

THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS OF MEAT AND FLESH: DELEUZE AND MERLEAU-PONTY

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Deleuze's book on Francis Bacon remains his largest and most profound study of pictorial art. However, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981) is more than that: it elaborates on a series of philosophical concepts, such as the "body without organs" or the "diagram", and invents a metaphysics of forces. In this article, we want to focus on Deleuze's notion of meat (*viande*), which figures in his discussion of Francis Bacon's paintings, and show that it is also a notion of crucial philosophical importance. As its phenomenological counterpart, we will then take up Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh (*chair*), which is central to his late ontology of the visible and the invisible. The notion of flesh emerges as the result of a long and intensive engagement with modern art. We will refer to two essays in particular: "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945) and "Eye and Mind" (1964).

Although "meat" and "flesh" are both metaphysical concepts and created under the influence of pictorial art, they are signs of two very different modes of thinking. Deleuze's metaphysics of becoming calls for resistance toward the intolerable in the present. It assigns to philosophy the task to create concepts or ideas that enable us to think differently and engage in political action. Virtual ideas are supposed to liberate us from the rule of actual facts, opinions or clichés, and to effectuate a movement of becoming beyond the actual toward the virtual. This movement of becoming—or process of "counter-actualisation", as Deleuze also calls it in the *Logic of Sense*—has a clear utopian aim, namely that of calling forth a new earth, a new people. In this context, Deleuze's notion of meat, that is the virtual Idea of "universal meat", puts a great challenge to the phenomenological notion of flesh.

The radical nature of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh lies above all in its emphasis on relationality, ambiguity and multifacetedness. He opens up a new view of the world and its different layers of sense; he makes us feel our embeddedness within it. However, while it can also be said that Merleau-Ponty questions the rule of simple facts, opinions or clichés, it seems that his way of thinking is much less radical than Deleuze's. Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh presents a comprehensive and conciliatory "Weltanschauung", a theatre of the visible and the invisible, which puts us at peace with the world and our fellow beings. This is, perhaps,

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why reading Merleau-Ponty is such a joy, while Deleuze does not cease to puzzle and disturb us.

In taking up and comparing these two philosophical notions of “meat” and “flesh”, we do not simply want to state the affinities or divergences we find between the two concepts. Rather, by following the genesis of Deleuze’s and Merleau-Ponty’s thought, we would like to give a sense of the particular “line of flight” that their thinking takes respectively. If the thought of a philosopher is like an arrow shot through our minds, the question is: Where does it take us? Although this article in no way intends to answer this question, it at least aims to open up a field for questioning the effectivity and radicality of their different styles of thought.

1. PITY THE MEAT!—DELEUZE AND FRANCIS BACON

In their co-authored book, *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari declare that both philosophy and works of art have the important task to strengthen the power of resistance, that is, “resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present”.¹ In the case of philosophy, they regard the creation of concepts as the enabling conditions of resistance against the intolerable; in the arts, it is the construction of blocks of affects and percepts that can induce intensive processes of becoming. Resistance is not to be conceived as a negative or destructive attitude toward the present, but as a positive act of creation and transformation.

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), Deleuze presents us with an example of how art can have an impact on the way we see, feel and act. Deleuze detects in Bacon’s paintings “a kind of declaration of faith in life”,² a claim that might surprise at first, because in these paintings we find scenes of terror, crucifixions, mutilated and deformed bodies. But according to Deleuze, the violence that is involved is of a very special kind: it is not the representation of something horrible happening. Bacon’s paintings are not narrative; he paints seated or crouching “Figures” isolated from any context of a story. Bacon wants to paint another violence, a “violence of sensation” that consists of the effects of colour and line more than anything else. This violence of sensation dissolves clichés of representation and instead releases intensive forces that immediately attack our nervous system. As Deleuze says: “The violence of sensation is opposed to the violence of the represented (the sensational, the cliché)” (FB 39). Sensation, according to Deleuze, has an intensive reality of its own: what Bacon aims to capture in his paintings are the *invisible and intensive forces*, those that act upon the body and climb through its flesh. The way that Deleuze describes the relation between the invisible, intensive forces and sensation is that of a transcendental conditional: The forces act as transcendental conditions to the effect that sensation would be impossible, if not for these forces. Invisible and intensive forces are the necessary and genetic conditions for the “givenness” of sensation. The problem that needs to be solved by the artist is the question how he can make these invisible forces visible. As Deleuze says in his book on *Francis Bacon*:

if force is the condition of sensation, it is nonetheless not the force that is sensed, since the sensation “gives” something completely different from the forces that condition it. How will sensation be able to sufficiently turn in on itself, relax or contract itself, so as to capture the nongiven forces in what it gives us, to make us sense these insensible forces, and raise itself to its own conditions? (FB 56-7)

The artist needs to find a way for sensation, e.g. the sensation of colour, to extricate the pure and excessive presence of forces beyond representation. He needs to make visible what lies beneath the organism with its fixed organization of organs, he needs to release the *body without organs*, that is, the reality of an “intense and intensive body” (FB 44). “Bacon has not ceased to paint bodies without organs, the intensive fact of the body” (FB 45-6).

