

### The Flesh Is Tougher Than You Imagine

*“The creating Self created for itself esteeming and despising, it created for itself joy and woe. The creating body created for itself spirit, as a hand to its will.*

*Even in your folly and despising ye each serve your Self, ye despisers of the body. I tell you, your very Self wanteth to die, and turneth away from life. No longer can your Self do that which it desireth most:—create beyond itself.*

*That is what it desireth most; that is all its fervour.*

*But it is now too late to do so:—so your Self wisheth to go under, ye despisers of the body.*

*To go under—so wisheth your Self; and therefore have ye become despisers of the body. For ye can no longer create beyond yourselves.*

*And therefore are ye now angry with life and with the earth. And unconscious envy is in the sidelong look of your contempt.*

*I go not your way, ye despisers of the body! Ye are no bridges for me to the Superman!—*

*Thus spake Zarathustra.” (Nietzsche 24-25)*

In their section on “Percept, Affect, and Concept” within their work *What Is Philosophy?*

Deleuze and Guattari state “the flesh is too tender” (149). This statement and the surrounding paragraphs of this work act as a direct challenge to Merleau-Ponty without explicitly naming him. Deleuze and Guattari have a philosophy built on a strange universe, filled with cosmic forces and leaky bodies - some of them without organs! (Parr 35-40) They see the lived body and subjectivity as misguided attempts to harness the uncontrollable “forces of the cosmos” (Logic of Sensation 50). This is a philosophy of invisible forces, deformable figures and vibrations aiming to create concepts which will change the world (Deleuze et al. 2-5). Merleau-Ponty on the other hand, has a grounded project and philosophy with more clear goals, especially in the realm of imagination. He is interested in the perceiving body and how we imagine it in the world, and how we enact that imagination. Using a variety of Merleau-Ponty texts<sup>1</sup>, as well as a supplemental work “*Imagining Bodies*” by James B. Steeves, I will uncover some of the details

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using abbreviations for the Merleau-Ponty texts, see appendix 1. These abbreviations are a development of those used by Steeves with the additional use of allowing me to distinguish essays as well as full texts.

of his theory of embodied perception and how it works alongside imagination. I will then compare this to the treatment of embodiment, subjectivity and perception shown in a variety of Deleuzian texts. I will investigate the possibility of their reconciliation and show why this is extremely difficult to justify. As my Nietzschean epigraph suggests, I will spend a moment arguing that the embodied perception of Merleau-Ponty is more convincing than that of Deleuze & Guattari. The result of the investigation will show that Deleuze and Guattari and Merleau-Ponty's theoretical approaches to perception and imagination are non-compatible.

All of Merleau-Ponty's work rests on perception. The world of perception which human beings live in is the ground on which any knowledge can be built from (PrP 3). Perception is for Merleau Ponty, an incarnated process by a mind which exists "in its body and in its world." (ibid 3) This perception is woven into the body, we sense through the body, "it is our point of view on the world." (ibid 5) In "The Phenomenology of Perception" part of this explanation is that the body is the background for the rest of perception: "bodily space can be distinguished from external space" (103). From this orientation, which can also be referred to as the "body schema" (PP 101) we are able to perceive the world. Crucially, the body is experienced as a whole, or Gestalt (PP 102). The world we perceive is then made up of figures and backgrounds that we sense from this central orientation in the body (PP 103). The world, our focus and the body which perceives them are *also* experienced as a cohesive whole (PP 108-109). The individual senses which go into making this world are combined synesthetically in this whole (Steeves 37). Beings perceive themselves in this grounding space and can then project themselves intentionally through this space, envisioning how they might freely play in the space they occupy (PP 137-138).

This envisioning, which Merleau-Ponty describes as “the intentional arc” (PP 137) is connected to how he explains imagination. Merleau-Ponty argues “consciousness is originally not an ‘I think that’ but rather an ‘I can’” (PP139). We perceive the world through a body which imagines different ways it can inhabit space (PP140). This allows the body schema to develop through the structure of a “virtual body” (PP260). This virtual body helps us to anchor ourselves in experience and play with the possibilities of the “I can”. In *Imagining Bodies*, Steeves develops and refines this idea of the imaginary body and its relationship to the world. The perception of the body and the symbolic extension gained by the virtual body permits us to develop more complex modes of behaviour (Steeves 23). The realm of the virtual is woven into the actual in a way which is typically non-disruptive, slowly generating a phyio-symbolic understanding of the world (Steeves 27-28). Steeves’ explanation uses the art of mime to expand on notions of how the body is imagined in the world (29). Mimes show us how we can perceive the body in terms of the imagined world, they exemplify the power to adjust our body schema with the power of imagination (31). The mime’s trained body gestures in a way which can be understood by another subject because of our shared sense of embodiment (31).

