

# Embodied Subjectivity in Cézanne's Late Paintings

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## Abstract

This study aimed at the transformative artistic approach of the renowned French painter Paul Cézanne during his later years, emphasizing a departure from conventional cognitive conventions in painting. Cézanne's shift towards highlighting the structuring of visual impressions over mere observation aligns with the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which places the embodied subject at the core of perceptual experience. The argument presented here centres on how embodied subjectivity, as employed in phenomenological research methods, facilitates a deeper understanding of the imaginative abstraction in Cézanne's late paintings. In doing so, this paper contributes to a deeper comprehension of post-impressionist art and underscores the significance of the theory of embodied subjectivity in artistic interpretation. This reciprocal relationship establishes a distinctive approach to artistic thinking and research grounded in essential cognition and direct intuition, enriching the understanding of Cézanne's late paintings, and advancing the discourse on art perception.

## Keywords

Post-Impressionism Art, Paul Cézanne, Embodied Subjectivity, Phenomenology, Philosophy of Art

## 1. Introduction

Paul Cézanne was a well-known French painter from a post-impressionist school. In his later years, Cézanne modified certain cognitive conventions of painting, emphasising how the human mind structures the visual impression instead of the process of ordinary seeing (Andersen, 1980). This abstract artistic expression highlights the role that perception plays in creating consciousness. In the same way that the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenome-

nology places the “body”, with its unity of subject and object, at the centre of experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). This paper will argue that embodied subjectivity in phenomenological research methods allows viewers to better understand the imaginary abstraction presented in the late paintings of Cézanne. Specifically, embodied subjectivity in phenomenology interacts with the world through the body, encouraging viewers to rely on their own primordial experience when appreciating works of art, thereby determining the structure of experiential consciousness and the essential characteristics of objects through systematic reflection (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

The artworks selected in this study are *Apples and Oranges* (Figure 1) and *Mount Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 2). It has been organised in the following way. The first part deals with visual elements in painting by depicting natural objects and the formal structure, explaining the complementarity of embodied subjectivity to the traditional transcendental logic of absolute subjectivity and the grasp of primitive perception by both painter and viewer. The second is to explore the work’s innovative use of colour language, complementing Roger Fry’s approach to the unity of form and emotion. It critically negates the logic of the sensory material in visual experience and illustrates the interaction between bodily perception and the world. By doing so, this research provides a crucial opportunity to advance the understanding of post-impressionist art and reveals how art is presented through the theory of embodied subjectivity. Reciprocally, it establishes a distinct artistic thinking and research style grounded in essential cognition and direct intuition.



**Figure 1.** Paul Cézanne, *Apples and Oranges*, c. 1899, Paris, Musée d’Orsay.



**Figure 2.** Paul Cézanne, *Mount Sainte-Victoire*, c. 1904, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

## 2. The Research Overview of Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

The scholarly exploration of Cézanne within the field of art history has consistently been a prominent subject, particularly when contextualising his paintings within the domain of phenomenology. As a post-impressionist painter, Cézanne departed from the narrow pursuit of colour alone and sought a more emotionally charged subjective representation instead. Cézanne desired to “create something solid and durable out of Impressionism, like the art of the museums,” meaning that he wanted to give paintings a feeling of structure and order again (Huyghe, 1973). His ideas and methods caused a break from the conventional path that European painting had taken since the Renaissance (Chen, 2013). Consequently, a new and innovative creative idea emerged, leading to the development of Western modernist art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Cézanne’s distinctive painting style led traditional formalist critiques to overly emphasise formal elements in interpreting his visual language overly, often neglecting the intuitive experiences and perceptual features he accentuated. For example, Fry believed artists should steer clear with the replicable and overly fine academicism, concentrate on the portrayal and infusion of imagination, the integration of forms, and other concerns, and pay attention to the emotional elements projected in the paintings (Liu, 2021). On the contrary, this viewpoint does not entirely apply to Cézanne, as he emphasizes a profound observation of the objective world and the stability of form rather than focusing on imagination and emotion. There-

fore, phenomenology, with its emphasis on the significance of intuitive experience and perception, proves to be more universally applicable in interpreting Cézanne.

