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## Beyond the Digital: The Virtuality of the Flesh in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*

### Introduction

Merleau-Ponty's late thinking is particularly fascinating, as it develops a phenomenological ontology attempting to overcome the dualism between subject and object, which still characterizes his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Barbaras 2008; eng. trans. 2021). This dualism seems to be overcome by the idea of the flesh, seen as the common element of the world, the “formative medium of the object and the subject” (Merleau-Ponty 1965; eng. trans. 1968, p. 147). It is precisely in the context of the phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty uses the term “virtual” in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this paper, my aim is to discuss the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's idea of the virtual and its contemporary meaning, bonded to the development of the Digital Revolution.

The ideas of “virtual” and “virtuality” are not particularly recent in the philosophical landscape. A deep sense of these concepts is already present in Aristotle (*Metaph.* IX), who outlines a distinction between potentiality and actuality, and Leibniz, who takes inspiration from Aristotle's idea of potentiality. Leibniz coins the definition of “virtual innatism”, considered as the “power to receive ideas” (Leibniz 1765; eng. trans. 1996, Book II, Chap. XXI), power which passes into actuality through experience. There is something in the definitions of Aristotle and Leibniz that still resonates both in Merleau-Ponty's late thinking and in our common use of the word “virtual”.

Regarding the latter, virtuality particularly refers to digital technology, especially interactive platforms and immersive dimensions. When we assume a “virtual identity”, we use a digitized version of ourselves, such as an avatar, to interact in social networks, video games, dating applications, etc. In this case, the term “virtual” may be considered synonymous with “digital”: a virtual identity is simply a digital identity, the one we assume in a digital dimension (interface or platform). Another example is the expression “virtual reality” (VR), which refers to a digital, immersive, and interactive dimension (Chalmers 2022). Our experiences of VR take

place inside a simulated environment, which has a quite high degree of immersivity. Less known to the general public is “augmented virtuality” (AV), which indicates a dimension “where imaged portions of the real world are integrated within a virtual world” (Gutiérrez, Vexo, & Thalmann 2008, p. 117). In the cases of these partially or totally virtual dimensions, the environment is commonly considered as not real, as a possible world where we do not live and where we spend only a limited part of our lifetime.

However, this way of conceiving the virtual contains a double trap: first, it overlaps what is “virtual” with what is “fictional”<sup>1</sup>; second, it generates confusion between the “virtual” and the “digital”, thus leading only to a partial understanding of the virtual, which is seen as opposed to the real. In this paper, I will not dwell on the former, which has little to do with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and would need proper space to be discussed. I will rather focus on the latter, since the definition of the virtual in Merleau-Ponty’s late thinking can be considered a good starting point to discuss the difference between “virtual” and “digital” and to open to a contemporary interpretation of the Digital Revolution.

In this respect, my proposal is to come back to the original philosophical meaning of the virtual, without staying inside an Aristotelian or Leibnizian framework, but rather taking inspiration from Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh. In his late thought, he conceives virtuality on the ground of a dynamical and dialectical monism, which overcomes Cartesian dualism, as well as the traditional concept of substance. I will focus on the “virtual center” or “virtual focus” of the flesh in *The Visible and Invisible* and indicate related passages where their sense may be clarified. I consider Merleau-Ponty’s virtuality as defined by the following features: first, it refers to a monist view of reality, which includes both the analogue and the digital; second, it implies a dynamic and dialectic relationality, modeled on Schelling’s circular idea of being; third, it is not opposed to “reality,” but constitutes its fabric. I will also argue that Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the virtual as the focus of the flesh can be used to interpret the bond between the analogue and the digital as very tight, dynamical, and in line with the latest achievements in informational technology.

