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## **“Merleau-Ponty and the Metaphysics of Virtual Reality: Flesh or Nature Machine?”**

*“Thinking ‘operationally’ has become a sort of absolute artificialism, such as we see in the ideology of cybernetics, where human creations are derived from a natural information process, itself conceived on the model of human machines...then, since man really becomes the manipulandum he takes himself to be, we enter into a cultural regimen where there is neither truth nor falsity concerning man and history, into a sleep, or a nightmare, from which there is no awakening”<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The term “virtual reality technology” relies on a dualism between the real and the unreal, the virtual and the actual, as well as the metaphysical illusions of presence, representation and transcendence in its theorizing and in so doing upholds the rigid hierarchical dualisms of western metaphysics that are the foundations for the privileging of culture over nature, mind over body, and the human over the animal. These hierarchical dualisms maintain and justify the exploitation of non-human animals, nature, and other humans on the basis of the perceived utility of those “programmer subjects” in control of this technology. However, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “flesh” as an undermining metaphysical third term which is not reducible to a mental or material substance, but is a latent and underlying in-between movement of becoming that resists all presence, representation, and transcendence is a possible way to rethink the hierarchal

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Primacy of Perception* p160.

dualisms of western metaphysics and undermine the metaphysics operative in 'virtual reality technology' narratives.

### **The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality**

What is "Virtual Reality" and what are the metaphysics of its claims? The term virtual reality is most commonly used to indicate a kind of technological mediation that makes the real unreal and the unreal real via a technological representation. Virtual reality occurs when a real being somehow is reproduced in such a way that it is no longer real but has become virtually real as a digital image. Thus, all discussion of virtual reality as a technological mediation relies on a particular understanding of reality such that it could be rendered virtual, and technological mediation such that it is mediating something by something else. The question becomes then, what is meant by reality? What is technological mediation in this account?

#### *Presence*

The term virtual in the case of the technology named virtual reality seems generally to indicate that the digital images and projected sounds of particular technological devices create another world that is very similar to the real one, but because it is a digital reproduction based on a known real world then it is in fact not quite real but is virtual, or unreal, an unreal reality. To make an unreal reality in these terms, the world as the totality of perceived and known beings is the reality which must then in some way be re-produced in a digital medium, and in

this “reproduction” the real loses its status as a completely real being in the world but becomes virtual in the sense that it is a copy or reproduction based on an original. To name certain computer programs and technological gear as virtual reality is to stake a metaphysical claim that reality is the sum total of beings able to be known and reproduced.

The operative metaphysics of this term “virtual reality” is one that looks out into a world of posited real beings, identical to themselves, and fully present to the extent that they may be reproduced in their totality. Virtual reality in this sense attempts to render the present into a moment of fixity that would allow a containment and definite distinction between the present and the past. The past is that discrete snap shot moment of the present that has just past. And the present is this moment, which can be captured and isolated in space. These beings as present are organized in terms of a spatial relation to one another and distinguished from their milieu by certain determinate characteristics or functions they perform. Just as memories are stored in the brain, the code of nature is written in the DNA of plants and animals. Virtual reality technology creates on this model of a metaphysics of presence. The being of a being is captured in its present identity and self-sameness by an objective observer who then codes these functions and sensations into data to be stored on a hard drive. If the brain stores memories and information and our thoughts are neuronal impulses then the computer stores the data of nature in binary within its computer chips. Virtual reality as a metaphysics of presence covers over any difference within Being, and by rendering the past as a series of now points that were once present

covers over any real past that would allow for beings emergence at all. If virtual reality is the rendering present of the unreal reality by means of codification and reproduction then it relies on a reality that is first known as an original. Nature becomes the totality of known discrete beings presented for replication. The very claim of virtual reality's resemblance to reality itself already refers to an original which it resembles. But does it not also refer to an internal difference that makes such a "duplication" possible? Does resemblance already rely on the ontological difference between the original and the duplicate such that it could be called a duplicate?

