & Metaphysics 6

Heidegger & Merleau-Ponty

Phenomenology's rapprochement of art and philosophy. Heidegger's account of art as resisting the modern conception of technology, and as articulation of the Being of entities. Merleau-Ponty: painting as insight into the transcendental constitution of objects in perception. Sartre's anti-romantic theory of imagination.

Main reading

- ? M. Heidegger, 'The origin of the work of art' (1950) [abridged], in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. Farrell Krell.
- M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', in *Sense and Non-Sense*, ch. 1.

Further reading – primary texts

- M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect language and the voices of silence', in *Signs*, ch. 1.
- M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and mind', in *The Primacy of Perception*, ch. 5.
- M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Metaphysics and the novel', in *Signs*, ch. 2.
- J.-P. Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination*, Conclusion (sect. 2 of the Conclusion, 'The work of art', is reprinted in H. Osborne ed., *Aesthetics*).

Further reading – commentary

On Heidegger's later philosophy and philosophy of art:

- ? J. Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, ch. 1.
- C. Guignon, Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, pp. 15-26. Summary of the themes in Heidegger's later philosophy, giving the context of his philosophy of art.
- F. Olafson, 'The unity of Heidegger's thought', in C. Guignon ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Clear and detailed account of the later Heidegger in relation to the earlier.
- H. Dreyfus, 'Heidegger on the connection between nihilism, art, technology, and politics', in C. Guignon ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. On Heidegger's critique of technology.
- S. Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, ch. 6. On Heidegger and art.
- A. McGill, *Prophets of Extremity*, ch. 4. Critical discussion of Heidegger's 'aestheticism'; see esp. pp. 157-62 on 'The origin of the work of art'.
- P. Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, ch. 5. On Heidegger.
- T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, ch. 11.
- J. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, ch. 2.

On Merleau-Ponty:

- E.F. Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic*, esp. chs. 7-8. On Merleau-Ponty.
- P. Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, ch. 6. On Merleau-Ponty.

Essay questions

- Discuss critically Heidegger's conception of the truth of art.
- Elucidate and assess Merleau-Ponty's conception of the shared task of art and philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty ('Metaphysics and the novel'): 'For a long time it looked as if philosophy and literature not only had different ways of saying things but had different objects as well. Since the end of the 19th century, however, the ties between them have been getting closer and closer ... Classical metaphysics could pass for a speciality with which literature had nothing to do because metaphysics operated on the basis of an uncontested rationalism, convinced it could make the world and human life understood by an arrangement of concepts. It was a matter of ... explaining life ... Everything changes when a phenomenological or existential philosophy assigns itself the task, not of explaining the world ... but rather of formulating an experience of the world, a contact with the world which precedes all thought about the world ... When one is concerned with giving voice to the experience of the world ... one can no longer credit oneself with a perfect transparency of expression. Philosophical expression assumes the same ambiguities as literary expression.'

Heidegger. Background: Being and Time's distinction between Being and beings/entities. The later Heidegger: anti-humanism, and a critique of modern technology, as a 'setting upon' and 'challenging' of nature. The true notion of technology – techne – is that of 'being responsible for letting something presence itself', 'occasioning', 'bringing-forth' entities: 'Technology comes to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where alethea, truth, happens'; this revealing 'is never a human handiwork'. 'The origin of the work of art': – 'Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealedness of its Being ... there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is ... there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work. In the work of art the truth of beings has set itself to work. "To set" means here "to bring to stand". Some particular being, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its Being. The Being of beings comes into the steadiness of its shining. The essence of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work.'

– 'The currently predominant thing-concept, thing as formed matter'.

– 'we [try to] treat as the most immediate reality of the work, its thingly substructure ... we then also ascribe a superstructure supposed to contain its artistic quality'.

– this is 'the formulation native to aesthetics. The way aesthetics views the art work from the outset is dominated by the traditional interpretation of all entities.'

– 'the dominant things-concepts are inadequate as means of grasping the thingly aspect of the work'.

– 'We must now ask the question of truth with a view to the work ... it is necessary to make visible once more the happening of truth in the work ... A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley. This building encloses the figure of the god ... It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. / Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the obscurity of that rock's bulky yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm manifest in its violence. The luster and gleam of the stone, through itself apparently glowing only by the grace of the sun, yet first brings to radiance the light of the day, the breadth of the sky, the darkness of the night. The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air ... The Greeks early called this emerging and rising in itself and in all things physis ... We call this ground the earth. What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet.'

– 'The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on

- earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground ... To be a work means to set up a world ... The work moves the earth itself into the open region of a world and keeps it there ... The setting up of a world and the setting forth of earth are two essential features in the work-being of the work.'
- 'in great art ... the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge'. The role of the audience is to 'preserve' the work.
 - 'The art work opens up in its own way the Being of entities. This opening up, i.e., this revealing, i.e., the truth of beings, happens in the work. In the art work, the truth of beings has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work.'

Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt'

- 'Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, between order and chaos. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organisation. He makes a basic distinction not between 'the senses' and 'the understanding' but rather between the spontaneous organisation of the things we perceive and the human organisation of ideas and sciences. We see things; we agree about them; we are anchored in them; and it is with "nature" as our base that we construct our sciences. Cézanne wanted to paint this primordial world ... He wished, as he said, to confront the sciences with the nature "from which they came". / By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cézanne discovered what recent [Gestalt, phenomenological] psychologists have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one ... it is Cézanne's genius that when the over-all composition of the picture is seen globally ... [we have] the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organising itself before our eyes.'
- 'Other minds are given to us only as incarnate, as belonging to faces and gestures. Countering with the distinctions of soul and body, thought and vision, is of no use here, for Cézanne returns to just that primordial experience from which these notions are derived and in which they are inseparable. The painter who conceptualises and seeks the expression first misses the mystery – renewed every time we look at someone – of a person's appearing in nature.'
- 'Expressing what exists is an endless task ... The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remained walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things. Only one emotion is possible for this painter – the feeling of strangeness – and only one lyricism – that of the continual rebirth of existence.'

Sartre, Psychology of Imagination

- 'the imaginative act is the reverse of the act of reality ... the imaginative act is at once constitutive, isolating and annihilating ... The imaginary appears "on the foundation of the world" ... All imaginative consciousness uses the world as the negated foundation of the imaginary.'
- 'the imagination, which has become a psychological and empirical function, is the necessary condition for the freedom of the empirical man in the midst of the world'.
- 'the work of art is an unreality ... the aesthetic object is something unreal ... it is outside the real, outside existence. I do not hear it [a musical work] actually, I listen to it in the imaginary ... Aesthetic contemplation is an induced dream ... an entranced consciousness, engulfed in the imaginary, is suddenly freed by the sudden ending of the play, of the symphony, and comes suddenly in contact with existence ... From these observations we can already conclude that the real is never beautiful. Beauty is a value applicable only to

the imaginary and which means the negation of the world in its essential structure.'