For instance, Gosetti-Ferencei (2018) emphasised how modernist literature and visual art, which are highly involved in contemplating processes of perception, are in perfect harmony with the phenomenological goal. Phenomenology aptly characterises this contemplative approach, mirroring modernist discoveries of hidden creative potential in ordinary experiences and drawing from shared reflective practices in the arts and literature (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018). Among numerous phenomenological philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt," written in 1945, stands out as a direct elucidation of the subject of Cézanne's study (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). This article departs from Cézanne's life experience and significantly underscores perception, the ontological status of art, freedom, and psychoanalysis. Simultaneously, it serves as a crucial vehicle for Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophical theory of perception. Accordingly, Gosetti-Ferencei (2018) explained how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology might help us comprehend imagination in modernist art in a new way by reflecting on its reflected manifestation. Similarly, from Conde Soto's perspective (2008), Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and the perceptual phenomena of Cézanne's painting techniques indicate the unique perceptual patterns accompanying both the artistic creation process and the interpretative process for the recipients of the artwork. However, current research on Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne predominantly focuses on an aesthetic phenomenological reflection of Cézanne's works, often neglecting to position his painting aesthetics within Merleau-Ponty's theory of bodily phenomenology. The construction of bodily theory is pivotal in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological framework, endowing it with a "medium" for acquiring direct experiences. Thus, the creation of unique artistic expressions through perception, bodily engagement, and subjective experience emerges as a key element in Cézanne's studies.

### **3. Cézanne's Visual Objects: Unveiling the Perception of a Primitive World**

The visual ontology in Cézanne's late paintings reflects the exploration of natural objects and the formal structure of paintings, which is the perception of the primitive world through embodied subjects. Merleau-Ponty grounds the ultimate source of normativity in his novel conception of embodied transcendental subjectivity (Liu, 2023). According to theories of embodied subjectivity, our "body" serves as both the foundation for our subjective experiences and objective entities. Here, the bodily differentiation is distinct from the actual "flesh", and the focus is on using the body to experience the world rather than just thinking about it abstractly. Correspondingly, it is novel to propose that the nature of art lies somewhere between reality and pictorial representation. Nature has always piqued artists' interest, yet this fascination is shifting in new direc-

tions (Boztunali & Basbug, 2017). Cézanne believed that the structure of the physical thing and the pictorial object is both apparent and unseen, and that the artist constructs this structure via the painting process (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Thus, from an objective perspective, most objects he depicted are natural, and all-natural entities could be considered geometric forms. However, how the visual object is represented in his painting contrasts with the viewer's experiential perception of it.

For instance, Cézanne's oil painting *Apples and Oranges* (Figure 1) features over two dozen apples and oranges set against a colourful floral canvas. Visually, the main subjects of this oil painting are two fruits in nature: apples and oranges. The picture's white tablecloth stands out sharply against the warm-toned fruits, most of which are orange. The white and black tones occupy most of the picture. The rich red, yellow, and blue reflect the difference between warm and cold colours. The rough wooden table is covered with a thick tablecloth and has some apples and porcelain on it. Fruits are also on the table and in the tall porcelain bowl. Moreover, Cézanne was conscientious about capturing each fruit's texture, weight, and bulk by studying its physical structure. Natural forms, in Cézanne's opinion, all tend towards the sphere, cone, and cylinder. He saw this as the discovery of an objective reality, which is akin to a natural law (Fry, 1958). Consequently, every one of his fruits assumes an almost flawless geometric shape, utilising spheres, cones, and cylinders to convey an idealised idea that surpasses the laws of nature. The perceiving mind, which both reveals and modifies what is seen, is always an essential component of the thing perceived in Cézanne's work (Gervais, 1984). Nevertheless, as fruits in nature cannot grow into almost perfect shapes due to the complexity of the growing process, this idealised depiction of the painted object is different from people's everyday experiences. This indicates that when the viewer enjoys the painting, it seems to be based on a transcendental logic. In fact, it is not through the absolute subject but through the body's sensory organs that the viewer interacts with the external environment. This interaction does not follow the objective experience of life. Instead, it is a return to primitive perception, which is precisely the participation of the embodied subject. Unlike Edmund Husserl's transcendental phenomenological position, Merleau-Ponty does not follow the traditional transcendental consciousness view. Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of an eternal and absolute subject that accompanies or underlies all experience. When he does discuss sense constitution, it is in reference to the embodied agent's involvement in the process of "co-existence," "communion," or "exchange" with its surroundings (Inkpin, 2017). In other words, embodied agency thus replaces absolute subjectivity. Therefore, by emphasising the observation and idealised depiction of the form of the object during the creative process, Cézanne conveyed his artistic ideas through subjective experience, and the viewer, rather than being a passive recipient, increased the depth of interaction with the work of art through the body.