### *Representation*

The term virtual reality posits a discrete and present reality, an original from which all technological duplications are made. Video games, computer screens and anything considered virtual in these terms becomes a representation of reality such that virtuality itself has any meaning different from reality. If virtuality and reality were the same term then "virtual reality" would be redundant. As such it is the difference between these terms that gives them their discursive meaning. The *virtual* becomes synonymous with the *possible* as that which has not yet become real, and in this way a metaphysical distinction is posited between the possible and the actual, the unreal and the real, non-being and being. The ontological dualism of being and non-being, however, is not a real one in that non-being as a negation of a prior being relies on the identity and sameness of an original being which is not different to itself such that it can stand as present to

be negated by non-being. Non-being as such then, is the mirroring of an identical being and thus not a real distinction but one posited by a unified and self same being, which gives no account of any real ontological difference. The term virtual reality thus relies on this same distinction in its metaphysics of representation and in this way establishes the hegemony of *the same*, the totalization of being in all its presence to itself and to an objective programmer who is able to complete the representation.

### *Programmer subjectivity*

The term “actual reality” can now be distinguished from “virtual reality”. What is actually real is the totality of present beings to be used and codified into binary for representation. This representation then is not the actual, but the virtual. It is virtual in its unreality. It is the discourse of the programmer that is the agent of this representation. The programmer thus renders the actual virtual. The sphere of utilizable and categorized beings as actual and real beings are first posited in their originality to be duplicated and represented in the binary code of the screen (computer, television, display screen etc.). But on what grounds is such a representation possible, and upon what metaphysics does this rest? The subjectivity of the programmer is the posited authorial agent of representation. But there is a doubling of representation (as representation itself is a doubling) a double doubling occurs. The subject of the programmer in order to posit this sphere of actual given beings as ready to represent, relies on a representation of the subject itself as a programmer who authors such representations. What is

this ground, this origin on which the computer programmer subject posits an authorial-self that represents beings to itself? The word programmer itself indicates a particular setting up in advance, a positing of a plan that is prior to that which is to be programmed. Pro-gress, a coming forth or preceeding from a source, a pro-gram, that which lays out a map or a plan, an outline or schematic that sets up in advance what is to be shown or laid out, the prog-nositic, that is the pre-knowledge of an event before the event, a knowledge before beings are known in any particular way.

The pro-grammer is the language or grammatical structure, which posits a way in which beings will be allowed to speak and to be. The programmatic of the programmer subject has already arranged all beings and all difference into the sameness of the programming code, a code which has pre-codified beings. The programmer subject in this case has also been programmed and laid out advance before itself. The subject is an event within the program. The programmer subject posits a ground of sameness and identity such that a subject as present to itself may emerge from. From the posited ground of the program the subject emerges as programmed subject, and upon this programmed subject, the programmer subject becomes its own foundation as the authorial origin of the program or plan that it is to fit all beings into. There is thus a double representation, a pre-coded code. For the virtual representation of actual nature to take place there is both a posited origin of the actual that distinguishes it from the virtual, and a posited origin of the subject as programmer that takes place within the world of the actual to program this actual in order for that actual to

become virtual. The programmer subject is a transcendent one that is the ground of its own representations, one that posits its program as outside of nature such that it can organize nature. The computer programmer subject applies form to matter through binary code, and in so doing renders the actual virtual via the display screen.

### **Merleau-Ponty and the Flesh**

In his final and unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty attempts to rethink the traditional philosophical dualisms of the intelligible and the sensible, subject and object, knower and known, being and non-being, through the notion of the Flesh. The flesh is the sinewy in-between of things, the co-constituting relationship that allows both knower and known to emerge in relation to one another. The Flesh is the relationship of the world to itself and being's "difference without contradiction"<sup>2</sup> to itself.

Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh as, "a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world, less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility. Between the alleged colors and visibles, we would find anew the tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them, and which for its part is not a thing, but a possibility, a latency, and a flesh of things"<sup>3</sup> This notion of the "flesh of things" does not indicate things as rigidified objects of investigation, or of things and qualities as fully present beings that can then be

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<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University. 1968. p.135

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.132-133

reproduced according to given functions or characteristics demarcated upon their being. The flesh of things, also, is not “the thing in itself” outside of all inquiry and visibility. The flesh is not the secret hidden essence of the thing, which delimits it as the discrete thing that it is either. The flesh of things is the very process of differentiation and becoming of things as other to themselves. It is the difference between the thing and its qualities, it is that which sustains and nourishes and allows all things to become-different in a process of crystallization. This latency of the flesh is not an unreal absence that does not exist, but rather the flesh is latency in that it is always active and productive in its nourishing and sustaining.