Deleuze borrows the concept of the body without organs from the French poet and writer Antonin Artaud, who first used it in his text, “To have done with the judgment of God”, which was written as a radio play in 1948. Artaud created this concept as a means of resistance against politics and culture of oppression, against American imperialism and the judgement of God. The body without organs is the idea of a body that rejects any kind of pre-determined organization imposed upon the body by organic functions, political inscriptions

and societal codes. In Deleuze's reading, the body without organs is a plane of immanence, a field of intensive forces that express "a more profound and almost unlivable Power [*Puissance*]" (FB 44). This unlivable Power is to be conceived as the *excessive, intensive and indeterminate life* that subsists prior to its incarnation in fixed and organized forms. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze spoke of it in terms of the *virtual Idea of vitality*, the transcendent object of which would also include monstrosity.³ With the example of Bacon's contorted figures, this monstrous vitality, that is the powerful nonorganic life beyond the organism, is rendered visible. One characteristic of Bacon's figures is the animal traits that they invoke. Frequently, we find that the human head is replaced by that of an animal. Bacon's figures are drawn into a movement of becoming, of becoming animal. The technique that Bacon applies to make these metamorphoses visible does not simply consist of a combination of forms. Instead, Bacon's techniques involve a wiping or scrubbing of parts of the canvas, so that a "zone of indiscernibility" emerges, that is a disorganized zone, which is common to several forms and irreducible to any of them. As Deleuze states: "In place of formal correspondences, what Bacon's painting constitutes is a *zone of indiscernibility or undecidability* between man and animal" (FB 21). The human face as a signifying and spatial structure gives way to the head which incarnates an animal spirit: "It is the animal spirit of man: a pig-spirit, a buffalo-spirit, a dog-spirit, a bat-spirit ..." (FB 20).

In his crouching and deformed bodies, Bacon depicts the combat between the invisible forces of becoming. It needs to be stressed that this combat takes place entirely within the visible; it is revealed in the meat (*viande*), which appears in splendid colours (pinks, reds and blues, and broken tones).

Deleuze emphasizes that meat (*viande*) is not flesh (*chair*). As he says in *What is Philosophy?*, flesh is 'too tender' to support the invisible forces of becoming;⁴ there needs to be a second element, the bones: "the bones are like a trapeze apparatus (the carcass), upon which the flesh is the acrobat" (FB 23). Although Bacon's depiction of meat and bones might make us feel a bit uncomfortable, Deleuze assures us that it has nothing to do with sadism or a taste for horror. On the contrary, if there is a feeling in Bacon, it is an intense pity for the meat, including the meat of dead animals:

Pity the meat [*viande*]! Meat is undoubtedly the chief object of Bacon's pity [...]. Meat is not dead flesh [*chair*]; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colors of living flesh. It manifests such convulsive pain and vulnerability, but also such delightful invention, color, and acrobatics. Bacon does not say, 'Pity the beasts,' but rather that every man who suffers is a piece of meat. Meat is a common zone of man and the beast, their zone of indiscernibility. (FB 23)

Perhaps we might say that Bacon is a painter of the "universal meat". Here we have to invent a new universality, a concrete universality, which has to be distinguished from generality, as Deleuze suggests. We do not achieve this universality by observing and contemplating specimens of animal and man, and then forming a general concept that determines a common structure "meat". Such a concept would necessarily remain a mere abstract, nominal definition and impose a formal identity. We also do not want to define the universal as a kind of general element or substance that exists before objects are individuated. Rather, in the Deleuzian usage, the universal is something to come, something to be created, a utopian aim. In *Critique and Clinique*, Deleuze considers literature under this utopian aspect: The task of writers is not to express their personal memories or lived experience, or to speak in behalf of an already existing people, but rather "to write for this people who are missing".⁵ Writers—and here Deleuze refers particularly to American writers such as Thomas Wolfe and Herman Melville—call forth a "universal people composed of immigrants from all countries",⁶ "a minor people, eternally minor, taken up in a becoming-revolutionary",⁷ a people that does not yet exist because it is "always in becoming, always incomplete".⁸ This "universal people" is the object of an Idea, a virtual Idea as Deleuze would say. The virtual Idea does not designate an imaginary projection of the mind, the image of an ideal abstract unity. It also stands opposed to a concept of the understanding that extrapolates a conceptual identity for distinct empirical objects. According to Deleuze, the virtual Idea is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract" (DR: 208). It is a "concrete universal" (DR: 173), ideal no less than real, which can only become determined in empirical circumstances. It poses a permanent task: The Idea of a universal people calls for a new subjectivity, a new people to be created or invented under conditions of combat and struggle. It is an

