

MERLEAU-PONTY'S CÉZANNE AS MISFIT ARTIST

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological writings celebrate the artist Paul Cézanne's ability to capture the nuances of lived experience and find expression for the vitality and meaning of sensory perception, as many scholars have noted.¹ Yet the history of Cézanne's reception in the artworld would seem to complicate this praise. Cézanne has the honor of having works appear in both the 1863 *Salon des Refusés* (Salon of the Rejected) and the 1937 Nazi exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). The term “degenerate”—which had been applied to Cézanne's art even before the Nazis began using it to fuel their eugenic propaganda—explicitly casts modern art as the product of illness, deformity, and disease. It is an ableist term meant to convey the dangers of artistic deviations from traditional methods and subject matters by marking them as products of mental or physical illness, rather than artistic genius and its ability to create new forms of expression. Additionally, as Merleau-Ponty notes in “Cézanne's Doubt” (1964), the painter had his own concerns about his artistic abilities. Merleau-Ponty states that later in life Cézanne “wondered whether the novelty of his painting might not come from trouble with his eyes, whether his whole life had not been based on an accident of his body” (9). The “accident of his body” includes many possible indications of health issues, including anxiety, “fits of temper and depression,” antisocial behavior, “a morbid constitution,” as well as symptoms of schizophrenia (10).

Yet, unlike the critics who thought that Cézanne's paintings lacked artistry because of assumed physical or mental disabilities, Merleau-Ponty asserts that it “is quite possible that, on the basis of his nervous weaknesses Cézanne conceived of a form of art which is valid for everyone” (11). It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty does not reduce

¹ The scholarship on Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne in relation to his phenomenology of painting and visual perception is very rich. Since my discussion of “Cézanne's Doubt” will focus more on its significance for disability aesthetics, I will not engage with these conversations at length, although some familiarity with them is helpful for understanding my argument. For scholarship that focuses more on Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics, I recommend Jorella Andrews (2019), Paul Crowther (2012), Véronique Fóti (2013), Galen A. Johnson (2010), and Rajiv Kaushik (2011).

Cézanne's art to a mere side effect as critics who failed to see the value of his work have. He avoids reductive, causal accounts of the relationship between the particularities of Cézanne's embodiment and his artistic work to preserve his creative liberty. At the same time, he sees their bond and declares that "*this work to be done called for this life*" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 20; emphasis in original). This statement is not a claim about causality, nor do we know enough about Cézanne's actual physical or mental conditions to make such a claim. At multiple points in the essay, Merleau-Ponty challenges the distinction between freedom and determination, hereditary and spontaneous, and external causes and deliberate choices. While these distinctions attempt to provide clear and distinct ways of understanding life, they set up false binaries that obscure the complexities of life.² Instead, he states, "[t]here is no difference between saying that our life is completely constructed and that it is completely given" (21). For this reason, trying to ascribe a simple causal connection between Cézanne's embodied particularities and his works of art is reductive and deflates the meaning we might find in them. Yet these embodied particularities are still significant for understanding the meaning of Cézanne's art. It is not an either/or problem. Merleau-Ponty ends his essay with the paradoxical claim that "the life of an author can teach us nothing and that—if we know how to interpret it—we can find everything in it, since it opens onto his work" (25). Merleau-Ponty's essay thus raises the question of how we are to interpret not simply Cézanne's art, but also his life.

Recently, Joel Michael Reynolds (2022) has argued for a more disability-centric reading of "Cézanne's Doubt." Reynolds describes how "the question of Cézanne's embodiment, of what one should or should not make of his ability/disability state, continually appears and reappears" in Merleau-Ponty's essay on the artist (200). Treating the essay as a hermeneutic task that asks us to "enact Cézanne's own doubt (and others' doubt about him)," Reynolds shifts Merleau-Ponty's emphasis toward the very meaning of ability (201). With this interpretation, "Cézanne's Doubt" should be read as in light of the "doubt of what it is to have an ability in the first place" (210). Building from Reynolds's *crip* reading of "Cézanne's Doubt," I will situate these concerns with reading Cézanne as a disabled artist within other discussions of vision and art in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and, more broadly, within art history and aesthetic theory.

This paper explores what we find in Cézanne's art when we read the particularities of his embodiment as (dis)abled or, to be more precise, as abled through the lens of *disability gain*.³ The concept of disability gain defies the ability-disability binary, which defines disability as a *lack* of ability, by emphasizing what is *gained* through different disabilities. Ableism restricts the concept of disability to a mere lack or deprivation. Yet the lived experiences and testimonies of disabled people defy this harmful misconception.⁴ When read through

² See Don Beith (2018) for an explanation of this dynamic in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature and consciousness.

³ See Georgina Kleege (2018) and H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (2014) for more thorough explanations of how disability can be understood as a way of opening up perception in beneficial ways. Bauman and Murray's collected volume discusses how Deaf people's experiences demonstrate a wide variety of gains philosophically, linguistically, socially, and creatively.

⁴ See Elizabeth Barnes (2016).

the conceptual framework of contemporary disability studies, Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne can be understood as an example of what the artist gained through his disabilities.

Central to my discussion of Cézanne as a disabled artist are (1) Tobin Siebers's description of modern art as vitally and thematically disabled and (2) Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of disability as *misfitting*. Siebers's book *Disability Aesthetics* helps me to contextualize Cézanne within art history and art theory in ways that bring his disabilities to the fore without pathologizing them and without denying his artistic genius. Garland-Thomson's concept of *misfitting* describes disability not as an inherent trait of one's body, not as a lack of ability, and not as a purely socially determined condition. Instead, disability describes a contingent, contextual dynamic between the flesh and world that creates friction. Misfitting allows for a fluid, dynamic, and phenomenological account of disability. Additionally, misfitting involves phenomenological descriptions of disabled lived experiences that emphasize the depth of awareness and creative world-making possibilities that are gained through disability.

