Painting as Stylized Vision: The Movement of Invisibility in “Eye and Mind”

“In the work of Cézanne, Juan Gris, Braque and Picasso, in different ways, we encounter objects...that do not pass quickly before our eyes in the guise of objects we ‘know well’ but, on the contrary, hold our gaze, ask questions of it, convey to it in a bizarre fashion the very secret of their substance, the very mode of their material existence and which, so to speak, stand ‘bleeding’ before us.”

“I cannot be grasped in immanence,” announces the tomb of Paul Klee. If the strictly immanent is in some way deficient, then this is because it is always more than itself — immediate visibility is the trace of a whole play of invisible becoming. But profane vision misses this excess, taking for the whole what is only its surface. The topic of this paper will be an exploration of the way painting is capable of cultivating this trace of invisibility, of following its thread as it weaves itself in and through the fabric of Being. By making visible the in-visible — what is in the visible, obscured by its overtness—painting is able to disrupt ordinary vision. To make sense of this concept, as well as the rest of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of painting, we will consider Picasso’s *Dora Maar au Chat*, a portrait of one of his most significant mistress-muses — the “weeping woman.”

The painter, says Merleau-Ponty, “interrogates” the object of his painting “with his gaze.” He seeks to “render visible,” to speak with Klee, the object’s enigmatic invisibilities, the style by which the object gives itself over to us in the way that it does. The painting “gives visible existence to what profane vision believes to be invisible.” So what of these invisibilities, this style? It is here that Merleau-Ponty’s line of thought begins to proffer a startling ontology. Doubtless, this term invisible means many things to Merleau-Ponty. For the purposes of this paper, we will interpret it in terms of style. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “I am a psychological and historical structure and have received with existence a manner of existing, a style.” Structurally, people appear to us in the way that they do by means of their personalities, experiences, memories and habits. In other words, they are visible in the way that they are by means of their invisibilities. Concept, idea, mood, affect: these invisibilities line the visible, constituting the way it gives itself to vision. I cannot see Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder the way I can see its victim’s anxiety and tears. The latter’s visibility is made possible by the invisibility of the former. This relation of visible to invisible permeates the entirety of Being, constituting the way the fabric of the world hangs together. Understood in this way, the world becomes a bottomless enigma, polymorphous and endlessly pregnant with possibility. It is a web, a plenum, of bodies and the way they move — their styles. And bodies appear to us as infinitely diverse; they proffer a wide range of stylistic becoming. Things are distinguished from each other therefore not on the basis of fixed identities — for Being is always becoming — but rather by the “carnal particularity” of their individual styles. “It is through its style,” writes Singer in her essay on Merleau-Ponty, “that the perceptual object is present as what and how it is.” Of particular significance to Merleau-Ponty is this how-ness. The what is transient, fluid — ceaselessly shifting and becoming. The how refers to the terms of this becoming, the trajectory of
this transience. A thing’s movement therefore is its identity, and its identity is the shape of its becoming.

In “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” Merleau-Ponty develops this conception of style as “a certain manner of being flesh” with reference to his perception of a woman. This woman, he writes, is not first encountered on the basis of a shape or contour, as a sort of “colored mannequin” waiting to be endowed only after the fact with a personality, with a way of moving through the world unique to her. To resurrect our textile metaphor: there is not first fabric, and only afterward its texture or the way it is threaded, the manner by which it hangs together. All is given simultaneously; fabric simply is all of these things at once. This is style. The woman “is a certain manner of being flesh which is given entirely in her walk or even in the simple shock of her heel on the ground.”

She is all of these things; but more importantly, she is also given to perception in precisely this way: “an individual, sentimental, sexual expression.”