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experiment, a challenge to political practice, but nothing that can be translated into general propositions of a party directive or explicated in particular propositions of a political programme. The virtual Idea of a universal people is a *u-topos*, a reality which has no place *hic et nunc* and which cannot *be* but only *become*.⁹

To become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from *a* woman, *an* animal, or *a* molecule—neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form.¹⁰

The indefinite article designates “the power of an impersonal”: “literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say ‘I’”.¹¹ Thus, according to Deleuze, the “noble” criterion of literature is, whether it carries author and reader to this state of an impersonal power, the power of intensive and indeterminate life.

Let us briefly recall what Nietzsche means by “noble”: Noble designates “the superior form of everything that ‘is’”—in the language of energy physics “that energy which is capable of transforming itself” (DR: 41). Transformations, metamorphoses, eternal formlessness and becoming are the highest form of being and the highest thought. According to Deleuze, “the thinker of eternal return ... can rightly say that he is burdened with the superior form of everything that is, like the poet ‘burdened with humanity, even that of the animals’” (DR: 67). “The thinker, undoubtedly the thinker of the eternal return, is ... the universal individual” (DR: 254). What Deleuze means by “universal individual” becomes explicit in his reference to Pierre Klossowski. The thought of eternal return, its selective and creative power, “allows only the plebeian to return, the man without a name” (DR: 91), or as Deleuze explicates: “The man without a name, without family, without qualities, without self or I, the ‘plebeian’ guardian of a secret, the already-Overman” (DR: 90). Deleuze links Nietzsche’s utopian vision of the “noble” or the “superhuman” with the “universal individual” that strips off particular properties, escapes general categories and instead invokes all possibilities of becoming, becoming man, becoming animal. The “universal individual” or the “universal people” indicate a concrete universality (not a generality), a multiple becoming, which is always incomplete. This incompleteness or indefiniteness is its strength, because it cannot be blocked by formal (conceptual) identity or real identity (the Same, *hic et nunc*). We find that this utopian dimension of Deleuze’s thinking also appears in his book on Francis Bacon: it is the “universal meat” (instead of the universal people) that Bacon summons forth. He is not simply offering an empirical observation and depiction of the contortions and convulsive pain common to both man and animal. Instead, he creates a virtual Idea of universal meat, based on affects and percepts that exercise a violent effect on our cherished identities and destroy our power to say “I”. But virtual Ideas not only have a destructive impact, they also elicit creative processes of becoming, a movement of counter-actualization or counter-effectuation. In Bacon’s paintings, we can see this movement of counter-actualization to all the suffering, gaping wounds and spasms, in the inventive play of colours and “acrobatics”: the acrobatics of the flesh on the trapeze apparatus of bones. The destructive play of forces is counter-actualized by the creation of new forces that emerge within the visual but reach beyond it (in the intensive sphere of nonorganic life). As Deleuze says, “When the visual confronts the invisible force that conditions it, it releases a force that is capable of vanquishing the invisible force, or even befriending it” (FB 62).

Bacon’s paintings visualize an ontology of forces that we know from Deleuze’s books on Nietzsche and Spinoza. Bacon reveals the hidden forces that act upon the meat: forces of isolation, of deformation and of dissipation, forces of expansion and of contraction, forces of coupling and of disjunction. The combat of these intensive forces affect the meat, but the meat is not simply to be pitied as a passive bearer of contortions and spasms. Instead, we have to see its capacity of being affected as active to the extent that it affirms life with all its colours, it releases the vital power of rhythm and engages in new possibilities of becoming. In other words, the meat has the capacity to render the invisible and intensive forces fruitful, to experiment with new compounds or alliances between forces, to open up new ways of becoming and forms of existence.

What makes Bacon a political artist in the sense that we indicated above is his rejection of representation and the creation of intensive compounds of colours and lines eliciting a shock of sensation. His paintings do not address a subject, the viewer or art critic, but—in Deleuze’s words—they affect “a primary sensibility that we *are*” (DR: 73). They establish a common plane of sensibility or affectivity, which allows for “another sensibility, another way of feeling” that can be shared by both man and animal.¹² They establish “a zone of indiscernibility more profound than any sentimental identification: the man who suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man. This is the reality of becoming” (FB 25). This plane or zone of indiscernibility finds its expression in the “universal meat”, which is not something actual that can be located and fixed in time, but a virtual Idea or event yet to come. Bacon’s paintings reach for this utopian aim by inducing processes of becoming that violently change the way we are, think, act and feel. Only by subjecting ourselves to this violent effect of the virtual Idea or event, can we open up to the possibilities and metamorphoses of life, can we establish this zone of indiscernibility, “a common zone of man and the beast” (FB 23).