## 1. A monist view of reality

In order to problematize Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the virtual in *The Visible and the Invisible*, I am first referring to the few points in the text

<sup>1</sup> The confusion between “virtual” and “fictional” is particularly well addressed by David Chalmers (2022).

where the word “virtual” is mentioned, specifically in the expressions “virtual focus” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 34, 146, 215) and “virtual center” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 115). The latter expression is used in the following passage:

There is no emplacement of space and time that would not be a variant of the others, as they are of it; there is no individual that would not be representative of a species or of a family of beings, would not have, would not be a certain style, a certain manner of managing the domain of space and time over which it has competency, of pronouncing, of articulating that domain, of radiating about a wholly virtual center – in short, a certain manner of being, in the active sense, a certain *Wesen*, in the sense that, says Heidegger, this word has when it is used as a verb. (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 114-115.)

Virtuality is considered as a characteristic of being as such, especially if intended “in the active sense”, “as a verb” (the Heideggerian *Wesen*). The activity of being should be understood, in this case, not as a lack of passivity. As I will point out later, the concept of passivity assumes a key role in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. In this passage, he particularly focus on activity as constituting the dynamism of being, which has its representatives and variants in individuals and emplacements. The flesh is not considered as a static substance, an unchanging substrate lying under beings, but as the source of emerging singularities.

In this sense, the “virtual center” of the flesh is the key concept of an ontological and dynamic form of monism. This belongs to the definition of the flesh itself, as clarified by this famous passage:

What we are calling flesh, this interiorly worked-over mass, has no name in any philosophy. As the formative medium of the object and the subject, it is not the atom of being, the hard in itself that resides in a unique place and moment; [...] this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 147-148.)

Merleau-Ponty sees the flesh as characterized by a chiasmatic and dialectic movement. This is the reason why the words “hiatus” and “a zero of pressure” are used. The term “hiatus” denotes the juxtaposition of two vowels that are not pronounced together, as in a diphthong (i.e., in “cloud”), through a single vocal emission, but are articulated separately (i.e., in “cooperate”); at the same time, the hiatus is part of the

same juxtaposition of vowels, which in turn belongs to the same word. The flesh, as a hiatus, separates and unifies at the same time, exactly as happens with the “zero of pressure” between two solids. The flesh can thus be considered as an “inbetween”, a *Zwischen* between polarities, in this case, the object and the subject. By connecting this passage to the previous one (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 114-115), it can be noticed that the flesh is neither the hard core of being, nor the privation of being (non-being), but what stays inbetween as a dynamic *Wesen*. Merleau-Ponty here re-problematizes the ontological question, thanks to the Heideggerian suggestions (i.e., Heidegger 1927; eng. trans. 2010; 1954; eng. trans. 1977): he refuses the hypostatization of being and the confusion between “being” and “beings”, typical of classical metaphysics. Moreover, he questions certain assumptions of Husserlian phenomenology.

Merleau-Ponty owes much to Husserl, especially to his concept of the body. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2002), he takes inspiration from what Husserl writes about the *Körper*, the purely physical and objective body, and the *Leib*, the subjective and phenomenal body, which is the zero-point (*Nullpunkt*) of our orientation in the world (Husserl 1952; eng. trans. 1989, p. 165). When Merleau-Ponty writes about embodied subjectivity, which is at the center of his reflections on perception, he clearly refers to the *Leib*. However, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty takes a step forward and goes beyond the difference between *Leib* and *Körper*: the flesh should be considered as a “universal *Leib*”, an extended subjectivity. It is neither an individual subjectivity, nor pure objectivity, but an extended first person (Vanzago 2012, pp. 194-195). The flesh is not confined within the boundaries of the phenomenal body: it involves everything, since it is the common element, the “stuff” (*étouffe*) of the world.

We have to reject the age-old assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body, or, conversely, the world and the body in the seer as in a box. Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968: 138.)

The flesh is the world, and the world is flesh. Nothing in the world is distinct or detached from the flesh. In this passage, Merleau-Ponty appears to overcome the dichotomy between the living and the non-living, the subjective and the objective dimensions, a dichotomy that he reflects upon throughout his life.