Perception does not divide essence from accidental particularity, it does not subject the way one walks to one’s basic corporeal extension; it does not separate at all. In a word: “perception already stylizes.” Stylization “begins as soon as [the painter] perceives—that is, as soon as he arranges certain gaps or fissures, figures and grounds, a top and a bottom, a norm and a deviation, in the inaccessible fullness of things.” When we speak of the painter’s style, we mean precisely this: his way of seeing the world, of arranging and making sense of it. It is by means of his style that he presents the world to us in the particular way that he does — Braque’s play of geometric shapes, Rothko’s wash of affect or mood. It is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty writes that whether the painter is seeking to express real or paper flowers, “he always goes back to his world,” as if the vision he is chasing lay dormant there from the beginning. To paint his sunflowers, for example, Van Gogh had to make manifest their meaning as it presented itself within the universe of his style. Their expression lay dormant not in the flowers themselves, but rather in the world through which they had to pass before they could become the flowers we know to be Van Gogh’s own. But we must be careful not to set up a false image: the painter does not retreat from the world of perception into his own privative realm in order to paint. Rather, just the opposite: the world of his perception is nothing other than the world that he brings to life in painting. The painter teaches “that it is impossible, in this world, to separate things from their way of appearing.”

The style of his painting is the perspective of his vision, the way he interprets the world in seeing it. “How would the painter or poet express,” Merleau-Ponty asks, “anything other than his encounter with the world?” Perception is therefore selective, stylized, and continuous with the movements and fluctuations of the world.

Style is not just a trajectory of movement, not just one manner of moving through the world; but rather this manner of movement, this singular mode of engagement with the world. Style is a “distinctive way of being and being-with.” It is metabolic: each body has its own way of consuming and digesting the world as it moves through it. Thus, it is by means of its style that a body creates itself; for if identity is a particular form of movement, then it is a constant happening: a body never fully or finally is, but is always in the process of becoming. And everything has a style, even what we might normally consider inanimate objects.

It seems strange to think of a mountain in terms of its style or way of going; and yet, Galen Johnson observes the manner by which two mountains express two very different ways of “making…forests, animals, and peaks “mountainous” and “stony”.” Further, Johnson holds that the durability of the mountain is not an excuse for freezing events and actions into an ontology of permanent substances.” Everything has a speed of becoming, a way of heeding the world — the mountain is certainly far slower than the tree, which is far slower than the cat, which is far slower than the fly, and so on. But this relative lack of speed is not an excuse for abandoning the lexicon of style and becoming in favour of the vocabulary of permanence and fixity. Everything has a particular way of moving through the world, a manner of taking up the world, making sense of it, a rhythm and speed of becoming, an intensity of consumption — in short, a style.
The thing appears to us in the way that it does by means of its style — which serves, for Singer, “as the phenomenal presence of the thing’s identity.”\textsuperscript{21} And it is in this sense that Merleau-Ponty speaks of the painter’s vision as “an ongoing birth.”\textsuperscript{22} The painter makes immediately visible that which is “only virtually visible,” like the fetus that is eventually expunged from its mother’s womb and given over to the world of visibility.\textsuperscript{23} In terms of style, the painter translates the way a thing goes into an expression of what that thing is. It is by making the virtually visible actually visible that the painter gives birth.

Let us turn now to a consideration of Picasso’s \textit{Dora Maar Au Chat}, a portrait among his most significant.\textsuperscript{24} Speaking of his mistress, Maar, Picasso exclaimed:

\begin{quote}
I couldn’t make a portrait of her laughing. For me she’s the weeping woman. For years I’ve painted [Dora Maar] in tortured forms, not through sadism, and not with pleasure, either, just obeying a vision that forced itself on me. It was the deep reality, not the superficial one.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The portrait in front of me, my eyes are drawn immediately to Maar’s fiendish hands, her monstrous nails. In Nusch Eluard’s 1935 photograph of Maar,\textsuperscript{26} her fingers are almost as captivating, but for precisely the opposite reason: they are gentle, sweet, generous and merciful. The differences between Eluard’s photograph and Picasso’s portrait are startling. But given Picasso’s own remarks regarding his portrait, we might be inclined to think that Eluard’s photograph expresses the merely “superficial” reality of Dora Maar; she appears beautiful and serene, self-contained and calm. In Picasso’s painting, Maar is vicious and vibrating with energy — the chair seems barely capable of containing the visceral ebullience of her figure. Picasso calls this “tortured form” of Maar her “deep reality.” In terms of the concepts delineated above, we might say that Eluard’s photograph gives us Dora Maar’s immediate visibility. It is neither disruptive, nor transformative of the way we might understand Maar. Picasso’s portrait, on the contrary, announces itself as an unusual expression of Maar. This is because it renders visible the deep, tortured reality that imposed itself upon Picasso’s conception of his mistress. It articulates Maar’s style — her visceral energy, her wickedness — as it gives itself to Picasso’s vision. The painting makes sense of Maar in terms of Picasso’s relationship with her, disrupting our mundane understanding and forcing upon us a wholly novel way of taking up not only Dora Maar the woman, but Dora Maar the lover, the mistress, the muse. And Merleau-Ponty knows this rather well. In “Indirect Language,” he writes:

\begin{quote}
There will be in the painting not just “a woman” or “an unhappy woman” or “a hatmaker.” There will also be the emblem of a way of inhabiting the world, of handling it, and of interpreting it by her face, by clothing, the agility of her gestures and the inertia of her body—in short, the emblems of a certain relationship with being.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

He speaks here of a mere passerby, but the descriptive coincidence with Maar is uncanny. Does Picasso’s portrait not give us a certain intimacy with Maar’s “gestures,” with her “inertia”? Does it not express in her wicked fingers, in her restless figure, precisely that which Merleau-Ponty calls “the emblems of a certain relationship with being”?\textsuperscript{28}

We have treated briefly the expressive work of Picasso’s portrait, but at the expense of setting it against what seemed to be a certain superficiality of the photograph. We must take care here not to proceed too quickly. Reflecting on the meaning of photography, Roland Barthes writes that “[w]hat the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once…”\textsuperscript{28} The photograph is a
selected rendering of a perceptive image. It seeks to immortalize, to extend outward (or to paralyze, to render funereal and immobile, as Barthes says) an absolutely singular event. Eluard’s photograph is, in this sense, as selective as Picasso’s portrait. It is the selection and expression of an image that is made manifest not plainly, objectively or universally, but rather by passing through a stylized world that is Eluard’s own. In The Art of Photography, Gene Markowski writes that “[i]f we place a photographer and a painter in front of a landscape, each will respond to the stimulus of the landscape in a different way…according to his own associations with the objects before him.”29 The photograph is as much a stylization — it is as much a perspectival response to a vision, an artistic rendering of an image of perception — as is the painting. Eluard’s photograph is an arrangement of Maar’s characteristics, an expression of (a certain aspect of) her style(s). Her fingers appear gently, generously; she is calm, serene. This “picture”30 of Maar is, of course, an interpretation of Eluard’s, emblematic of his perspective. It is a stylization.

The photograph is not a depthless externality, but is rather, for Barthes, “co-natural with its referent.”31 The photograph exists on the same real plane as the image it immortalizes. If we are content with the claim that the photograph expresses a superficiality, a surface that is pierced and disrupted by Picasso’s probing abstraction, then we have confined ourselves to the idea that Maar has but a single rhythm of movement, a single manner of being flesh; if we correspond the painting to the truth of Maar and the photograph to her mere appearance, then we have resigned ourselves to the reductive claim that she has but a single style, that she is apparently gentle, but really wicked. In a word: if the photograph is superficial, then there can be but a single truth of Dora Maar, a truth that is embodied fully and finally in Picasso’s portrait. But we must take note of Picasso’s own words:

If I look for truth in my canvas, I can do a hundred canvases with this truth.
Which, then, is the true one? And who is truth? The one who serves as my model or the one I paint? No, it’s like everything else. Truth does not exist.32