Continuing this trajectory, Cézanne focused on exploring the structure of

things, an expression deeply rooted in them. He inherited the rationality of the classical experts in painting. His paintings are more concerned with establishing a sense of order, aiming to capture the essence of the object being visualised, and to achieve the effect of near-simple line modelling. Compared with the works of the Impressionists and others, he is more adept at using composition and creating spatial relationships, which is a reduction of the purely intuitive approach. Similarly, establishing a sense of order implies that the creative subject is a “body” excluded from the poetry of painting and the importance of the subject matter. The artist’s “body”, as the “body” of the perception medium, creates art directly by obtaining information from the initial perception, which increases the construction and understanding of visual nature. Notably, artists are regarded as the first light of the rational perspective since they are said to concentrate more on the outside visual environment. In the painting, Cézanne used a colourful floral canvas as a backdrop for several apples and oranges on a plate or scattered and the arrangement of these fruit objects is not a careless setup. The way the canvas backdrop is arranged produces an ongoing interplay of scenes that compete for space around the items, giving them a slight illumination. The items’ volume and texture are enhanced by light reflection. In contrast to the sepia-toned background, the red and yellow fruits, the fruit plate, and the white serviette stand out dramatically. He broke with the conventional focal point perspective by using both flat and overhead views to produce a balanced composition that keeps everything in the image visible. The napkin connects the seemingly dispersed fruits into an organic oneness. The aesthetic delight derived from the opulence and ubiquity of phenomena surpasses his habitual contemplative tendencies, resonating consistently throughout the entirety of the work (Fry, 1958). The giant apple, which Cézanne purposefully put in the centre of the painting, draws the viewer’s attention, and controls the entire scene. All the elements in the artwork seem substantial and weighty, and the red apples appear to be carrying a hefty load that would drop from the picture. Every element in this picture has a purpose and a tie to everything else. Each object is a component of the entire image. Merleau-Ponty compares the body to a work of art, which conveys its meaning through both the physical object and the projection of meaning (Suhendra, n.d.). In the same way that Cézanne portrayed objects as visually dynamic, this emphasis on the relativity of visual experience renders the objects autonomous and reinstates the body’s primordial perception.

#### **4. Embodied Perception: Cézanne’s Exploration of the “Body” and the “World” Through Colour**

The innovation of colour language in Cézanne’s late paintings reflects the negation of the logic of sensory materials, thereby achieving the interaction between body perception and the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne enquired into the geological structure of his landscapes, believing that these abstract linkages, articulated in terms of the visible world, should impact the act of painting.

There can only be one element motivating all the motions from which a picture eventually emerges: the entire landscape and utter completeness, which are just what Cézanne referred to as a “motif” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). From the mid-1880s until his death, Cézanne focused on Mont Sainte-Victoire, during which he enjoyed seeing items from various angles, at various times of day, and in various seasons to acquire a raw visual experience (Monnier, 2022). The mountain, trees, and sky components take on a geometric form in Cézanne’s painting of *Mount Sainte-Victoire* (Figure 2). Cézanne was dissatisfied with the recognised principles of focal perspective and the bright but loose modelling of the Impressionists (Meyer, 2023). He desired to discover some connections between classical reason and reality construction. Instead of the typical view of perspective space, he accentuated the flatness of hue. This painting is more akin to Pointillism than it is to the conventional thin-painting method. Cézanne expresses colours and shapes through the superimposition and overlapping of dots, assembling a collection of small dots to create an overall image. He used small, densely packed dots to quickly find relationships between colours in smaller strokes. By not using traditional gradient colour transitions, this method deviates from the conventional logic of light and transition colours. Instead, the viewer’s eye can combine these spots over distance to produce an overall visual colour effect, giving them a more complex and richer visual experience. This is meant to negate the traditional logic of the viewer’s sensory material and mobilises the painter’s primordial experience of looking at an object to capture, the first sensation of viewing it as far as possible. It is, therefore, a work of abstract rationality and structural analysis, where the structure of the painting is rendered invisible by using unconventional brushstrokes. This almost abstract painting language is extracted from the rational analysis of the object, and he completes the transition from the object’s nature to the subject’s expression.