2. MERLEAU-PONTY’S ONTOLOGY OF THE FLESH

It is striking that Deleuze prefers the notion of meat (*viande*) to that of flesh (*chair*). What immediately comes to mind is Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical notion of flesh (*chair*) that he develops in his late ontology of the visible and the invisible. Deleuze’s rejection of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh of the world is well-known: “A curious Fleshism [*Carnisme*] inspires this final avatar of phenomenology and plunges it into the mystery of the incarnation. It is both a pious and a sensual notion, a mixture of sensuality and religion, without which, perhaps, flesh could not stand up by itself.”¹³ Deleuze charges that the notion of flesh is too much bound to subjectivity, that is the incarnated subject of phenomenology, and borrows too much from Christianity. It is also obvious that Deleuze would reject the whole set of terms that Merleau-Ponty uses in order to characterize his ontology of the flesh.

Despite Deleuze’s reservations against Merleau-Ponty, an encounter between the two notions of “meat” and “flesh” is attractive, all the more as Merleau-Ponty develops his ontology of the flesh under the influence of his engagement with modern painting, in particular that of Cézanne, Matisse and Klee. The painter, says Merleau-Ponty, teaches us to see. He discovers the latency and depth of things, their polymorphous being or hidden flesh. Seeing in this sense is not to be understood as an intentional act or act of cognition but rather as “a delirium which is vision itself”.¹⁴

According to Merleau-Ponty, science and philosophy have both been unable to discover this delirium of vision. Science is not interested in *seeing* but in *explaining* the world. It creates models that represent states of affairs in general, disregarding the particularity of things and the differences of the situational context. Science is “a thinking which looks on from above (*pensée du survol*), and thinks of the object-in-general” (EM 122). Science is essentially “a construction”, inasmuch as by means of its experiments it yields primarily only “the most ‘worked-up’ phenomena, more likely produced by the apparatus than recorded by it” (ibid.). “Thinking ‘operationally’” the way that science does, is predominantly an activity of the mind, not of the eye (ibid.).

Philosophy as well treats seeing as “a mode or a variant of thinking” (EM 132), a fact which is particularly notorious in Descartes. For Descartes, only the faculty of thought can grasp the essence of things behind their various sensuous appearances. It grasps the extensive and mathematically describable form of things. The eye is an inferior, though necessary function of cognition. In his essay *Dioptric*, published in 1637 as one of three lengthy essays prefaced by a brief *Discourse on Method* (which has become his most famous and widely read work), Descartes elaborated his theory of vision by virtue of a dynamic model of light rays. He defines seeing as an effect of light rays that are reflected by the things in the world and impress their images on the back part of the human eye. Seeing in this sense operates according to the model of touch, and in fact Descartes compares seeing to the mode of perception of blind persons “who see with their hands”: The blind man’s cane serves him as a “sixth sense”.¹⁵ The resistance of things that meets with the top of the cane is transferred to the blind person’s hand and via the nerves to his brain.¹⁶ In a similar way, light rays hit the human eye and cause our

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vision. Seeing is explained here as a merely external and causal relation.

Already Descartes notices that such an objective model of seeing forces us to assume a “little man inside the man”:¹⁷ a man which looks at the representation yielded by the eye and interprets it, identifying the objects and analysing their relations. Accordingly, Descartes’ numerous drawings of the refraction of light rays culminating in the eye frequently also portray the head of a little man looking at the eye. Descartes’ objective model of seeing induces us to “seek *still further inside* that *seeing man* we thought we had under our eyes” (VI 210). The physical activity of seeing needs to be accompanied by a “thought of seeing”: Seeing is dependent on thought, which deciphers the given impressions.