How should this extended subjectivity be considered in relation to the virtual? A highly significant passage can be found in the Worknotes, where

Merleau-Ponty writes: “one cannot see it there and every effort to see it there makes it disappear, but it is in the line of the visible, it is its virtual focus, it is inscribed within it (in filigree)” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968: 215). The flesh is animated by a dialectic between the visible and the invisible aspects of being. To comprehend their relationship, the concept of virtuality must be invoked. While Merleau-Ponty explicitly states in a passage cited above (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 114-115) that he refers to the active sense of Heidegger’s *Wesen*, this does not imply that the flesh is always in act. The word “active” refers to the dynamism of the flesh, a dynamism that also encompasses passivity. This passivity should be regarded as the other side of being. In another passage, Merleau-Ponty assimilates virtuality to potency, or rather “virtuality or potency”, in contrast to what is “wholly in act” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 51). The author clearly refers to the profound philosophical meaning of virtuality according to Aristotle and Leibniz, but reformulates it through a different concept of being.

The virtual focus or center characterizes the flesh itself. In its dynamism and openness, it contains the potentiality of existence, of beings whose movement brings them to emerge and become actual or remain potential. This point is particularly important, as the virtual is not pure passivity devoid of activity, but passivity that “bears” activity, as I will demonstrate in the third section.

## 2. The relationality of the flesh

Another crucial passage in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where there is an explicit reference to virtuality, is the following:

That assurance can come only from the world – or from my thoughts insofar as they form a world, insofar as their cohesion, their vanishing lines, designate beneath reflection a virtual focus with which I do not yet coincide. (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 34.)

Here arises the problematic nature of the flesh and of the virtual. Every thought about the world, every endeavor to reduce the flesh to reflective thought, appears to dissipate, much like a clear concept of the *Leib* as a *Nullpunkt*, as a zero-point of orientation: this point, coinciding with me as a living body, is comparable to the vanishing point of vision, not actually but only virtually focused. Lines of thought seem to converge towards a potential focus that cannot be clearly localized, as it resides not in my individual body but in the world.

In another passage, Merleau-Ponty writes:

And finally, I believe it – I believe that I have a man’s senses, a human body – because the spectacle of the world that is my own, and which, to judge by our confrontations, does not notably differ from that of the others, with me as with them refers with evidence to typical dimensions of visibility, and finally to a virtual focus of vision, to a detector also typical, so that at the joints of the opaque body and the opaque world there is a ray of generality and of light. (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 146.)

How can this “ray of generality and light” between the opacity of the body and the world be interpreted? Only in a relational sense, since “the spectacle the world that is my own [...] does not notably differ from that of the other”. Merleau-Ponty, well aware that Husserlian phenomenology risks falling into solipsism, even if only from a methodological perspective,<sup>2</sup> overcomes this difficulty by asserting a common visibility that refers to a “virtual focus of vision”: in this sense, virtuality is closely intertwined with relationality.

The relational nature of the flesh can be better understood through Merleau-Ponty’s idea of dialectic. The flesh is animated by a particular kind of dynamism characterized by the relation between two poles reverting into each other. This form of dialectic differs from both the classical dyadic dialectic of ancient philosophy (as theorized by Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, etc.) and Hegel’s triadic dialectic (inspired by Fichte), whose movement articulates in thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Merleau-Ponty writes about a “hyperdialectic” nature of the flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 94), which is inspired by a Schellingean circular model (Vanzago 2012, pp. 194-195). Hyperdialectic is animated by a movement of “reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 147). In this movement, one pole moves toward the other, attempting to become its opposite, but never coinciding with it. According to my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s text, this “on the verge of” constitutes the meaning of the virtual.

Why does Merleau-Ponty prefer reversibility to the Hegelian synthesis? Merleau-Ponty attempts to explain it in this passage:

The bad dialectic is that which does not wish to lose its soul in order to save it, which wishes to be dialectical immediately, becomes autonomous, and ends up at cynicism, at formalism, for having eluded its own double meaning.

<sup>2</sup> In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl denies the solipsism of the ego and asserts its intersubjectivity, but also states that solipsism is the starting point for a phenomenological meditation on subjectivity (Husserl 1950; eng. trans. 1960, sects. 13, 47).