Steeves goes on to explain that the world we perceive is shaped by how we inhabit it and how we might interact with it (43-44). Perception informs the virtual body and the virtual body informs perception, allowing us to synesthetically understand the world (41). This goes further than the Gestalt psychologists, this whole is a continual experience we live (43). Instead of passively observing the world, we are intentionally dwelling within it in our bodies and their virtual extension (46-47). One of the key terms illustrated by Steeves is that of “reversibility” which allows a dialogue between the world we perceive and the role of the imagining body (48). This reversibility allows for the body to creatively interact with nature (48). Steeves sums up the

result of this synthesis: “Perception provides the body with a basic mode of existing in which the world is offered in the form of possibilities of virtual embodiment” (49).

It is important to stress at this point the unity and primordial nature of the experience of perception, body and imagination in Merleau-Ponty. This unity and synthesis is a prereflective experience (PrP 15). Sense data is unified in the synesthetic whole before any intellectual work can be done, and is always grounded in our relationship to the inexhaustible world (PrP 15). In *The Primacy of Perception* this is stated explicitly: “the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos (...)” (25). That discussion is primarily oriented towards disputing Cartesian attitudes towards the world, but it is still relevant to stress the primordially of unified perception. Another extremely useful remark comes at the end of the discussion accompanying that text:

“M. Parodi. I would be tempted to say that the body is much more essential for sensation than it is for perception.

M. Merleau-Ponty. Can they be distinguished?” (42)

This acts as another reminder of the indivisibility of sensations and perception in Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of imagination and his theory in general rely on a world that can be experienced in a way that is continuous, lived and synthesized. Steeves connects this to the imagination, describing “how the real and imaginary worlds are continuous and virtually interchangeable with each other (88). Deleuze will strongly differ on these points.

Before discussing Deleuze it would be remiss to not discuss the aesthetic aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of imagination. The imagination as realm of possibility is not the entirety of the Merleau-Ponty view of imagination. Artistic imagination for Merleau-Ponty creates a piece of nature (CD 62) which can be observed through our perceptual processes. This creates a new thing for the world, it “writes what has never been painted” in Cézanne’s own

words (CD 68). The painter thus takes their unique perception of the world and converts it into the physical gestures involved in painting (71). Steeves describes this as the “allusive logic” of painting, where it alludes to nature and contains expression simultaneously (56). The artist’s perception allows them to bring the invisible aspects of the world out that they perceive (S 54). Painting “says something about the world which remains to be said” (S 79) and does so in the style of its painter. This style is connected to physical reality, but not defined by it “we are never determined and yet we never change” (72). The painter cannot escape the immanence involved in existing in the physical world, and the acts of their imagination are grounded in the perceiving body.

Against the whole, continuous, imagining body comes the violent cosmology of Deleuze. Deleuze has entirely different ways of using common terms: I am indebted to *The Dictionary of Deleuze* for its efforts to clarify this. Deleuze’s bodies describe entities in a manner more reminiscent of physics – “any whole composed of parts, where these parts stand in some definite relation to one another, and has a capacity for being affected by other bodies” (Parr 35). The important thing for his bodies is the unique relationship which keeps the parts together, one that is seen as a power struggle in itself. The whole is not as much of a key to this, and Deleuze and Guattari are opposed to the completeness which psychoanalysis – and Merleau-Ponty – prioritize (Parr 37).

This concept articulates itself more clearly in the concept of a “body without organs” which Deleuze refers to in several places, including *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. This is an incredibly complex concept which originates with Antonin Artaud, who is quoted:

“the body is the body / it stands alone / it has no need of organs / the body is never an organism / organisms are the enemies of bodies.” (Logic of Sensation 39)

The life of the body without organs is a series of different intensities and forces which resist subjectification (40). Deleuze argues “the organism is not life, it is what imprisons life” (LoS 40). The lived body which Merleau-Ponty prioritizes is seen as “a paltry thing” (39). He uses Bacon’s abstract and warped paintings as demonstrations of the body without organs, where things are not subjected to the logic of the whole or contained within the human subject (Logic of Sensation 41-43). This is a quite different body than Merleau-Ponty’s and it is intentionally so, Deleuze sees the chaotic forces and intensities of the world as able to break apart the weak structure of the body (What is Philosophy? 178-180).

Among these forces are sensations, which in Deleuze are prior to cognition and experienced as a multiplicity of different sensual forces directly on the nervous system. These are a chaotic catastrophe which act with a power greater than the subject can endure (Logic of Sensation xix-xxi, 85-88) It can be imagined as the force of senses as they encounter a body and potentially overwhelm it. Sensations are percepts which may later become organized into perception (What is Philosophy 163) but need not be and regardless are independent of the perceiver (164). Percepts are not perceptions and are not contained within the subject (164-165). The purpose of art for Deleuze is to wrest sensations and percepts from perceptions and put them into material, creating a “bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations” (166-167). These material monuments do not preserve an artist’s perception, they exist as a constellation of sensation (167). This constellation is independent of the artist, it is its own body in the world affecting things through its force and vibrating sensations (168).