In *Dioptric*, Descartes addresses, albeit briefly, the art of engravings. He remarks that those landscapes represented by a copper engraving are not “similar” to nature as we see it.¹⁸ “And thus it comes about that often, precisely in order to be more perfect in their quality as images, i.e., the better to represent an object, they ought not to resemble it [nature].”¹⁹ The representation given by the engraving follows the rules of perspective, which for Descartes (and for Renaissance painters, more broadly) were those of geometry. The linear perspective was a technique which dealt with the problem of depth by subjecting geometrical forms to a perspectival deformation: “the square becomes a lozenge, the circle an oval” (EM 131) in perspectival projection. The engraving does not resemble the things it represents. Instead, it excites thought, which performs the act of cognition: it reads the engraving just like a text; the assemblage of lines are means or signs to be deciphered by thought, “as for instance, signs and words, which have no manner of resemblance to the things they signify.”²⁰ For Descartes, there is no “power of images”, that is, seeing does not have the power to overwhelm us and take from us the faculty of judgement (or of “objective thought” as Merleau-Ponty also calls it). At all times, thought has to inspect the image (the depicted as well as the retinal image) and to “read” the signs. Between the depicted and the real object, there is no hidden analogy, no internal relation—solely an external relation of representation, which is to be interpreted by thought. A Cartesian, says Merleau-Ponty, does not see *himself* in the mirror (EM 131). He sees the image of a body caused by reflection that can be identified by a thinking subject, a cogito. For Descartes, reflexivity is a function of thought, while for Merleau-Ponty it is a metaphysical structure of the flesh: “The mirror emerges [as a cultural device] because I am a visible see-er, because there is a reflexivity of the sensible; the mirror translates and reproduces that reflexivity” (EM 129). And in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states: “The flesh is a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body” (VI 255).

When I touch or look at myself, Merleau-Ponty explains, I receive a “specular extract” (VI 256) of myself. The “fission of appearance and Being” is an inherent structure of my body, just as there is an irreducible “duality of the touching and the touched”, of which the mirror is only an extension (ibid.). Merleau-Ponty borrows his famous example of one hand touching the other from Husserl, in order to explain this “dehiscence (*déhiscence*)” as the ontological condition of a kind of “corporeal reflexivity” or “reversibility”:

My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of the two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it*—my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only its outer covering. (VI 147-8)

Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty, there is a reversibility between the touching hand and the hand being touched that is “always imminent and never realized in fact” (VI 147). There is no coincidence but always a minimal delay or “hiatus” (VI 148).

If I see myself in the mirror, I am also confronted with this hiatus, which however does not separate me completely from my mirror image but rather grounds a necessary “deferred reversibility”. The touching hand is only able to touch, because it can be touched itself; it is part of the same flesh. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty

wants to say that I am only able to see because I am part of the visible and can be seen: “my body sees only because it is a part of the visible in which it opens forth” (VI 153-4). My activity of seeing is at the same time a passivity of being seen. This intertwining of activity and passivity reveals the secret of “narcissism”. Seeing is essentially narcissistic: “since the seer is caught up in what he sees, it is still himself he sees: there is a fundamental narcissism of all vision” (VI 139). Immersed in the visible, the see-er is also seen: by himself in the mirror, by the gaze of the other, and by the things surrounding him. However, it is not sufficient to be visible, one must become visible for oneself. This is the essential function of the gaze of the other but also of the surface of things around me: they act like a mirror, which reflects my image and thereby makes me complete and visible to myself. The quasi-vision that arises within things adds to my picture that what things could see of myself, thereby creating a theatre of visibility, a “total or absolute vision” (EM 130). According to Merleau-Ponty, there is

a Visibility, a Tangible in itself, which belongs properly neither to the body qua fact nor to the world qua fact—as upon two mirrors facing one another where two indefinite series of images set in one another arise which belong really to neither of the two surfaces, since each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them. (VI 139)

The dehiscence between my touching hand and the hand being touched, between myself and the mirror image, between myself and the other, between myself and things is an essential ontological feature. However, it does not divide what exists into separate worlds (those of the subjective and the objective, of being and appearance), but rather creates a common world of simulacra, a visibility in itself or “specular being”. This is what Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh”. He emphasizes that it is not an anthropological term, but rather a metaphysical or ontological category of an “element” or “*general thing*” (VI 139) prior to the differentiation into subjects and objects.

When we speak of the flesh of the visible, we do not mean to do anthropology ... Rather, we mean that carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves and several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible. (VI 136)

His interest in art, especially in painting, is what carries Merleau-Ponty all the way from a Husserlian phenomenology of the body to an ontology of the flesh of the visible. Through art he attempts to understand the magic of seeing, which connects seeing and being seen in a carnal relation of reversibility. The essential structure of the flesh is reversibility, a “chiasm” of seeing and being seen, a “promiscuity between the seeing and the seen” (EM 132).

3. MERLEAU-PONTY AND ART

“Every theory of painting is a metaphysics” (EM 132), says Merleau-Ponty in *Eye and Mind*. Referring to modern painting, to Cézanne, Klee and others, he sketches his own philosophy of vision, of the visible and the invisible, that is, his ontology of the flesh. “Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting scrambles all our categories, spreading before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings” (EM 130).

According to Merleau-Ponty, the painter surrenders his body to the world, and by doing this he transforms the world into a painting, into “a ‘visible’ to the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first” (EM 126). We need to understand the way in which these metamorphoses or “transubstantiations” (124) occur.