To see this (as opposed to simply reading it), one need look no further than Picasso’s portraits themselves, for he painted Maar a number of times, in a number of ways. Indeed, this very multiplicity of portraits stand testament to the inexhaustibility of Maar’s styles. Picasso is emphatic here: “If there were only one truth, you couldn’t paint a hundred canvases on the same theme.”33 In his lectures at Sorbonne, Merleau-Ponty notes the positive significance given by modern painting to the multiplicitious nature of perception. He claims that Picasso’s “plurality of profiles is a means of expression.”34 Consequently, each expression of Maar’s style forms a double-movement, a relationship that moves in two directions at once. The pleasant photograph or painting of Maar is both an expression of her gentle rhythm of movement, her generous and serene gestures and mannerisms, as well as an embodiment of the photographer or painter’s own manner of heeding the world, his own style of perception. Perhaps Maar is (at times) wicked for Picasso, but (at times) placid and agreeable for Eluard. She is, of course, capable of both forms of movement. And each artist is capable of making sense of her in different ways. She is, in short, a multiplicity, a pulsating pluralism of ways of going, of manners of being-flesh.

We divide ourselves against ourselves when we construct the false dichotomy that elevates Picasso’s vision to the status of dazzling profundity at the expense of the relegation of a different expression of Maar’s style to the status of superficiality. No one expression is any more valid, precisely because no one style is any more properly emblematic of her relationship with being. In Picasso’s eyes, there is no truth, but only an endless series of interpretations—if one wishes to speak with Nietzsche. Eluard’s photograph is as much an interpretation as Picasso’s portrait. Further, Maar’s amicability, her serene beauty is as much an interpretation of the world on her part, as much a perspective on it, a manner of taking it in, of making sense of it and responding in
a certain way, as is her wickedness, her energetic violence. Style shows itself both in the artist’s perception of his or her subject, and in the subject’s perception of his or her world.

As Merleau-Ponty so succinctly puts it: “perception already stylizes.” The photograph is as stylistic, as digestive and expressive as is the painting. Both show us different styles as well as different ways of heeding those styles, different ways of stylizing them.

What is expressed equally in both media is a particular perception, a vision. Merleau-Ponty writes that vision is “the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being.” It is a nexus of the visible and invisible: we see the world both as it offers itself, as well as the way it offers itself — its style, intensity, rhythm, speed, behaviour, and so on. Further, this movement or “convergence of all the visible and intellectual vectors of the painting toward the same meaning, \( x \), is already sketched out in the painter’s perception.” Picasso’s painting affects us in the way that it does precisely because it is capable of rendering this convergence, this synthesis of the world as it offers itself with the way it offers itself that is present already at the level of the painter’s perception — for perception itself is stylistic. Yet, “synthesis” and “convergence” gesture toward too imprecise a terminology; they imply a separation between as and way, when “there is no break at all in this circuit.” This is to say that the world as it offers itself just is the way it offers itself — to articulate the two separately is to “double the doing,” to borrow a line from Nietzsche. To speak of Dora Maar as a woman who then offers herself in a particular way to Picasso’s vision is to posit the “same happening” “first as cause and then once again as its effect.” All there is is the way Dora Maar offers herself; her identity is nothing other than the shape of her movement, the expression of her style. In Nietzsche’s terms, we speak of the lightning that flashes as if it could have done otherwise, as if there were a lightning-as-cause that preceded the flash-as-effect. In reality, the lightning simply is the way it moves, the way it flashes — there is only a single happening. Picasso’s portrait is saturated with this insight.