Beings, as they are nourished by the invisible, yet fully active, and latent nourishing of the flesh, cannot be reproduced or rendered fully present in their self-sameness. “Since the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only through an experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself. It is thus, and not as the bearer of a knowing subject, that our body commands the visible for us, but it does not explain it, does not clarify it, it only concentrates the mystery of its scattered visibility; and it is indeed a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man, that we are dealing with here.”<sup>4</sup> Visibility is always after or between the aspects we see of it, and it is in this sense that past has never been present, that being is a continual becoming-other allowing beings to come forth in ephemeral modulations that are not clarified by a knowing subject. This concentrated mystery that takes place in visibility is the very paradox of being, a paradox that will not allow nature to be

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.136

turned into the sum total of beings nor simply the mind that enumerates their being. Nor will it allow for a fully present thing to be established as original to itself such that a metaphysical duplication would be possible without itself already becoming differentiated.

“The flesh is not matter, in the sense of corpuscles of being which would add up or continue on one another to form beings. Nor is the visible some “psychic” material that would be –God knows how- brought into being by the things factually existing and acting on my factual body. In general, it is not a fact or sum of facts “material” or “spiritual.” Nor is it a representation for a mind: a mind could not be captured by its own representations; it would rebel against this insertion...”<sup>5</sup> The flesh is this in-between that allows discrete entities to come to be as distinct from one another, yet this flesh cannot be reduced simply to these entities or as the sum of all entities. This latent and dark becoming can never be represented for a mind, nor can a mind ever be represented for itself. The flesh rebels against representation because it is never present to be re-presented or doubled, but always past, or in-between.

### *The Flesh as Virtual Reality*

Given this notion of the flesh, what is reality such that it can be virtual? Virtual reality as understood by traditional metaphysics which animate the project of virtual reality understand the virtual as that which is unreal, non-existent, or potential. Virtual reality then is the unreal rendered real by digital representation.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.139

These representations then are impure duplicates of a more originary sameness of “actual reality”.

However, for Merleau-Ponty, “Reality is not a crucial appearance underlying the rest, it is the framework of relations with which all appearances tally.”<sup>6</sup> The term virtual reality relies on the contradiction of real and unreal and the metaphysical dualism between essence and appearance. However, if reality cannot be reduced to either appearance or that crucial underlying essence beneath all appearance then we need another way to think about these distinctions. For Merleau-Ponty reality is not the sum total of all beings in their presence but rather the relations with which all appearances produce. But if reality is this network of crystallizations which never come to present appearance what is the virtual? The virtual is this latency of the flesh that is active and productive in its nourishing of things yet can never be rendered fully present. The flesh is this, “reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact,”<sup>7</sup> this “invisible reserve,”<sup>8</sup> “...it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.”<sup>9</sup> The flesh is not separate from visibility nor is Being separate from beings, but they are intertwined in a “flesh as expression.”<sup>10</sup> Both the virtual as latent and real and the actual as visible and real express the “momentary body without a glorified body.”<sup>11</sup> The flesh as virtual reality is the expressivity of a

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<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* p.349.

<sup>7</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Northwestern University. 1968. p.147

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.152

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.151.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.145.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.148.

momentary being without the glorification of a fixed immovable, fully present and self same body.

Given this account of the flesh as virtual reality the term becomes redundant. Virtual reality *is* this relational matrix of the visible, this in-between, this ephemeral modulation of Being. The term virtual reality as a contradiction thus becomes redundant and in so doing reveals a more originary and non-dualistic third term of the flesh.

### *The Resistance of the Flesh*

If the metaphysics of technological virtual reality rely on presence, representation, and programmer subjectivity to theorize their practice then how does this notion of the flesh disrupt the illusions of that transcendence?

The flesh as “invisible reserve” and “never finished differentiation”<sup>12</sup> which always lies after or between things then cannot possibly be present to be fully known or codified into ones and zeros. If nature cannot be understood as the totality of beings, or quantified and broken down into bites of memory to be stored in the brain and in computer hard drives then the metaphysics of virtual reality fail. The flesh cannot be reduced to brain states or digital images; it rebels against representation, which relies on the identical fixity of an origin or essence to be duplicated. The repetition of the flesh is thus the repetition of a difference, or rather a movement of differentiation that is constantly undermining all duplications and digital representations.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.153.

The programmer subject as an authorial agent of digital representations now as flesh becomes different to itself, out of time, just behind, or just between itself causing a skip, a difference within thought, within speech that undermines its project of the representation of beings to itself and even of itself to itself. The programmer subject thus, cannot think the un-thought ground of this latent and productive flesh that nourishes and allows all beings to become, and become-other.