The central fact is our openness onto the world, of which our body is a part. The metamorphosis happens in our body, insofar as the visibility of the world is duplicated by “a secret visibility” (EM 125). Things evoke an “echo” (125) in our bodies, “a carnal formula of their presence” (126), which is an “internal equivalent” to their public appearance. For instance, the vibration and rhythm of colours awaken a resonance in our bodies. There is

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an internal affinity, a relation of “sympathy”: Our bodies admit that the vibrations of the sensible pass into him and prolong themselves into a rhythm of existence. The painter, says Paul Valéry, “takes his body with him” (123). Madame Cézanne describes how her husband could completely immerse himself into the spectacle of a landscape: “He would halt and look at everything with widened eyes, ‘germinating’ with the countryside.”²¹ “‘The landscape thinks itself within me’, he would say, ‘and I am its consciousness’.”²² Cézanne’s words recall Arthur Rimbaud’s famous formula “I is an Other”, in which he expresses the experience of being formed by thought rather than being the originator. Capitalizing on this affinity, Max Ernst remarks: “Just as the role of the poet since [Rimbaud’s] famous *Lettre du voyant* consists in writing under the dictation of what is being thought, of what articulates itself in him, the painter’s role is to circumscribe and project what is making itself seen within himself.”²³

The visible world, which makes itself seen, takes over the painter’s eyes and his body. It is as if a fire were lit on the ground of the sensible world, as if the spark of the sensible had seized the body of the painter. The gesture of his arm and his hand, the movements of the brush respond to this ignition and leave some tracing on the canvas, which blend with the spectacle of the visible again. In this way, Paul Klee described the crossover of the seeing and the seen: “A certain fire wills to live; it wakes. Working its way along the hand’s conductor, it reaches the canvas and invades it; then, a leaping spark, it arcs the gap in the circle it was to trace: the return to the eye, and beyond.”²⁴

The world of the sensible, the body of the painter and the work of art merge into a “circuit”, which has no break and of which it is “impossible to say that here nature ends and the human being or expression begins. It is, then, silent Being that itself comes to show forth its own meaning” (EM 147). Merleau-Ponty also speaks of a “coming-to-itself of the visible” (141).

However, this “coming-to-itself of the visible” should not be understood as a blind process that unfolds with its own internal dynamics throughout all phases of history and nature. The painter is not simply a tool, a passive medium, he actively takes part in this metamorphosis of being into vision. He renders visible what profane vision believes to be invisible. As Merleau-Ponty declares: “This voracious vision, reaching beyond the ‘visual givens’, opens upon a texture of Being of which the discrete sensorial messages are only the punctuations or the caesura” (EM 127). Different from ordinary vision, the vision of the painter, which is learned by exercise, gives visible existence to fleeting phenomena such as light reflexes, varying shades, the radiation of colours, the veil of morning mist and the fuzziness of the horizon. He is able to give clouds a heavy and sculptural or light and airy appearance, he conveys the soft gleaming of silk, he bestows eyes with a glance. The painter captures the becoming of things, their becoming visible. According to Merleau-Ponty, he breaks “the ‘skin of things’ to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world” (141).²⁵ In his famous still life paintings, Cézanne shows how things become visible to our spontaneous and wandering gaze: The surface of the table stretches into a two-dimensional plane and is pulled down to the lower part of the painting. It presents itself to a searching gaze, which changes its visual angle constantly and causes a large table surface to warp. The distortion also becomes manifest in the white and bluish plates that are elongated to ellipses, while the two ends of the ellipses are swollen and expanded. The ellipses are never ellipses but forms that oscillate around the mathematical ellipse. Cézanne knew that “that shell of space must be shattered—the fruit bowl must be broken” (140), in order to capture the things in their genesis, “as if they had come from a pre-spatial world behind the scenes” (143). The external form of things, their “envelope” or “shell”, is only “secondary and derived” (140). The contour of the apple is not outlined by a continuous line—an exact and closed line would make the contour a positive “thing”, yet it “is rather the ideal limit toward which the sides of the apple recede in depth”.²⁶ Cézanne’s problem was: not to lose the depth and solidity of things, while remaining faithful to the sensuous surface of reality. “Not to indicate any shape would be to deprive the objects of their identity. To trace just a single outline sacrifices depth—that is, the dimension in which the thing is presented not as spread out before us but as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves.”²⁷

Cézanne's solution was to modulate the colours towards the edges and to generate the contour out of multiple blue lines. He showed a contour in *statu nascendi*, that is he sought to convey the "impression of an emerging order, an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes".²⁸ He tried to capture things by means of a multiplicity of lines and colours. As the impressionists already knew, in order to represent the colour of objects, it is not sufficient to put "on the canvas their local tone, that is, the colour they take on isolated from their surroundings".²⁹ The painter has to consider the atmospheric conditions (the lighting, shadows and reflections), the phenomena of contrast and the reciprocally heightening effect of complementary colours—all of these effects modify local colours in nature. However, Cézanne did not stop here. For him, colour not only describes the instantaneous and sensuous surface of things but also crystallizes their Being, that is the solidity and material substance of things. In other words, colour implies the form and depth of things, their materiality, their texture, their odour, the sound they make if you tap on their surface. As Merleau-Ponty says, colour is more than a property of the thing, a "certain being" (VI 218); it is "a *dimension*, the expression of every possible being" (218). "Thus we must seek space and its content *together*. The problem [of depth] becomes generalized; it is no longer solely that of distance, line, and form; it is also, and equally, the problem of colour" (140f.).