By bringing Siebers's approach to disability aesthetics and Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting into conversation with Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind," I will explain how Cézanne's unique way of perceiving the world and capturing it in paint helps Merleau-Ponty to dismantle abstract, disembodied concepts of visual perception and trace the nuanced contours of lived perspective. In other words, what is gained through Cézanne's disabilities is a revolutionary optics that overcomes the limitations of Cartesian optics.

To describe Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne as a disabled, or—more precisely—as a *misfit* artist, I will begin with Reynolds's crip reading of "Cézanne's Doubt" before situating Cézanne's art within disability aesthetics. Disability aesthetics will then provide the lens for interpreting "Cézanne's Doubt" and "Eye and Mind." The first section explains why "Cézanne's Doubt" is about the meaning of ability and needs to be read through philosophy of disability. The second section situates Cézanne within the history of modern art and its meaning for disability aesthetics to provide more context for the tension that Merleau-Ponty raises between the artist's great talent and his doubts over his abilities. The third section employs Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting to characterize Cézanne's unique and dynamic approach to painting as a type of disability gain. Using disability aesthetics and the concept of misfitting, the fourth section turns to Merleau-Ponty's critique of Cartesian optics to challenge the idea that linear perspective captures lived experience more realistically, which leads us to the need for a misfit optics. The fifth section uses Merleau-Ponty's writings on Cézanne to describe his method of painting as a misfit optics and explains how it captures the lived perspective. I conclude with brief reflections on why deviant ways of perceiving and inhabiting the world are essential to phenomenology and to art.

I. THE NORMATE AND THE QUESTION OF ABILITY IN “CÉZANNE’S DOUBT”

Reynold’s path-breaking interpretation of “Cézanne’s Doubt” focuses on the question of Cézanne’s artistic ability and whether it bears a causal (*because of*) or contradictory (*in spite of*) relationship to his disabilities and impairments. Understanding Cézanne’s art in relation to his disabilities shifts dramatically depending on how one defines disability. Scholars in disability studies frequently draw a distinction between the medical model and social model of disability. For the medical model, disability is a flaw or deficiency in an individual’s body. The medical model would assert that Cézanne is a great artist *despite* his disabilities and impairments (Reynolds 2022, 205). By contrast, the social model describes disability in terms of socially created obstacles and disadvantages that are the result of “the constant disturbances of ableism” (205). With the social model, for example, a paraplegic’s inability to walk is not in and of itself a disability. It is the created environment—a lack of accessible designs for wheelchair users—and social attitudes and prejudices that make paraplegia a limitation. The idea is that a difference in embodiment only has meaning in terms of its social context. As Reynolds notes, for the social model, Cézanne’s greatness as an artist is *shaped* by his disabilities and impairments:

Shaped not merely in the sense that they shape his bodymind but shaped also in the sense that he invariably learned to navigate and live in a world not made for, and often actively hostile to, those with “abnormal” bodyminds such as his. (205)

While the distinction between the medical model and social model is now common in disability studies, it was not available to Merleau-Ponty. At the same time, it can be helpful for considering the meaning of Cézanne’s possible disabilities in “Cézanne’s Doubt.” This distinction, as Reynolds describes, “is a dance between reading Cézanne’s work as a symptom *or* as symbol” (209; emphasis in original).

For Reynolds, this question goes to the very nature of ability and whose experiences and ways of thinking count as being meaningful for others. Engaging with Cézanne’s art as a symptom makes it a curiosity—an outward marker of something that may not be significant to those who do not share his embodied experiences. It dismisses what his art has to offer. This dismissive attitude points toward a problematic concern with what is deemed normal, not simply in a descriptive way but also in a normative way—that is, a concern with how people *ought* to be. Here the concept of the normate as “a persistent and compulsory mythic norm” becomes helpful (205).

At the center of Reynolds’ interpretation is the distinction between *normality* and *the normate*.⁵ The concept of normality is at work in phenomenological method insofar as its *epoche* attempts to identify “regularities of experience either in general or relative to some domain X with respect to some specified set of conditions” (202). Both art and

⁵ Garland-Thomson (2017) coined the normate in *Extraordinary Bodies*. For more information about the history and stakes of this concept, see Reynolds’s (2019) contribution to *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*.

phenomenology attempt to capture what lived experience is like and in doing so often rely on some aspect of normality. Reynolds further distinguishes between *lived normality* and *represented normality*. They describe *lived normality* as

an act, process, or state of being that is experienced either as concordant, “going-with-the-flow,” and at-home-like or as instead optimal, as going beyond concordance to an ideal or near-ideal fit relative to some set of specific actions or intentions of the individual. (2022, 202–03)

By contrast, *represented normality* judges certain aspects of experience as “normal” according to a social standard for actions or intentions. The *normate* is distinct from both lived and represented normality insofar as it is “a product of and functions through *mythic* norms” and “educes an overriding *ought*” (203; emphasis in original). The forceful *ought* of the normate asserts not only that bodies ought to be and act a certain way but also that they are defective and without value if they diverge from what is “normal.” Moreover, the concept of “normal” at work in valuing some bodies and devaluing others is based on a myth of “how things are and must be” and not any realities of embodiment (203).

In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson (2017) coins the normate to describe an imagined bodily and cultural configuration, a “veiled subject position” that seems to serve as a general and neutral concept for the human person, until one tries to specify its characteristics in detail and notices that it describes “only a minority of actual people” (8). The normate serves as a “social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings” (8). Yet this social figure is merely the outlines of what is left when any form of difference or otherness has been excluded. The normate creates a narrow concept of what a human is and should be, which then dehumanizes any form of otherness outside it. As the constructed identity of the normate serves as a reference point for people to assert their humanity, Garland-Thomson points out how often people “try to fit its description in the same way that Cinderella’s stepsisters attempted to squeeze their feet into her glass slipper” (8). The normate is not simply a myth because it is based on the fantasy of what is normal. It is also a myth in the sense that it shapes values, judgments, and feelings at a deep level that is often unquestioned.