What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that on the contrary is capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationship and what has been called ambiguity. (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 94.)

Bad dialectic opposes the thesis and the antithesis, overcoming them with a synthesis, which is “a new positive, a new position” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 95), thus erasing the negative. Good dialectic, on the other hand, embraces ambiguity and does not eliminate the negative, “the other” of the positive. In this sense, the poles of the flesh should not be seen as opposites or enemies but as part of a duality whose limits are blurred (Colombo, Ferro 2023, p. 14). For this reason, hyperdialectic embraces “the plurality of the relationship” and its “ambiguity”.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty draws inspiration from the Husserlian example of touching hands (Husserl, 1960: 97) and focuses on the lack of clear boundaries between the *Leib* and the *Körper*, the subject and the object of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; eng. trans. 2002, p. 106). Moreover, the *Leib* is also considered as the place of third-person processes (agility, motility, sexuality, etc.), which cannot be traced back to a first-person view of subjectivity (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2002, p. 230). The idea of ambiguity is particularly important in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (i.e., Sapontzis 1978; Weiss 2008), as it can help understand how opposite polarities relate by avoiding a sharp separation or a form of consensual dualism between the physical and the psychic.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty elaborates the phenomenology of the flesh, departing from his previous reflections on ambiguity. This progression leads to the concept of reversibility, wherein the blurred boundaries between opposing poles give way to a circular movement where each pole is on the verge of becoming the other. In this new ontological framework, the flesh is conceived as a tissue of dynamic connections between these poles. Yuk Hui’s exploration of the digital objects (Hui 2012; 2016) echoes this idea. Hui posits that relationality defines digital objects, setting them apart from other kinds of objects through an anti-substantialist perspective. While Hui’s argument aligns with Merleau-Ponty’s late thought, I contend that these assumptions can be further extrapolated: within a Merleau-Pontian framework, the relationality of Hui’s digital objects can be extended to encompass every object, as the flesh manifests as an ontological network of relations.

Another pivotal aspect for understanding Merleau-Ponty’s hyperdialectic and its virtual center is the concept of “divergence” (Morris 2010; Ferro 2021), an apt English translation of the French term *écart*

(Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 7, note 4). This idea permeates many passages in *The Visible and the Invisible*, especially in Merleau-Ponty's discussions about the relationship between subjective and objective bodies, the active and the passive sides of the flesh. For instance, in the Working Notes, Merleau-Ponty writes:

the fabric of possibilities that closes the exterior visible in upon the seeing body maintains between them a certain divergence (*écart*). But this divergence is not a void, it is filled precisely by the flesh as the place of emergence of a vision, a passivity that bears an activity – and so also the divergence between the exterior visible and the body which forms the upholstering (*capitonnage*) of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 272.)

In this passage, the significance of divergence as a crucial characteristic of the flesh becomes evident: it aligns with what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere designs as the “zero of pressure” or the “hiatus” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 147-148) between two polarities. Divergence “is not a void”, but what dynamically differentiates these polarities without sharply separating them. It operates in conjunction with reversibility, constituting the complementary facet of the dialectic movement: on the one hand, polarities revert into each other, on the other hand, none annihilates or is annihilated by the other. Divergence is the connective tissue ensuring a fluid distinction between the polarities within the flesh of the world. Together with reversibility, divergence forms the “chiasm” of the flesh: the two crossing lines of a  $\chi$  or an  $x$  meet at a point, attempting to revert into each other before suddenly diverging in opposite directions (Ferro 2021).

The chiasmatic nature of the flesh, nurtured by both reversibility and divergence through a circular movement of poles approaching and departing, can be defined as a “separation in relation”, an “originary connectedness” (Clarke 2002, p. 213) that allows polarities to emerge and relate. In this context, the idea of the virtual arises from the double dialectic movement of the flesh: it is sustained by both the potentiality of reversibility, where a pole is “on the verge of” becoming its opposite, and the inevitable divergence preventing complete coincidence with the pole's aim of realization. The virtual is the continual openness of the processuality of the flesh, in its endeavor to actualize. This movement is indispensable for an authentic “ontological” thinking; otherwise, the flesh would be reduced to a static and well defined substance, aligning with the metaphysical “ontic” perspective criticized by Heidegger (1927; eng. trans. 2010).