With the example of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty shows that, more than anything else, modern painting seeks to sever its "adherence to the envelope of things" (EM 142). It undertook a new approach to the use of line and colour. Colour is no longer a positive attribute of things, just as the line is no visible line of the figure. This does not mean that the line would be dispelled from painting altogether; rather, it was liberated from the conception of the line as an exact contour encircling the object.

It is simply a matter of freeing the line, of revivifying its constituting power; and we are not faced with a contradiction when we see it reappear and triumph in painters like Klee or Matisse, who more than anyone believed in colour. For henceforth, as Klee said, the line no longer imitates the visible; it "renders visible"; it is the blueprint of a genesis of things. Perhaps no one before Klee had "let a line muse". (EM 143)

The use of lines in modern painting has a constituting effect: lines let things arise. Thus a painter gives a vivid expression to a person moving in space, for instance a dancer, by capturing several impossible moments of movement at once. His painting works differently from photography, which simply isolates and fixes a single instant. A single instant is a photographic absurdity, a mathematical artifice: things do not move in an instant. In order to give visible expression to a dancer, to let him arise on the canvas, the painter needs to capture the impossibles, that is, to render the invisible visible. Lines are no determinable, physical-optical things, but axes of movement, lines of force, structural filaments (*des nervures*), folds or vectors.

For Merleau-Ponty, modern painting visualizes the depth of things and their becoming. It is therefore equivalent to a philosophy of the visible and the invisible, which abandons the ideology of identifiable things, that is, "the *skin* of things, but giving their *flesh*" (VI 218).

4. CONCLUSION: DELEUZE AND MERLEAU-PONTY

It is tempting to equate Merleau-Ponty's notion of flesh "as a being of depths, of several leaves and several faces" (VI 136) with Deleuze's plane of immanence, which he describes as "interleaved"³⁰: it has multiple dimensions, different layers and folds. Both thinkers characterize this milieu of being as endowed with a genetic potential, as a field of pre-quantitative and pre-qualitative processes, a field of individuation, and as the genetic condition of experience and thought. However, we want to point to some decisive differences in their thought and way of thinking. Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh remains on the surface of sense-experience, in particular that of vision. Deleuze would utterly reject Merleau-Ponty's terminology of reversibility, of doubling, of mirror-image and of narcissism. It is a theatre of images, of visibility and tangibility, of simulacra, while Deleuze favours an ontology of forces, of intensity, of affectivity and of becoming. Deleuze's ontology seeks to capture

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real processes, intensive movements “in-place”, the connecting, coupling and disjunction of forces, which are essentially a-subjective. In fact, Deleuze describes those forces and intensities as too “strong” for any individual to bear. Those terrible movements are almost unlivable and “can only be sustained under the condition of a larval subject”.³¹ Comparing Deleuze’s philosophy of genesis or becoming with Merleau-Ponty’s, it is obvious that the notion of flesh of the latter is indeed too “tender”. The flesh is a very reconciliatory notion according to which the sentient being is embedded within an indivisible whole, an unsurpassable specular being, a visibility and tangible in itself. Merleau-Ponty challenges the traditional dichotomies such as that of the soul and the body, the subject and the object, or the world and its beyond. The notion of flesh entails no promise of a transcendent world (like the promise of the Christian notion of flesh, that is Jesus’ sacrifice through which we gain access to a transcendent world), Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh constitutes a plane of immanence, which is already there (*il y a*) and of which we are all part. By contrast, Deleuze’s plane of immanence has a utopian character: it has to be created, be it in art, in philosophy or in politics. Equally, the “universal meat” cannot be taken for granted. Deleuze’s notion of meat is supposed to act as a weapon of resistance against the multiple sufferings and the intolerable of the present. It is supposed to draw individuals and groups into a movement of becoming (becoming-animal), to establish new alliances (man and animal) and induce new processes of subjectification (the result of which cannot be foreseen). The “universal meat” is, like Deleuze’s conjuration of a new earth and a new people, a utopian aim, a micro-political agenda, and therefore differs radically from Merleau-Ponty’s mystical and contemplative notion of flesh. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy involves the danger of a good will that reconciles Being, experience and thought on a surface of the visible and the invisible, with the ontology of the flesh. Deleuze, on the contrary, follows Nietzsche in calling for a philosopher of “bad will”, who is suspicious against bourgeois life and values, and for a philosophy the use of which is “to *sadden*”: “A philosophy that saddens no one, that annoys no one, is not a philosophy.”³² Deleuze’s thinking favours difference, the disparate, “disjunctive syntheses”, the coexistence of “impossibilities”. The dimension of utopia in his thought certainly is a *u-topos*, a place that cannot *be*, at most, it can *become*. It is a critique of the world as it *is*, a critique of the present. Philosophy has to be “untimely”, to say it with a Nietzschean term,³³ and act against the reactive forces of the present world, which are a hindrance to life and its excessive, intensive and indeterminate power of becoming. As Deleuze says, “it is with utopia that philosophy becomes political and takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point.”³⁴ There is no comfort or consolation in his words, but only a call to think, “to follow the witch’s flight”,³⁵ to transgress the boundaries of the subjective and to act under the violent constraint of virtual Ideas.