Reynolds brings the distinction between normality and the normate to bear on Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Cézanne to highlight how differently his art is evaluated when it is seen as the result of a disability, rather than the expression of artistic ability. As Reynolds explains, “[i]f you do X and are considered able-bodied, there is one evaluative scale. If you do X (the very same X) and are considered disabled, there is another scale” (2022, 207). Yet that scale of evaluation for those considered disabled is highly inconsistent and can express pity or praise. There is no one script for interpreting how an artist’s disabilities contribute to or detract from their work, but such interpretations frequently fall into ableist tropes. Ableism does not always express itself as an outwardly negative response to the disabled. It can also wear the mask of approval, praise, or celebration—such as inspiration porn or superhero narratives.⁶ The artworld is replete with examples of how differently artistic

⁶ See Eli Clare (2015) and Barnes (2016).

ability is read alongside disability. Frida Kahlo's childhood polio and chronic pain caused by injuries from a bus accident are treated as fuel for her artistic creativity, especially since some of her paintings deal directly with her disabilities and hospitalizations. In other cases, disability prevents people from being given the status of "artist." For example, art critics have questioned whether the fiber sculptures of Judith Scott, the Deaf, nonverbal fiber artist with Down syndrome, can be said to be art.⁷ When the normate is at work, whether an artist's work is considered a symptom of an illness or an expression of their life, a pathological behavior or a transformative activity, is determined by how well their bodymind adheres to the fantasy of "normal." These problematic dichotomies, moreover, are part and parcel with the normate and the assumption that any deviations from the norm strip a person and their actions of value or meaning. Reading Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne as a misfit artist attempts to overturn this problematic dichotomy.

A disability-centric approach to "Cézanne's Doubt" thus requires challenging the normate. The normate assumes that ability—including artistic abilities—absolutely must be the result of a "normal" body or mind. It assumes that no great art can come from disabled bodyminds. To assert otherwise would be to acknowledge that deviations from this mythic norm may have value. The mere thought that differences in embodiment can have value would destroy the myth of the normate since it so firmly relies on denying this possibility.

The following section will delve more deeply into how the normate functions in the artworld, both in terms of its history and in terms of aesthetic theory. Here I will rely heavily on Siebers's disability aesthetics as a lens for interpreting modern art. I will argue that disability aesthetics allows Cézanne to be both a great artist and a disabled artist without contradiction and that his greatness as an artist should be considered in terms of disability.

II. "DEGENERATE" ART AND DISABILITY AESTHETICS

The normate helps us to understand the history of Cézanne's reception in the artworld, the ableism that casts doubt on his artistic abilities, and the value of embracing, rather than denying, the idea that his art might be a product of his disability—where disability is not a

⁷ See Siebers's (2017) discussion of Scott in *Disability Aesthetics*. Scott spent much of her life neglected and isolated in an asylum and did not start to create fiber sculptures until she was enrolled in an art therapy program. When she began making these objects, it was not clear if they were intentionally art objects. Her works of art involve weaving pilfered materials, like paper towels, around an acquired object. There is no clear intention to express a feeling or idea, communicate to an audience, or even display her work. Despite the originality, complexity, and skill of her fiber sculptures, critics question whether she should be considered an artist and her creations works of art. For some art critics, Scott's mental impairments and lack of education or knowledge of the world preclude her from inclusion in the artworld. Yet, as Siebers explains, this exclusion has more to do with ableist constructions of what an artist should be, rather than any of the qualities of her art. Siebers explains how Scott's fiber sculptures embody many of the ideals of modern art, including found art. He states that Scott's method of creation "demonstrates the freedom both to make art from what she wants and to change the meaning of objects by inserting them into different contexts" (17). Additionally, he outlines a number of aesthetic principles at work in her technique, which he describes as "a process of concealment and discovery that destroys one object and gives birth to another mysterious thing" (17).

lack of ability but instead a difference that matters. Here it is important to understand the ableist rhetoric around not simply Cézanne as an artist but also the artworld that provides the context for his work and its reception.

More than once, Cézanne's art was excluded from exhibitions for not adhering to norms: the 1863 *Salon des Refusés* (Salon of the Rejected) and the 1937 Nazi exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). The *Salon des Refusés* rescued works of art that were rejected by the Paris Salon for not conforming to the standards of the Academy and put them on display for public opinion. Emperor Napoleon III wrote that he wished to let the public judge the legitimacy of the art, which was a revolutionary democratization of the artworld that we now recognize as the beginning of modernism in painting. By contrast, the Nazi Degenerate Art exhibition was eugenic propaganda that was meant to expose the dangers of modern art for a healthy society by illustrating its relationship to mental and physical disabilities.

Both the *Salon des Refusés* and the Degenerate Art exhibition displayed art that was considered deviant in style and/or content. Yet both exhibits included many famous artists who went on to shape modern art, such as Édouard Manet, Camille Pissarro, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall, and Wassily Kandinsky. It is significant that, in the end, what was rejected for not fitting came to define modern art. From a contemporary perspective, inclusion in these exhibits demonstrates the role Cézanne played in *redefining* art. While the concept of “normal” often excludes artists and their works from public spaces, especially places where prestige and status matter, art continually transforms into new styles, forms, and modes of expression. In this sense, I want to assert that art, especially modern and contemporary art, tends to push back against the normate and challenge its fear of differences. If we turn to twentieth century art history, Nazi Germany vividly illustrates how the normate suppresses the vitality and meaning of art through its rigid and narrow concept of how bodies and minds ought to be. Here I will focus on the concept of “degenerate” art, its relation to eugenics, and its significance in art history and disability aesthetics.