### 3. The real and the virtual

In this context, the third aspect of Merleau-Ponty's idea of virtuality, involving its role in constituting the fabric of the real, can be further elucidated. To explore this aspect, I turn to Pierre Lévy's concept of the virtual. Lévy cautions against easy generalizations and emphasizes that the virtual should not be perceived as opposed to the real (Lévy 1995; eng. trans. 1998, p. 17). Drawing inspiration from Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, Lévy opposes two couples of concepts: possible-real and virtual-actual (Lévy 1995; eng. trans. 1998, chap. 1).

The possible and the real are fully constituted and their difference lies in existence: whereas the real exists, the possible is not there yet. For instance, a published book, as a PDF file and in its printed version, is real, since it exists in both analogue and digital dimensions. On the other hand, the book in my mind, that has not been written or published yet, is a possible book: it lacks existence but holds the potential for realization. Here, the difference between the real book and the possible book is grounded in existence: the former is there, whereas the latter is not, though it has the potential to be there.

Conversely, the virtual and the actual have a different ontological status, since they belong to the event: "the virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization" (Lévy 1995; eng. trans. 1998, p. 24). Consider, for instance, the book an author intends to publish: the author has begun writing, outlined the general structure, and compiled some bibliography. Is this a possible book? Not exactly, because the book already exists, even if it is subject to changes. Is it a real book? Not in a fully realized sense, because it is in the process of being modified. Instead, it can be understood as a virtual book engaged in a dynamic process of becoming actual.

Lévy's text highlights the inherent ambiguity of the virtual, positioning it not as merely possible or real but in relation to the actual. While the possible lacks reality, and the real lacks possibility, the virtual is in the process of becoming actual and the actual is in the process of becoming virtual. This movement between the virtual and the actual mirrors the movement in Merleau-Ponty's hyperdialectic, a dance of reversible and divergent poles in a network of multiple relations. In this context, the virtual is not a state yet to be attained or awaiting realization; rather, it is the essence of reality itself, a dynamic being in a process of transformation towards actuality, characterized by a relational and interactive process.

This perspective has a point in common with Roberto Diodato's definition of the virtual body as "an interactive digital image" (Diodato 2005; eng. trans. 2012, p. 1). Diodato emphasizes that interactivity is not merely

an accessorial quality of a digital compound; rather, the virtual body is “in essence interactive” (Diodato 2005; eng. trans. 2012, p. 2). Although Diodato refers here to the digital meaning of the virtual (which does not directly correspond to Merleau-Ponty’s perspective), he carefully avoids conflating the terms “virtual” and “digital”: he excludes from the definition of “virtual body” photographic or televisual digital images, as they lack potential interaction with the user (Diodato 2005; eng. trans. 2012, p. 2). This implies that interactivity is not an attribute exclusive to the digital realm. Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the virtuality of the flesh is deeply permeated by interactivity. The flesh, in this framework, is a potency bearing actuality, in a dynamic and relational process of activity among (*inter*) a plurality of singularities. The “passivity that bears an activity”, as described in the Working Notes (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 272), can be understood as nothing other than “inter-activity”.

In this context, Merleau-Ponty’s view of the virtual does not imply an opposition to the real. On the contrary, if the flesh constitutes what is real (embracing a monistic perspective) and, simultaneously, has a virtual center, virtuality lies at the heart of reality. According to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of hyperdialectic, reality is considered in a processual perspective, as a unique element characterized by a network of relations. The flesh, being the body of the world, hosts a virtual focus where non-isolated singularities intersect and relate. Following Lévy’s and Diodato’s suggestions, it can be asserted that the virtual is not different from the real; rather, it constitutes the very fabric of reality, with interconnected nodes engaging in complex and dynamic structures.