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NOTES

1. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 110.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. London: Continuum, 2004, 61. Henceforth this edition will be referred to as *FB* within the text.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 143. Henceforth this edition will be referred to as *DR* within the text.
4. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 179.
5. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. London, New York: Verso, 1998, 4.
6. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.
7. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.
8. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 4.
9. In their late work *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari state that “utopia is not a good concept because even when opposed to History it is still subject to it and lodged within it as an ideal or motivation” (110). The concept of utopia carries a historical or temporal taste with it: it relates to something that ought to occur in future, which is still part of our history. In this sense, utopian thinking conjures a vision or projects an ideal into the future that should motivate us to act and to create the conditions of possibility. For Deleuze and Guattari by contrast, genuine utopia operates by virtual Ideas that elicit processes of becoming in the intensive, indeterminate and impersonal sphere of life. When we continue to use the concept of utopia in want of a better term, we use it in this latter sense suggested by Deleuze and Guattari. Cf. also Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 112.
10. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 1.
11. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 3.
12. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. London: Athlone Press, 1983, 64.
13. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 178.
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Ed. Galen A. Johnson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, 127. Henceforth this edition will be referred to as *EM* within the text.
15. René Descartes, “Dioptrique” *Oeuvres. Discours de la méthode & Essais*, vol. VI. Eds. Adam and Tannery. Paris: 1973, 84 (my translation, D.V.).
16. Cf. Descartes, “Dioptrique”, 113-14 [in English, Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: The Modern Library, 147: “For just as when the blind man, of whom we have spoken above, touches this and that body with his staff, it is certain that these bodies do not transmit anything to him save only this, that in making his staff move diversely according to the diverse qualities that are in them, they thereby move the nerves of his hand, and in sequence thereupon the points in his brain from which those nerves come. This gives occasion to his soul to sense as many different qualities in these bodies as there are varieties in the movements which are caused by them in his brain.”].
17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, 208. Henceforth this edition will be referred to as *VI* within the text.
18. Cf. Descartes, “Dioptrique”, 112-14 [in English, Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, 146-7: “Thus, in the case of engravings, made up of a little ink disposed here and there on the paper, we see how they represent forests, towns, men and even battles and tempests, while yet of the infinity of diverse qualities which they make us conceive in these objects, the only one of these qualities to which they bear any proper resemblance is the quality of shape; and even this is a very imperfect resemblance, since it is on a completely flat surface that they represent bodies diverse in height and distance, and further that in accordance with the rules of perspective they often represent circles better by ovals than by other circles, and squares by four-sided figures which are not squares, and similarly in the case of all other shapes.”].
19. Descartes, “Dioptrique”, 113 [in English, Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, 147].
20. Descartes, “Dioptrique”, 112 [in English, Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, 146].
21. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Ed. Galen A. Johnson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, 67.
22. Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt”, 67.
23. Georges Charbonnier, *Le monologue du peintre*. Paris: R. Julliard, 1959, 34. Cited in Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, 128-9.
24. Cited in Will Grohmann, *Paul Klee*. Paris: Librairie Flinker, 1954 [New York 1956], 99. We take this quotation from Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, 147.
25. Merleau-Ponty refers here to Henri Michaux, *Aventures de lignes*. Paris: Librairie Flinker, 1954.

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26. Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", 65.
27. Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", 65.
28. Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", 65.
29. Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", 62.
30. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 50.
31. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 118, see also 215.
32. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 106.
33. As Nietzsche puts it, untimely thought means "acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come", cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" *Untimely Meditations*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 60. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 112, where they cite Nietzsche and explain the utopian future as "the Intensive or Untimely, not an instant but a becoming".
34. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 99.
35. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 41.