Maar’s meaning is, however, far from being exhausted by the painting. The world has infinite ways of going, a polymorphous multiplicity of styles and movements. Thus, the painter’s task is, for Merleau-Ponty, a form of madness: it seeks to complete the visible, to capture its enigmatic significance by bringing into the realm of visibility its invisible styles. But this is an impossible undertaking: the world is incapable of a full or final exhaustion, of a complete visibility. “The painter’s world is a visible world, nothing but visible: a world almost mad, because it is complete though only partial.” “One ought to paint all that,” Picasso once said of a scene as it unfolded in front of him. “But how? How could one really manage to paint all that AS IT IS…And us as well, since we are there too. But how could it be done? It’s impossible…”

What Picasso can offer us, then, is the particular manner by which he takes up the world, makes sense of it, consumes it and re-organizes it, producing it anew — his perspective. In other words, Picasso’s painting, an expression of Maar’s style, is also emblematic of his own style. Dora Maar au Chat is the result of a vision of Maar that inspires Picasso, moving him to express it through painting. Put simply, the painter gives expression to his inspiration. “We speak of “inspiration,”” says Merleau-Ponty, “and the word should be taken literally.” Etymologically, “in-spiration” recalls a breathing-in, an in-halation. Taken this way, the common way of speaking that ascribes to the painter a sense of being inspired by the world belies a profound insight. The painter’s body is the locus of a fold: it is through his eyes that the painter takes in the world, inhales it, is in-spired by it; and through his hands that he exhales it, giving to his perceptual inspiration a material ex-pression. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it: “There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being…” The world folds back upon itself by passing actively through the painter’s body, a folding-over of which it makes little sense to speak in strictly binary terms. Is the painter actively observing and only passively giving voice to his observations, or merely passively perceiving what he will later actively paint? This intertwining
of act-ion with pass-ion fascinates Merleau-Ponty: “…it becomes impossible to distinguish
between who sees and who is seen, who paints and what is painted.”47 The painter’s body is the
means by which inspiration and perception become expression. The fold is a site of non-
coincidence, a production of difference: the process of painting is the process of a digestion, a
working-over. The painter, in making sense of the world, re-assembles it. We ought to take
seriously this common phrase: making sense. In making sense of the world, sense is created — it
is made — not simply recognized or uncovered. To make sense of the world is to take it up,
work it over, re-assemble it.

The painting is therefore irreducible to a representation or reference to what is absent. It is,
quite antithetically, its own way of taking up the world, of consuming the visible and reproducing
a “carnal formula” of its presence that “opens upon a texture of Being.”48 This carnal formula
depens Being, calling us to engage with the inexhaustible enigma of the world, the
polymorphous “wave” of which visibility is but the surface. In The Visible and the Invisible,
Merleau-Ponty writes that immanent visibility is “the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a
massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being.”49 In simpler terms: the world is
much deeper than it appears to ordinary vision. Painting is capable of a disruption of the ordinary,
an opening upon the fathomless texture of the world. Thus, we do not simply see the painting the
way we at first thought we might see the photograph. “Rather than seeing it,” Merleau-Ponty
writes, “I see according to it, or with it.”50 By this he means that the painting is not something
seen, but rather its own way of seeing. Taken in by Picasso’s painting, I am seeing Picasso’s way
of seeing Dora Maar. In this movement — this seeing seeing — a whole style of taking up the
world is made apparent to me. The painting does not give me a representation, but rather its own
system of productive consumption, its own method of taking in shadows, fingernails, hats and
dresses, light and colour, and producing a startlingly new way to make sense of, to see, Dora
Maar.