Bacon is the example par excellence for Deleuze. Bacon creates non-representational work which shows the violence and pain of the world (Logic of Sensation xxix). Instead of representing horror subjectively he represents the expression of that horror, the scream (LoS 50-

51 & fig 1). Bacon not only creates a new percept, in that percept itself he is demonstrating the forces of the world (LoS 48). Bacon fulfills Miles Klee's challenge to painting, making the invisible visible and paints the invisible forces of the world (49). The figures that Bacon uses represent an athleticism which shows bodies going beyond the limits of themselves (17). They are twisted, elongated, flattened, stretched, brought through holes and more: this shows that their movement is no longer that of the material structure but that of the more pliable Figure (17-18 & fig 2). This Figure is more than the body (19). The flesh is little more than meat, a material structure to be hacked into bits, a structure which can be seen literally in multiple Bacon paintings (fig 3&4). The flesh that forms lived experience and indeed later ontology for Merleau-Ponty "could not stand up by itself" (What is Philosophy? 178).

At this point the difference between Deleuze & Merleau-Ponty seems irreconcilable. An important note to introduce here is that of philosophical teleology. Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty have different missions in their philosophy. Merleau-Ponty is dedicated to exploring the phenomena of the world and understanding what role the body plays in that. Deleuze's philosophy is one which is attempting to challenge and change its readers by "forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts." (What is Philosophy 2) Deleuze wishes to create philosophical concepts which disorganize life, create new possibilities and recognizes difference rather than avoiding it (Parr 53-54). Deleuze's explicit violence and Merleau-Ponty's tenderness and optimism towards lived experience are at loggerheads.

One thinker who attempts to synthesize them is J.C. Mullarkey in his article "Duplicity In The Flesh: Bergson and Current Philosophy of the Body". Mullarkey sees the two models of the body as being able to meet through Bergson, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century thinker whom Mullarkey argues influenced both Deleuze & Merleau-Ponty (343). Mullarkey sees the difference as essentially

one between Merleau-Ponty's intentional body and Deleuze's multiform empirical body (347). Bergson has a dualistic approach to the body which describes it as both living and concrete (Mullarkey 346). Mullarkey's analysis of "*le corps vivant*" shows its connection to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and his formulation of bodily possibility (348). The body's possibility is in Mullarkey's interpretation of Bergson directed towards space as "instruments for its own desire" (Mullarkey 349). This instrumentality comes from the consumptive needs of the body which it attempts to carve out of the world – Mullarkey thinks these needs are similar to the drives which make up the unrepressed body without organs in Deleuze (350). These needs organized into a vessel for enacting them create the synthesis between the lived body and the Deleuzian body (350). The body imagines its possibilities in service of these aggregated drives (Mullarkey 351).

This attempt is useful in directing towards a possible synthesis of the two thinkers if developed and refined but does not accomplish it. Mullarkey is mostly dedicated to advocating Bergson in the realm of a specific question in psychology: whether the body is solipsistic or is directed towards the social world (340). This leaves him not explicating important aspects of the Merleau-Ponty approach, and softening Deleuze's project. His argument "Merleau-Ponty's work tends too greatly to a monism with no room to accommodate the very real aspect of the materialized and isolated body" (346) neglects the primordial nature of the physical body in his thought. His description of the Bergson-Deleuzian body counteracts one of the more important aspects of Deleuzian desire which he quotes earlier in the piece "Desire and its object are one and the same thing" (341). The aggregation of desires he is suggesting is exactly the kind of subjectification which Deleuze is challenging. The way to reconcile Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty will not be found through dualism.



Moving through the dualism of Bergson helps to show where the two thinkers can be united. Both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze have connections to monism: Merleau-Ponty's later view of "flesh" as he attempted to develop an ontology (Steeves 150-152), and Deleuze's rhizomatic structure takes some of its concepts from Spinoza (Parr 265). In *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Deleuze's materialism is described by John Marks as "expressive and intensive" (160). The notion of this intensive expressivity begins to show a possible bridge between the two. The material which makes up the Deleuzian world may not be as opposed to the lived body of Merleau-Ponty as it initially seemed.