The normate operates in the artworld by determining what is “true art” or “great art” and what is “degenerate art,” and its justifications always rest on the distinction between what is normal and abnormal. The Nazis were not the first to call Cézanne's art degenerate. A 1916 review by Petronius Arbiter described one of Cézanne's paintings of bathers as a “childish drawing” with “utter extravagance of form” and an “impossible construction” of figures (1916, 205). Arbiter uses highly ableist language to describe Cézanne's art:

Now when these semi-insane happen to be bitten with a desire to shine in Art they are sure to quit the normal ways of seeing, feeling and doing things and to go to the abnormal; finally, under the stimulus of a love for suffering and of parading they creep farther and farther toward the abnormal until they are completely insane. (205)

Due to Cézanne's “abnormal” way of presenting the visible world, Arbiter declared his painting of bathers to be “an absolutely degenerate work of a man who is partially insane”

(Arbiter 1916, 205). According to this bombastic review, Cézanne’s art is not simply poorly executed or lacking in beauty—it deviates from norms in a way that is labeled degenerate and assumed to indicate mental illness.

The Degenerate Art exhibition made a similar judgment about modern artists in general—for example, declaring the artist Klee to be mad based on similarities between one of his portraits and a picture drawn by a schizophrenic patient. The content of the exhibit was based on Paul Schultze-Naumburg’s (1928) *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race), which argued that modern art movements like Fauvism and Cubism were corruptions of the artworld resulting from growing mental and physical deformities in Northern European races. These juxtapositions demonstrate the simplistic, pseudo-scientific rhetoric of the normate and the force of its desire to draw a hard line between ability and disability. The works of art were displayed not for admiration, but as a warning of the dangers of “the abnormal.” Viewers were to look at the similarities between the degenerate paintings and photographs of disabled people with disgust and fear (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Images from Schultze-Naumburg’s (1928) *Kunst und Rasse* (Art and Race). Commons.wikimedia.org (fair use). Image description: Four portraits painted in expressive styles that characterize modern art movements like Fauvism and Cubism are compared with four photographs of people with visible disabilities.

The normate takes these works of art and strips them of any meaning outside of their perceived failings. When “normal” is the only aesthetic value at work, it becomes impossible to understand or appreciate modern art. More importantly, the Degenerate Art exhibition demonstrates the dangers of the normate. The underlying message of the exhibit is to deny that these works of art or people have any value or humanity and should be eradicated. The exhibit operates according to the same mindset as Hitler’s T4 program, which ordered the mass killings of disabled people in psychiatric and medical institutions.

The Degenerate Art exhibition promotes eugenics through its extreme application of the normate. The significance of the exhibition’s juxtaposition of art and disability reverses, however, if we question the normate. In *Disability Aesthetics*, Siebers (2010) makes this move through the provocative argument that the Nazis correctly interpreted modern art through the lens of disability but incorrectly understood the meaning of this connection. He states:

The Nazis waged war against modern art because they interpreted the modern in art as disability, and they were essentially right in their interpretation, for modern art might indeed be named as the movement that finds its greatest aesthetic resource in bodies previously considered to be broken, diseased, wounded, or disabled. (35)

Instead of contradicting the comparisons the Nazis made between modern art and disability, Siebers explains why this interpretative framework makes sense and how disability creates compelling art. As Siebers describes, “[p]eople quivering with anxiety, howling in fear, or cringing in silent terror populate modernist canvases, openly embracing situations and conditions thought abnormal and feared by the Nazis” (35). For example, art movements like Dada or expressionism used broken lines, unnatural coloring, and distorted figures in ways that made bodies seem disabled. Additionally, he notes how common themes in modern art—“alienation, violence, panic, terror, sensory overload, and distraction”—are often related to a wide variety of disabilities (35). That does not mean, however, that we should react to this art or to disabilities with disgust or fear. It is not the analogies between modern art and disability that are an issue—it is the assumptions that follow those analogies.

The normate denies the possibility of understanding disability in modern art as meaningful and worthy of aesthetic appreciation. Here it is important to emphasize that resisting the normate does not mean denying the influence and presence of disability in art, but instead seeing disability as valuable and meaningful. Nazis failed to see the value of modern art because of their eugenic ideology and extremely narrow concept of what is normal. As Siebers writes,

they attacked modern art for the very features that give it such imaginative and transformative power to represent the human condition—be it the capacity to claim through formal experiments and new content a vast array of human emotions, thoughts, and physical appearances or be it the confidence to leave behind the imitation of nature and to represent what nature might reject or fail to conceive. (35)

Modern art takes up the varieties, complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions of human life. It finds expression for emotions and ideas that are difficult to express. It courageously plays with artistic mediums and styles to explore what is possible. All of these qualities can be understood in relation to disability, and Siebers argues that we ought to make disability more central to our discussions of modern art.

For Siebers, the comparison between modern art and disability is important for understanding its value in redefining art and aesthetics. He argues that we ought to theorize “disability as a unique resource discovered by modern art and then embraced by it as one of its defining concepts” (2010, 2–3). He asserts that disability provided modern art with “a critical resource for thinking about what a human being is” in a broader sense and thus allowed it to portray a wide variety of human forms and experiences (3). In this sense, disability was central to the success of modern art. Disability is consistent with artistic ability and its transformative powers.

