

“Bresson’s Doubt: Pushing Merleau-Ponty toward a Phenomenology of Film, through the Artistic Affinities of Bresson and Cézanne”

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The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological aesthetics, with the intention of ultimately fleshing out what we might call a phenomenological film-theory.

Taking his cue from Husserl’s and Heidegger’s earlier appraisals of art, Merleau-Ponty famously composed several significant articles and essays which aim to show what art – specifically painting – may reveal about our lived experiences. These renowned works, devoted above all to the works of Paul Cézanne, bring to light essential aspects of one’s perceptual engagement with the world. As such, they are considered amongst the most essential works within the field of phenomenological aesthetics.

Although these essays are particularly valuable for their lucid articulations of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, there is a striking lack of diversity and range with respect to the artistic styles, mediums, and genres which they traverse.

This paper will aim to initially expose Merleau-Ponty’s motivations for primarily limiting his evaluation of aesthetics to the works of Cézanne. Initially, I will frame Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical project as a straddling of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic structuralism and Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology. As such, I will then illustrate how, in a similar light, Cézanne can be seen as straddling the structural techniques of Renaissance art (ie: the almost mathematical structuring of the canvas in order to denote depth/space/etc.), and Impressionist techniques (ie: the blurring of objects/the lack of hard lines/the limited usage of colours/etc.) to capture the brute experience of an embodied individual in the world. Along these lines, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty sees Cézanne as a sort of kindred spirit in the sense that his project entails an elucidation of one’s primordial engagement with the world via the senses, while also maintaining the concrete structures that organize and arrange our experiences rationally.

From here, this paper will consider Merleau-Ponty’s lack of consideration with regard to film, and examine the basis for such an evasive treatment of this artistic medium. In doing so, the aim of this paper will seek to reveal why an interrogation of Merleau-Ponty’s restricted treatment of film is inadequate for a thoroughgoing analysis of the medium, and why it is perhaps

preferable to push Merleau-Ponty's thought beyond its intended scope in order to flesh out an original film theory.

A subsequent analysis of filmmaker Robert Bresson's artistic style will then seek to reveal several similarities between his techniques and Cézanne's style as a painter. It will be argued that what Cézanne sought to achieve through his paintings is akin to what Bresson sought to accomplish with his films. As such, this paper will attempt to flesh out a "Merleau-Pontian" analysis of film by engaging the philosopher's reflections on Cézanne's work to Bresson's films.

With the assistance of several passages from Jean-Luc Godard's collection of essays, *Godard on Godard*, this paper will aim to investigate the advantages and disadvantages of film as a phenomenological apparatus. In Godard's work, it is revealed that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project inspired his film style, and in this way, his films might be interpreted as an initial attempt to expound a phenomenological film-theory.

The intended purpose of this paper is to illustrate what film, as an artistic medium, can reveal to us with regard to our perceptual and embodied engagements in the world. It will be argued that film, as an audio-visual medium, could perhaps provide a more robust artistic paradigm for illustrating Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project, as it has the unique ability to express the synesthetic experience of the senses that the French philosopher sought to explicate through his work.