Merleau-Ponty quoted Cézanne: “The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).” It follows that art is not mere imitation, nor does instinct create it, but should be traced. This implies that Cézanne’s creation of landscapes is between the real and the purely instinctive, which means that between subject and object, there is the perceptual engagement of the body with the world in the embodied subject. Analogously, Merleau-Ponty posits that Cézanne does not utilise colour to imply tactile experiences that would give shape and depth. These differences between touch and sight were not present in primitive perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). The mountain in the upper third of the painting and the sky are the two primaries blue colours. The colour treatment, which blends serene blue and warm orange to represent various areas of the painting, creates the variation and dynamics of natural light and shadow, giving the image a dynamic quality that, in Cézanne’s view, embodies Mount Sainte-Victoire. The painting’s near and far views’ differing colour schemes give the observer a sense of depth and change. If the painter intends to portray the world, the arrangement of his colours must abide within this indivisible totality;

otherwise, his painting will just hint at things and not provide them in the demanding wholeness, presence, and unrivalled plenitude. From this point of view, Cézanne returns to the primordial experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). In brief, Cézanne emphasises the unity of physical experience and perception by challenging the traditional dichotomies of contrasting light and dark colours. Equally, this innovative use of colour language aims to convey the unity of perception with the world, reflecting the interconnectedness of interiority and transcendence. Simultaneously, it signifies the unity between the body and the language of the painting.

The entire history of modern painting has a metaphysical significance because of its endeavour to escape from illusion and to acquire various dimensions of its own. Merleau-Ponty is aware of this (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In essence, the metaphysics of painting can consider painting from the standpoint of a conceptual mechanism, the philosophical and formal order of painting, and determine whether it is possible to present a painting philosophy. More precisely, the phenomenological theory of embodied subjectivity can supplement Fry's formal analyses of Cézanne's paintings. Fry inherited Immanuel Kant's aesthetic ideas to some degree. Like Kant, Fry discovers two correlated types of beauty: 'sensuous charm' and what could be referred to as "pure beauty" (Kant, 1951). Building upon this standpoint, he repeatedly emphasised that Cézanne's paintings had sensibility and intellect. The latter means the artist was grasping formal relations. He considered the unity of the two to be aesthetics of form with emotion (Fry, 1958). Nonetheless, he did not mention how to unify the two parts in a specific way. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied subjectivity can complement Fry's formalist view of aesthetics based on Kant's metaphysical framework because the workings of the body can explain how a painter's behaviour occurs when making art. As mentioned in this paper, Cézanne frequently employed geometric shapes to describe natural objects in his paintings. Fry (1958) makes the point that Cézanne's interpretation of nature could only be understood in terms of basic geometric shapes while he was exploring the diversity of nature. In contrast, according to Merleau-Ponty's theory, in fact, in the actual creative process of the painter, the almost perfect geometry is a typical idealised state, which is a kind of communication and fantasy between the painter himself and nature, with the body facing the outside world and interpolating with the outside world. The body is oriented towards the outside world and interpolates with it. The artist relies on the "body" to understand the world, moving his body in an embodied-subjective way to acquire an understanding of the self and the objective world (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). As a result, the artist is not absolutely in control of information through nerves, nor does the artist decide how to work with an object in painting. The painter's thinking and intense concentration of consciousness during the creation of a painting are what Merleau-Ponty considered to be the spontaneous "sustained attention" practiced by each "body posture" towards the canvas. This active opening and maintaining

of the body towards the outside allow the viewer to better understand the painter's motivation and soulfulness in the painting, bridging the gap between form and emotion brought about by traditional dualism. Fry (1958) contends that from the standpoint of colour in painting, Cézanne arrived at the third dimension by using colour movement to create the rhythm of the colour plane. Whereas in embodied subjectivity theory, the suggestion is absent as contrary to transcendental concepts. There are two types of human response to colour, one in the retina in response to colour and the other resulting from the body's sense of muscular movement (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Both subjective and objective perceptions exist in humans, and different colours can elicit different reactions in various contexts, which primarily depend on how the human subject's body interacts with the objective painting. It is evident from this that colour suggestion alone does not constitute the entirety of the experience of art. Conclusively, it makes more sense for artists to use their bodies to engage form and emotion creatively.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, this study has offered a thorough examination of the significance of Merleau-Ponty's embodied subjectivity in augmenting our comprehension of Cézanne's artworks. By stepping out of Fry's traditional evaluation of Cézanne's formal aesthetics, the study succeeds in analysing colour and natural elements in two of Cézanne's later works from the phenomenological standpoint of embodied subjectivity. The study illuminates the connection between the structure of natural objects and the emergence of visual transcendence. Moreover, it clarifies the relationship between advancements in colour language and the domain outside of the sensory and suggestive dimensions. Establishing a link between the artist's creative perception and the viewer's appreciative perception through the lens of body theory provides valuable perspective into comprehending Cézanne's late pictorial innovations. By integrating philosophical perspectives, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the artistic and perceptual dimensions inherent in Cézanne's oeuvre. This phenomenological method allows for a nuanced exploration of artistic intentionality from the artist's point of view and contributes further insights into the broader narrative of historical artwork.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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