Modern art contradicts the normate and can only be understood in contradiction to the normate. The normate’s lack of artistic sensitivity and narrow concept of humanity become even more pronounced when we turn to what Nazi Germany categorized as “great art.” The art Hitler used to illustrate his vision for Germany included many examples of idealized bodies. Part of Nazi iconography includes giant figural sculptures that depicted exaggerated muscular men and women posed as if they were demonstrating their health and vigor. Siebers compares the vibrant, diverse, and expressive modern art that Nazis condemned with the 1937 Great German Art exhibition to demonstrate “how truly unreal and imaginary are nondisabled conceptions of the body” (2010, 31). He examines how extreme fear of bodily variation led to “overcharged regularity” and “emphasis on banal, unvarying, and exaggerated perfection” (32, 33). Nazi art expresses their eugenic ideology and yields cold, dominating presences that lack the humanity of the art they rejected. The Great German Art exhibition presents the “eerie world, sought by the Nazis, in which the desire for perfection quashes individuality and variety” (32). It illustrates how the demand for normality obfuscates our embodied experience and dynamic relationship with the world by replacing generative nuance, variation, and ambiguity with an artificial, unimaginative sameness. Modern art and disability aesthetics reject such limitations to embrace a broader, more varied concept of humanity.

It is important to note that art theorists consider Nazi art to be kitsch or “bad art,” and “degenerate” art to be avant-garde, or aesthetically and culturally significant art. “Kitsch” means “trash” in German and has come to describe bad art and bad taste in general. Art theorist Clement Greenberg (1961) describes kitsch as the “rear-guard,” as opposed to the avant-garde, or “vanguard” of art that is cutting-edge, innovative art. While avant-garde is original and experiments with medium, technique, subject matters, and meaning, kitsch tends to copy and remix ideas in ways that are easy to consume without reflection. Greenberg describes kitsch as art that is “mechanical and operates by formulas” (10). It is thoughtless insofar as “identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator” (14). The avant-garde can address complex, nuanced ideas and values, while kitsch lacks complexity and tends to express simpler emotions like sentimentality. Moreover, Greenberg notes how well kitsch serves as propaganda for



Figure 2. 1937 photograph of Josef Thorak's sculpture, *The Family*. Commons.wikimedia.org (public domain). Image description: Three nude figures, two male and one female, with exaggerated muscles and identical facial expressions stand rigidly on a pedestal that reads "Deutschland."

the rhetorical question, "would Nazi art be considered kitsch if it had not pursued so relentlessly a bombastic perfection of the body?" (5). The answer seems evident the more you examine the differences between the Degenerate Art exhibition and the Great German Art exhibition. Kitsch does not allow disability—or perhaps it makes sense to say that kitsch cannot portray disability because of a superficial and simplistic adherence to perfection. Kitsch art demonstrates the limitations of the normate.

For these reasons, addressing Cézanne's art in terms of his disabilities can enlarge and enrich our sense of its artistry. The following section will examine Cézanne's art through a specific approach to disability, *misfitting*, which is distinct from the medical model and social model of disability and allows a more phenomenological approach that focuses on the dynamics between the body and world.

totalitarian leaders like Hitler (19). The Degenerate Art exhibition and Great German Art exhibition illustrate the stark contrast between kitsch and avant-garde art. The so-called "degenerate" art is multicultural, requires reflection, asks questions, experiments with how we see the world and ourselves, and plunges into the depths of human experience, including experiences that are challenging or difficult to understand. The Nazi conception of "great" art displays one cultural identity, is simplistic in its messages, lacks reflection or any critical edge, hides and eliminates what it cannot understand, and expresses a dangerous nostalgia that is opposed to anything new or different (fig. 2).

As Siebers notes, comparing these two art exhibits demonstrates that "the acceptance of disability enriches and complicates notions of the aesthetic, while the rejection of disability limits definitions of artistic ideas and objects" (2010, 3). Kitsch often expresses an admiration for a superficial sense of perfection. Siebers poses

III. MISFITTING AND CREATIVE WORLD-MAKING

While the normate exemplifies the refusal to understand disability as anything other than a lack of ability, there are many other ways to conceptualize disability. I find Garland-Thomson's concept of misfitting particularly helpful in understanding Cézanne's artistic abilities through his disabilities.

Garland-Thomson describes disability as *misfitting* to address the gap between the medical model that understands the body as the source of disability and the social model that focuses on discursive social practices that create barriers for people with impairments. Rather than focusing on an individual's body as the medical model or on their milieu as the social model, misfitting addresses the tension between the body and world. In general, fitting is when two things correspond and can be joined without friction, whereas misfitting describes an inharmonious relationship between two incongruent things, like "a square peg in a round hole" (2011, 593). The misfit concept of disability thus addresses both the body and the world, which in turn allows for a more phenomenological account of what it is like to experience embodied, material friction with a world that was built to accommodate a very narrow concept of the body. At the same time, misfitting describes disability as contextual and fluid. It investigates a "dynamic encounter between flesh and world" that is neither static nor stable (592). Since fitting and misfitting involve specific dynamics within a concrete context, when "the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit, and with it meanings and consequences" (503). Misfitting is fluid and shifts with changing circumstances and cannot be understood in isolation—it "emphasizes context over essence, relation over isolation, mediation over origination" (593). Misfitting provides a phenomenological approach to disability by "framing the materialization of identity and subjectivity as perpetual, complex encounters between embodied variation and environments" (602). Like Merleau-Ponty, Garland-Thomson emphasizes relationality, contingency, and flesh. Additionally, like Merleau-Ponty, she avoids disembodied abstractions and false binaries that separate the body from the world.