### **Virtual Reality Technology as Nature Machine**

Based on the metaphysics of presence, representation and transcendence nature becomes the sum total of all factual present beings, which in their presence and self-identity are knowable and manipulable by a subject which is able to represent itself to itself and is thus separate from that nature which it knows, and in this way gains epistemological certainty.

Nature, in this account, becomes a mechanistic presence to be recreated and represented in virtual reality technology. Virtual reality becomes a nature machine. The programmer subject lays out its program in advance. Before beings can be revealed at all they are already laid out in a metaphysics of identity; the identity of the program. On a homogenous spatial plane objects of nature are measured and arranged, represented and digitalized. Nature becomes a pure object of manipulation, it can be re-arranged in any way the authorial programmer subject chooses, and this choice will be decided according to its own self-perceived benefit which is clear and transparent to itself. A teleology of

progress follows on the tail of this transcendence since the subject's knowledge can be certain and cumulative. The subject posits its own goals, and virtual reality technology becomes a narrative practice to gain power over the natural world by turning all beings into manipulatable parts for some explicit and clear end, (entertainment)?

The flesh of the world in this account is reduced down to the mere utility of the subject in which all beings are present. The virtual is reduced to the actual, and the actual is only that which is represented as identical to itself. This presence of the virtual is the foundation on which the human subject becomes the measure of all things, and thus establishes a hierarchal and hegemonic relationship to other beings. David Zeltzer, one of the leaders at the MIT media lab and founders of virtual reality technology, said in an interview, "True virtual reality may not be attainable with any technology we create. The holodeck may forever remain fiction. Nonetheless, virtual reality serves as the Holy Grail of the research."<sup>13</sup> While attempting to give the project of VR some modesty he ends up claiming that a clear transcendent ideality of ultimate knowledge, universal truth, and immortal life will be an escape from the confines of nature and will constitute the telos of this technological project. All research is aimed at this goal of domination, representation, and founded on the illusions of presence, representation and transcendence.

These illusions of transcendence are dangerous for any philosophy of nature or eco-politics. These illusions claim an arbitrary human superiority over

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<sup>13</sup> Heim, Micheal H. "Heidegger and McLuhan and the Essence of VR" in *Blackwell Technology Reader*. P.552.

the natural world, a justified domination over animals, ecosystems and other “non-human” entities in addition to the illusion of the transcendent power of human reason as the foundation of all knowledge and power over the natural world. Virtual reality technology in reducing all virtual reality as flesh to the actuality of pure presence and thus destroying the virtual also reduces all actuality to the supposedly ‘unreal’ digitality of the computer image by placing this new actual (the actual ‘unreal’ object on the screen) that has never been virtual (i.e. not present) into the service of a programmer subject who manipulates it and gives it the character of ultimate malleability in service of authorial reason. From a distance one can hunt animals online. Virtually Real animals as flesh are reduced down to their unreality as digital images, and at the same time the unreal takes on a real standing in the illusion of transcendence as ‘unreal’ object to be ‘really’ manipulated. The real animal becomes unreal on the screen and easy to kill from afar, and in this the unreal object gains power as that which is to be utilized for human benefit. In the metaphysics of the program both the unreal and the real are recontextualized as “to be programmed” and laid out in advance for human use.

### *Power*

In addition to the metaphysical grounds of virtual reality technology, its connection to environmental devastation and its view of nature as an ever manipulatable machine, how does power function in the practices of this technology? Who’s dream is produced on the screen? Whose transcendent

virtual reality is produced from the actual, and who benefits materially from this technology?

Many different kinds of technologies are described by different people as “virtual realities.” What is similar in all these claims are the metaphysical assumptions being made in the claim of “virtual reality?” However, in each case where these claims are being made, it is also important to ask the question of power. In the hierarchal dualisms of western metaphysics certain terms are privileged above others, how do certain privilege classes benefit from virtual reality programs? Who has designed internet hunting? Who does it benefit? Who’s dream is being produced on the screen? What groups of humans/animals are excluded from these programs, and how are they represented in these programs? Who programs video games? How are race, class and gender represented in these games and who benefits from these representations? When nature becomes an endless material for manipulation who benefits from these manipulations and how? The politics of power must be kept open to criticism and reconfiguration, and the metaphysics of programmer subjectivities must be undermined and re-thought.