Furthermore, it is precisely because the virtual is not in opposition to the real that it should not be equated with the digital. The digital, rooted in a development of the binary code, encompasses a multitude of objects, events, and dimensions, all of which are crucial components of reality. The relationship between the digital and the analogue realms is a paramount concern in our contemporary context. Both the analogue and the digital constitute reality. Hence, the virtual cannot be confined solely to the digital domain; since it lies at the heart of reality, it equally pertains to the analogue realm. Summarizing, the virtual does not coincide with the digital. While the digital is part of reality, so is the analogue; thus, the virtual extends beyond being exclusively defined by the digital.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the concept of the virtual in *The Visible and the Invisible* provides several insights. First, Merleau-Ponty develops the idea of the virtual in order to overcome a dualistic and Cartesian approach

to philosophy, based on separating subject from object, consciousness from matter, and so forth. This overcoming involves the formulation of an original monism, which redefines the dialectic movement between poles and singularities within a framework of processuality and continual becoming. The dynamism of the flesh is not established by any *a priori* essence; instead, it finds its foundation in the virtual.

Second, the relationality and interconnectedness of the flesh shape the surrounding world (*Umwelt*) that encompasses subjects and objects, living and non-living beings, body and technology. If “the world is flesh”, then it should be considered as a field whose center is not located in a specific point, not confined to my individual body but being virtually everywhere. The virtuality of the flesh stays at the bottom of the network of relations between bodies and technology, analogue and digital realms. This perspective also paves the way for a novel idea of subjectivity, which is not viewed solely as pure consciousness but rather as intertwined with objectivity. This intertwining is made possible by crucial characteristics of the flesh that constitute the body as such: relationality and openness to the interpenetration and co-participation with technology.

Third, despite the intertwining and the potential inclusion of technology in the processuality of the flesh, it is crucial to note that the virtual does not coincide with the digital due to their distinct ontologies (Evens 2010, p. 150). While the virtual includes some aspects and characteristics of the digital, it overcomes these boundaries to also incorporate the analogue dimension. It extends beyond information technology and mathematics, encompassing a general characteristic of being, which is its processual relationality. For this reason, it is essential to clarify that the term “virtual” in computer science and everyday language, particularly in expressions like “virtual reality”, shares some connection with the philosophical meaning of virtuality but does not align entirely with it. In the context of VR, “virtual” denotes something digital, immersive, and interactive (Chalmers 2022), whereas Merleau-Pontian virtuality indicates the continuous and dynamic tendency of the flesh toward actualization. The latter is also interactive, but not exclusively digital, as emphasized earlier. Any discussion regarding its potential immersivity should be explored in detail elsewhere and could serve as a launching point for further research.

The discussion presented in this paper constitutes only a fraction of the insights and advancements within Merleau-Ponty’s late thinking concerning the concept of virtuality. Consequently, a more in-depth exploration is warranted, comparing it with alternative perspectives on virtuality, and employing it as an instrument to interpret the complexity of our world, especially in the wake of the Digital Revolution.

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### **Beyond the Digital: The Virtuality of the Flesh in Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible***

This paper aims to find, in Merleau-Ponty's late thinking, a definition of the virtual which aligns with the latest advancements in digital technology while avoiding a reduction to the digital realm or a stark opposition to reality. The virtual is considered as a crucial characteristic in Merleau-Ponty's late ontology, especially in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where a "virtual focus" or "virtual center" of the flesh is introduced. The argument posits that Merleau-Ponty's monism of the flesh results in a dynamic view of virtuality, with significant ontological implications that reshape the relationship between the digital and the analogue. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the virtual is defined by several key features: it applies to a monist perspective on reality, to a dynamic relationality between dialectic poles, and to the fabric of reality. This interpretation of the virtual implies a divergence from the digital, as virtuality belongs to the whole spectrum of reality.

**KEYWORDS:** Virtual, Digital, Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of the flesh, monism