The concept of misfitting also helps us to understand disability gain because it highlights the creative world-making of people who do not fit into the world as it was constructed. While fitting has many privileges, it also supports obliviousness to material realities such as contingency, vulnerability, and dependence. Garland-Thomson describes fitting as "when a generic body enters a generic world" and can move through it without friction (2011, 595). Fitting allows an unproblematic encounter with the world—there are supports rather than obstacles and actions are sustained rather than interrupted. To fit, one must occupy a "dominant subject position" that allows one the privilege of moving through the world anonymously, one's identity unmarked and one's place unquestioned (597). Yet this lack of friction can cause the dynamic between the self and world to recede from attention. Misfitting thus draws out the meaning of disability as a form of subjugated knowledge. While fitting has many social and material privileges, it also supports obliviousness to material realities, contingency, vulnerability, and dependence. As Garland-Thomas explains,

When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow. (Garland-Thomson 2011, 597)

By contrast, the misfit is more aware of the way the world is constructed because of their dynamic with it. Rather than being generic and anonymous, the misfit is more particular and brings into focus specific material dynamics. There is greater awareness of one's body, the world, and the contingent relationship between them. Fitting can make it easy to forget that we are dependent and vulnerable. It can support the myth of the fully independent, autonomous subject—a *thinking thing* (*res cogitans*) defined by intelligence, rather than materiality. The experience of misfitting shatters these illusions and “ignites a vivid recognition of our fleshiness and the contingencies of human embodiment” (597–98). Misfitting thus makes the body, material environment, and conditions for the possibility of an action come to the fore.

Posing Cézanne as a misfit artist does not pathologize his art but instead highlights his *vivid recognition of fleshiness* and the *contingencies of human embodiment*, to use Garland-Thomson's language. It is because Cézanne does not fit into the narrow definitions of what is normal that he was able to paint the world as he did, which Merleau-Ponty describes as “abandoning himself to the chaos of sensations” (1964, 13). As a misfit artist, Cézanne invites us to reconsider narrow conceptualizations of human embodiment and to reinvestigate what we know about perception. In the following two sections I will argue that it is this quality that makes his painting so useful for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of visual perception. I will first begin with the obstacle to understanding visual perception—Cartesian optics and linear perspective—before explaining how Cézanne develops a misfit optics in his paintings.

IV. THE PROBLEM OF CARTESIAN OPTICS AND LINEAR PERSPECTIVE

Cézanne's art is significant for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of vision, as well as his phenomenology of art and painting. Merleau-Ponty explains that Cézanne discovered that “the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one” even before psychologists made this realization (1964, 14). While Cézanne's artistic style does not appear to be realistic in the sense of the academic paintings that preceded his work it captures something very real about embodied visual perception. Specifically, Cézanne discovers the lived perspective through his opposition to abstract mathematical models of optics that treat the visual field like a grid. Here I will read “Cézanne's Doubt” through Merleau-Ponty's (1993) “Eye and Mind” to explain why linear perspective does not actually capture visual perception and why a misfit approach to optics is needed.

Merleau-Ponty begins “Eye and Mind” with an account of how the scientific attempt at objectification fails to capture phenomena. He writes,

Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. Operating within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 121).

The world is treated as a collection of opaque objects that can be reduced to a set of data “to test out, to operate, to transform” and as a result such experiments admit “only the most ‘worked-up’ phenomena, more likely produced by the apparatus than recorded by it” (121–22). This approach constructs its object in terms of its instruments and their operations and reduces phenomena to the organization of data.

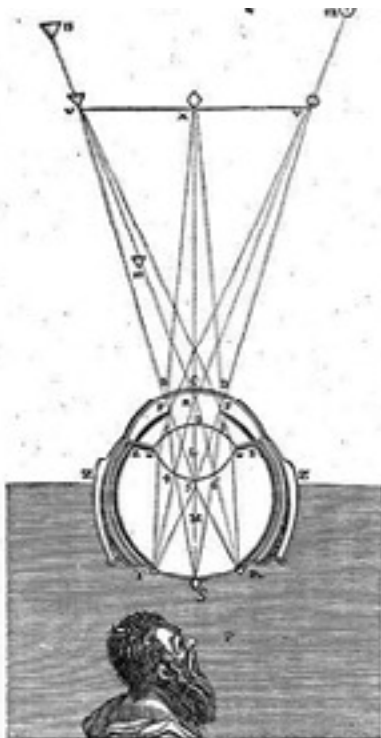


Figure 3. Descartes, *Diagram of Cular Refraction*. Commons. [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org) (public domain). Image description: This image shows the profile of a person looking in the distance. Above the person is a large diagram of an eye, a cross-section with multiple triangles to convey the field of vision. It demonstrates Descartes' geometrical account of vision.

For Merleau-Ponty, Descartes' *Dioptrics* presents a perfect example of the abstract construction of perceptual experience based on “objectivity” and “correctness.” Descartes' optics gives a mathematical model of vision, which is completely distinct from presenting vision as it is experienced: “Here there is no concern to cling to vision. The problem is to know ‘how it happens,’ but only enough to invent, whenever the need arises, certain ‘artificial organs’ which correct it” (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 130). Instead of giving an account of visual perception as it is experienced, Descartes idealizes our vision by giving it geometrical form—i.e., linear perspective and plane projection. Descartes follows the ambitions of the theoreticians who “wanted to forget what they disdainfully called *perspectiva naturalis*, or *communis*, in favor of a *perspectiva artificialis* capable in principle of founding an exact construction” (135). In perfecting the geometry of how objects are seen, early modern thinkers hoped to establish the ideal vantage point, the absolute perspective, from which objects could be seen in perfect clarity with absolute determination. It is an attempt “to rediscover the true form of things” (135). Yet the process of idealizing vision erases our experience of it. Cartesian optics is not personal or subjective visual experience, but rather “a network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party, witnessing my vision, or by a geometer looking over it and reconstructing it from outside” (138). In this sense, optics is necessarily artificial and fails to capture the experience of vision. Merleau-Ponty states that Cartesian optics is constructed from

the isolated reason of the thinker, and relies upon the mind, not the world. He explains, “[a] Cartesian can believe that the existing world is not visible, that the only light is of the mind, and that all vision takes place in God” (Merleau-Ponty 1993, 146). The idea that the world can be deduced mathematically from an absolute vantage-point (God) is present within Descartes’ *Meditations* as well as the *Optics*. Cartesian optics, like Cartesian epistemology, declares that things must be clear and distinct to be true. To achieve this clarity often requires a divine vantage point above our flawed human one. Yet Descartes’ idealization of visual experience leads to an artificial perspective that separates rather than joins us to the world. The objective model of vision abstracts from the subject, the object, and more importantly their relation, and replaces everything with mathematical points that are meant to clarify and correct the errors of the lived perspective (fig. 3).