While some of Deleuze's focus is on the barrage of "invisible forces" these are represented in his discussion of Bacon through the flesh they assault (xxix). These forces are hard to put into phenomenological terms when Deleuze describes them as "the forces of the cosmos confronting an intergalactic traveler immobile in his capsule" (50). But the deformation they cause is "always bodily" though static. The paintings Deleuze champions should not act intellectually, and should instead act "directly on the nervous system" (43-45); these same paintings are also said to release presences beneath representation. This would seem to be something that is in the world and is perceived pre-reflexively by the painter. If we take Merleau-Ponty at his word from *Primacy of Perception* and believe that the distinction between sensation and perception is misguided (45), similarities begin to develop. Deleuze quotes Cezanne saying "life is frightening" and says this cry is expressed in line and colour (45). In a later chapter on "Painting Before Painting" Deleuze describes how there are givens on the canvas and in the world which he describes as "clichés" (71-73). Deleuze discusses Cezanne's need to work with the reality of the world filled with clichés (72). Deleuze describes Cezanne's success in his fight with clichés as well as his need to avoid becoming a cliché of himself. His success allowed him

represent the “appleyness of the apple” (72) through dramatic experience of “fighting tooth and nail” to “know” this trait(72). All these descriptions to me suggest something like an embodied perception fighting with its preconditions, like that in Cezanne’s Doubt.

Even with Bacon, some kind of embodiment creeps into Deleuze’s writing. When Deleuze moves to “haptic” painting his insistence on the subject being a body without organs seems less significant (124-126). He states: “one might say that painters paint with their eyes, but only insofar as they touch with their eyes” (125). This can be connected back to the synesthetic structure of imagination in Merleau-Ponty; we imagine what we perceive in terms of its touch in combination with our vision. In *Eye & Mind*: “the painter in the instant when his vision becomes gesture, when, in Cezanne’s words, he “thinks in painting” (139). In Deleuze’s description of Bacon’s use of colour “there is indeed a creative taste in color, in the different regimes of color, which constitute a properly visual sense of touch, or a haptic sense of sight” (123). This seems like a synesthetic union of sensations through the imagining body more than it seems like sensations overwhelming the tender flesh.

Thus in the realm of the imagination and perception of the artist it would seem there is some affinity between the embodied imagining body and Deleuze’s artist. The imagining virtual body and its connection to the world may be just the thing to allow Deleuzian and Merleau-Pontian thought to interact in dialogue with each-other. I do not want to overstate this connection, however. The continuity of the whole body is something which is essential to Merleau-Ponty, and anathema to Deleuze. While there are examples in *The Logic of Sensation* which seem to work against Deleuze’s insistence in “Percept, Affect, Concept” that art stands completely separate from perception, it is not enough to cancel out the entire thread of logic. With world enough and time it would be crucial to examine more aspects of the imaginative

portions of Deleuze's drives on their own rather than in relation to Merleau-Ponty. In this paper, I have aimed to show how Deleuze's approach to the body and aesthetics interacts with Merleau-Ponty's but I cannot say I have shown entirety of his theory of the imagination without delving into the depths of *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. The process of finding aspects where Deleuze supports embodied perception is perhaps one which is not in the spirit of the rhizomatic project.

Ultimately, while there are areas of affinity between Deleuze & Guattari and Merleau-Ponty, they are incompatible at their base levels. Deleuze simply cannot accept consistent bodily perception, and this is a necessary part of Merleau-Ponty's thought. At this point it seems worthwhile to return to my Nietzschean epigraph. Is Deleuze a despiser of the body? Deleuze takes a great deal of inspiration from Nietzsche (Parr, 192-194) and his emphasis on philosophical creativity is similar but his theory does not support a strong self. Deleuze is interested in flesh and expansion of the possibilities of human accomplishment, but his insistence on a disorganized self is intuitively frustrating. Merleau-Ponty sees the body as the source of creativity and meaning. In Deleuze, this meaning seems to be primarily based on creating things which oppose organization and subjectivity. But life is lived as an embodied subject, regular experience is not that of a body without organs, and our flesh tends to stick on our ribs. As discussed above, sometimes it seems as if Deleuze's antsubjectivity is not absolute. As a whole though, it seems as if he does not appreciate the glory of everyday embodiment, and this makes him frustrating. Merleau-Ponty's positive project of understanding the world in terms of "I-Can" is something which is easy to comprehend and weave yourself into. Deleuze's project is far less convincing, and does not seem to provide evidence or clear examples. As a result, pardon the

pun, but it is much easier to *imagine* the world in Merleau-Ponty's terms than Deleuze's. Perhaps

Deleuze is not a despiser of the body, but nobody loves it as much and as well as Merleau-Ponty.

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#### Appendix 1: Abbreviations

CD: Cezanne's Doubt

EM: Eye & Mind

PP: Phenomenology of Perception

PrP: Primacy of Perception

S: Signs

#### Appendix 2: Figures.



Fig 1 Bacon, *Head VI* 1949.

Fig 3 Bacon, *Painting*, 1946



Fig 2: Bacon, *Figure at a Washbasin*, 1976

Fig 4: *Carcass of Meat and Bird of Prey*, 1980.