If the painting allows us to “possess the voluminosity of the world,”51 it is because it is not
simply an image of the world; or rather — it is also an image of the world. The painting first of
all “gives vision that which clothes it within, the imaginary texture of the real.”52 It is by means of
the image-creation that “the world give[s] birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of
the visible.”53 And this process is perpetual. For the painting to work as a “coming-to-itself of the
visible,” it must speak to a viewer, communicating its synthesis of visibility and its textured
lining, its expression of sense-making, of stylized vision. Neither does this process of
communication ever reach finality or completion: Merleau-Ponty implores us to consider “the
smile of a long-dead monarch which keeps producing and reproducing itself on the surface of a
canvas.”54 So long as it is taken up, seen according to, the image continues to reproduce itself, it
continues to give itself over to its viewer as a stylized manner of taking up the world. Thus, the
painting is described most accurately as an event. Its effect is never finished, never final. In his
Picasso’s Mask, Malraux writes that “[Picasso] spoke very impressively about the eyeglasses an
artist’s creation imposes upon the viewer.”55 It is as if the work of art replaces the lenses through
which the world is made to appear to us. It engages its viewer in an ongoing process of
transforming the realm of visibility by means of a disruption, a happening by which the viewer is
led to see the world in a fundamentally different way. This is to say that the painting not only
affects its viewer, but it actually requires its viewer as well. The painting necessitates an
engagement with its audience in order to set into motion this process of disruption and
transformation. To speak of the painting as an event, then, is to privilege its transformative
effects, the engagement it demands, the audience it requires, the process it sets into motion. The
painting is no longer a finished thing. Rather, taken as an image with force and transformative
affect, the painting is always-already incomplete, always-already ongoing, in-process. The
painting is always-already an event.
“It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings,” Merleau-Ponty tells us.\textsuperscript{56} Vision is embodied; it is this fact that renders it stylized. Each body takes up the world in its own way. The seer always consumes and expresses the world by means of his or her own style. Vision is metabolic, and each body digests the world differently. The painter inscribes his way of seeing, his style, on the image he creates — for how could he do otherwise? To see along with Picasso’s \textit{Dora Maar au Chat} is to watch as the artist’s muse is transformed into a pulsating, tortured semblance of the woman he loved. This is the force of painting: we become with the image, and, even if only briefly, see the world as Picasso does — a vibrant undulation of shapes and forms that never exhausts itself, never reaches finality. The world is an illimitable question that the painter interrogates, explores and expresses. “In the immemorial depth of the visible, something has moved, caught fire, which engulfs [the painter’s] body; everything he paints is in answer to this incitement…”\textsuperscript{57} By seeing the world as it is stylized by the painter’s hand, by seeing according to his painting, we become with the painter. “And once [this becoming] is present,” Merleau-Ponty announces, “it awakens powers dormant in ordinary vision…”\textsuperscript{58}

TANO S. POSTERARO
McMaster University

EMAIL: posterg@mcmaster.ca

\begin{flushleft}
1 Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The World of Perception}, 93.
3 This paper will also explore, in turn, Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of in-spiration, the fold, and the image.
4 Ibid, 128.
5 Johnson, \textit{The Retrieval of the Beautiful}, 103.
7 Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, 455.
8 Singer, “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” 240.
9 Ibid.
10 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 91.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid, emphasis mine.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 92.
16 Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The World of Perception}, 94.
17 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 93.
19 Johnson, \textit{The Retrieval of the Beautiful}, 34.
20 Ibid.
21 Singer, “Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style,” 240.
22 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 129.
23 Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
This particular portrait of Maar is among the world’s most expensive paintings: it sold for $95,216,000 to an anonymous bidder (Pollock and Borof).


27 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 91.

28 *Camera Lucida*, 4.

29 *The Art of Photography*, 21.

30 The term “picture” should be taken here to mean account, rendition or version.

31 Barthes, “Camera Lucida,” 203. Barthes also refers to the picture as a “wound,” as precisely that which pierces the surface.

32 Parmelin, *Picasso says...,* 70.

33 Ibid, 115.


35 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 91.


37 Merleau-Ponty, “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” 91.

38 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 147.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.


43 Parmelin, *Picasso says...,* 43.

44 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 129.


46 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 129.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid, 126-127.


51 Ibid, 127.

52 Ibid, 126.

53 Ibid, 141.

54 Ibid, 130.


56 Ibid.

57 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 147.

58 Ibid, 142.

**Bibliography**


Images Cited