Like Descartes’ optics, linear perspective attempts to replace our field of vision with a geometrical grid. Linear perspective is more than a set of geometrical rules for creating the illusion of three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface; it expresses a way of knowing and being in the world. The history of visual art teaches us that linear perspective had to be invented and with it came many ontological and epistemological assumptions. Many art historians and theorists have asserted that perspective in visual art acts as a theory of space, of bodies, of subjectivity, and of our relation to the world and to each other.⁸ In *The Poetics of Perspective*, James Elkins (1994) explains how much the concept of perspective has changed across time. He contrasts the use of linear perspective with Renaissance art, which used multiple perspectives. For Elkins, linear perspective replaces a set of pluralistic practices with a more monolithic, abstract, geometrical, and unified concept of vision, space, and subjectivity (xi–xii). It substitutes a variety of viewpoints with one that is, as Elkins describes, monolithic. We can see how linear perspective forecloses and limits our ways of seeing. Moreover, linear perspective describes a mastery over the world, the ability to make sense of it and articulate its hidden logic. As Hanneke Grootenboer states in *The Rhetoric of Perspective*, “[p]erspective makes a particular claim to truth” (2005, 3). For Grootenboer, perspective is best described as a *rhetoric*—that is, “a model of thought” and a “system of persuasion” (10). Perspective is not something visible, but a way of making things visible, which means it can often function in invisible ways. Gootenboer notes that the Dutch call it *deurzigkunde* (the art of transparency) and that “because we see through it, we are unaware of its operating system, so we look at objects that appear within this system as if they are truth itself” (92).

Cartesian optics and linear perspective thus might be read as forceful attempts to *fit* the ambiguity of human perspective into the clarity and regularity of a geometric one. Like the normate, it substitutes the imperfections and variations of our concrete, material existence for idealizations. It invents in order to “correct” at the same time that it claims to capture reality through artifice. As Garland-Thomson has noted, “[o]ne of hallmarks of modernity is the effort to control and standardize human bodies and to bestow status and value accordingly” (2011, 598). Cartesian optics, like the normate, asserts an idea of how bodies ought to be based on a myth that oversimplifies the complexity and varieties of embodiment. Garland-Thomson writes,

⁸ See Erwin Panofsky (1997) and Hubert Damisch (1994).

Although modernity presses us relentlessly toward corporal and other forms of standardization, the human body in fact varies greatly in its forms and functions. Our experience of living eventually contradicts our collective fantasy that the body is stable, predictable, or controllable, creating misfits of all of us. (Garland-Thomson 2011, 603)

In contrast to these artificial constructions of visual perception, Merleau-Ponty asserts that “art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning which operationalism would prefer to ignore” (1993, 123). Cézanne’s approach to visual perception differs from the artificiality of Cartesian science because he does not reduce experience to the clarity and order of geometry. He preserves the complexity and ambiguity of lived experience and allows us to experience perception in all its richness. The following section will consider how Cézanne breaks down these false constructions to convey visual perception in all of its dynamic, embodied complexity.

V. CÉZANNE’S MISFIT OPTICS

Cézanne’s artistic style does not fit the sense of clarity and order that traditional perspective painting offers, however, in breaking from such assumptions about vision, he offers a new optics—which I will describe as a *misfit* optics. For Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne’s attempt to develop a new optics through painting captures our perception of the world more faithfully than reductive, absolutizing, Cartesian optics.

Cézanne’s experimentation with perspective captures how we experience the world through visual techniques that we might consider examples of misfitting. In Cézanne’s paintings the outlines between shapes are broken and imperfect, objects are stretched at the bottom, and images collect at different angles. For example, in Cézanne’s (1890–94) *Still Life with Basket of Apples*, the back edge of the table looks dramatically higher to the right of the basket, and the front edges are also broken and irregular (fig. 4). These alterations would seem distorted in comparison to academic painting, which utilizes linear perspective; however, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, such “distortions” are truer to our lived perspective. When lines of one object are broken by another object, the line no longer seems straight and continuous to our lived perspective. Nor do we see things as perfectly ordered on a grid. Instead, “when our eye runs over a large surface, the images it successively receives are taken from different points of view, and the whole surface is warped” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 14). These distortions are not arbitrary or simply for artistic effect but demonstrate Cézanne’s remarkable sensitivity to the complexity of perception. Breaking the traditional rules of linear perspective allows Cézanne to paint our lived perspective. As Merleau-Ponty describes,

it is Cézanne's genius that when the over-all composition of the picture is seen globally, perspectival distortions are no longer visible in their own right but rather contribute, as they do in natural vision, to the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 14)

For Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne's painting evokes our pre-reflective experience in a way that Cartesian optics cannot.

Cézanne's paintings draw us to recognize the unified and dynamic embodiment of experience.⁹ Merleau-Ponty explains that the senses are not distinct from each other, especially touch and sight, unless we abstract from lived experience by introducing the concept of pure impressions or sensations (2012, 4). For Merleau-Ponty, the "perceptual



Figure 4. Image: Cézanne, *Still Life with Basket of Apples* (1890–94). Wikiart.org (public domain). Image description: In Cézanne's painting of apples above, the outlines between shapes are broken and imperfect, objects are stretched at the bottom, and the image collects at different angles instead of along a geometrical grid.

⁹ See also Helen A. Fielding (2021).

‘something’ is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a field” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 4). He uses a red rug as an example. If I were to try to isolate my visual perception of the color red as a separate impression from how it appears in the context of the carpet, I would have an abstract concept of red that is far removed from my actual sensory perception. Instead, as Merleau-Ponty notes,

[t]he red patch I see on the rug is only red if the shadow that lies across it is taken into account; its quality only appears in relation to the play of light, and thus only as an element in a spatial configuration. Moreover, the color is only determinate if it spreads across a certain surface; a surface too small would be unqualifiable. Finally, this red would literally not be the same if it were not the “wooly red” of a carpet. (5)

For this reason, dividing objects of experience into clear and distinct qualities that are separate from each other does not account for how we actually experience it. For Merleau-Ponty, a pure impression is “not merely undiscoverable, but imperceptive, and therefore is inconceivable as a moment of perception. If it is introduced, this is because, rather than being attentive to perceptual experience, this experience is neglected in favor of the perceived object” (4). This abstract simplification is an attempt to offer a pure object without ambiguity, rather than an account of perceptual experience. Sensory perception cannot be divided into discrete units without artificial divisions. Merleau-Ponty provides the following example to illustrate this unity of the senses:

If a phenomenon—such as a reflection or a light breeze—only presents itself to one of my senses, then it is a phantom, and it will only approach real existence if, by luck, it becomes capable of speaking to my other senses, as when the wind, for example, is violent and makes itself visible in the disturbances of the landscape. (332).

Cézanne was aware of this original unity. According to Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne said that a painting contained, in itself, even the odor of the landscape” (332).

Cézanne’s method of painting strikes us because he does not treat sight as a separate sense divorced from our experience of the whole. Merleau-Ponty explains that in Cézanne’s paintings the lived object is not constructed from different senses but instead “presents itself to us from the start as the center from which these contributions radiate. We *see* the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor” (1964,15). Cézanne’s painting relies upon the interweaving of all elements, which is evident within his use of color (fig. 5). The colors, movement, shape, lines, and textures cannot be separated because it is their relations to each other that allow them to articulate an object. For example, Cézanne traces several outlines of “modulated colors” that allow the shape to body-forth with the appearance of depth “as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves” (15). The effect of these colorful, modulating lines on our eye is the same as when we look at an object ordinarily: our eye must take in different aspects continuously without ever capturing all elements completely. As Merleau-Ponty describes,



Figure 5. Paul Cézanne, *Forest* (1890). Wikiart.org (public domain). Image description: This painting of trees illustrates Cézanne’s technique of layering colorful lines in ways that convey their movement and evoke feeling.

“[r]ebounding among these, one’s glance captures a shape that emerges from among them all, just as it does in perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 15). Cézanne use of color suggests the object as it emerges in experience, rather than a discrete object of pure presence. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne as capturing “the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things” (1964, 18). These techniques explain why Cézanne’s paintings of trees are so full of life.

Cézanne’s paintings, moreover, are charged with emotion in a way that speaks to the connection between mind and body. Merleau-Ponty writes that “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” (1964, 14). As painter, Cézanne brings together all aspects of who we are. Yet he does not do so in a way that limits human experience to narrow concepts of what is normal or how we *should* experience the world. As Reynolds describes, “Cézanne’s ‘greatness’, then, turns neither on humanistic universality, nor medical pathology, but on the extent to which his singularity and the singularity of his work both *particularizes* and *collectivizes* each to whom it speaks” (2022, 210; emphasis in original).

Often Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of Cézanne liken him to a phenomenologist, especially in terms of his doubt. When Merleau-Ponty explicates Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method in *Phenomenology of Perception*, he underlines the fact that "the return to phenomena" is not a recovery of what already was, but rather the act of bringing phenomena to sight for our investigation. It is a "return" in the sense that it invokes our pre-conceptual experience. As Merleau-Ponty explains, the "eidetic reduction is the commitment to make the world appear such as it is prior to every return to ourselves; it is the attempt to match reflection to the unreflective life of consciousness" (2012, xxx). This paradoxical demand—that reflection present what is unreflective or prior to reflection—means that phenomenology has a fundamentally different task than simply unearthing the source of experience or providing an explanation of its causes. Recovering experience of the world is not a task that can complete itself by capturing phenomena through concepts, as "there is no thought that encompasses all our thought" (xxviii). Instead of a complete method that totalizes and reifies the world as its object, phenomenology must perpetually renew its vision of the world. Accordingly, the "philosopher is a perpetual beginner" (xxviii). Cézanne's paintings renew our vision. They make the world appear as if for the first time. Merleau-Ponty writes, "[o]nly one emotion is possible for this painter—the feeling of strangeness—and only one lyricism—that of the continual rebirth of existence" (1964, 18).

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to make the connection between Cézanne's art and embodied experiences stronger by reading his painting technique as a misfit optics. Misfitting reveals the qualities of lived experience that fitting hides and, in doing so, allows greater awareness of our relation to the world. Cézanne created a new optics that helps us to understand the irreducibility of sight to geometrical grids and ideal vantage-points *not* in spite of his disabilities but *because of* them. Cézanne's misfit optics moreover demonstrates the limitations of aesthetic theories that exclude, and/or pathologize different ways of inhabiting the world. I have also attempted to show how the normate restricts and undermines the creative, expansive, and transformative impulse of art. For this reason, addressing ableism in aesthetic theory helps us to engage with art in meaningful ways that embrace the diversity of human life. As Siebers states the issue, "how difficult it is to think beyond the ideological horizon of ability and how crucial it is to make the attempt. For thinking of disability as ability, we will see, changes the meaning and usage of ability" (Siebers 2008, 11). Aesthetics requires a new concept of artistic ability that does not exclude disability but instead acknowledges the depth, complexity, and richness that come with different ways of embodying the world.

The task of recovering lived experience requires acknowledging the variety, ambiguity, and strangeness of life—all of which a misfit aesthetics illuminates.

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