

Floriana Ferro

Merleau-Ponty and the Digital Era: Flesh, Hybridization, and Posthuman¹

Introduction

Technological development, since the digital revolution, has been proceeding further, leading to the production of devices extending our perception. These devices, which are now external to us, one day will be parts of our bodies, giving birth to hybrids between nature and technology. What is the answer of phenomenology to this challenge? In this paper I will respond through a discussion on Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh" and on the application of this concept to posthumanism. In the first part of the paper, I will develop my thesis, according to which, in Merleau-Ponty's later writings, a "posthuman turn" takes place. Whereas, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the world is seen from an anthropological point of view, in the uncomplete work *The Visible and the Invisible* an ontological interest prevails, and human perspective is reconfigured.

Secondly, I will point out how this change takes place through the concept of *flesh*, according to which human body is made of the same element of other bodies and they all constitute a common being, the "flesh of the world" (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 144). Ontologically speaking, humans are not situated on a different layer than animals, plants, or inanimate objects, but all beings are on the same level: through my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's thought, I will show that his writings ultimately lead to a "flat ontology" (Harman 2009, p. 15), just as happens to Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Gilles Deleuze. Flat ontology is fully compatible with posthumanism, since the latter is opposed to conceiving human perspective as privileged and sees other perspectives as equally important (Pepperell 2003, p. 177). The concept of flesh may also be conceived in relation to the hybridization between humans

¹ This essay was born as a talk for a public conference entitled "Carne sensibile, carne virtuale. Da Merleau-Ponty alle tecnologie digitali", held in Udine with Claudio Tondo on 29 April 2021.

and technology (Pepperell 2003, p. 177): Merleau-Ponty offers us the possibility of an ontological reading of such hybridization, considering devices as extensions of our bodies and parts of the flesh.

In the third part, I will deepen the meaning of flesh in relation to the concepts of reversibility and divergence (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, pp. 139, 272). On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty claims that human beings belong to the same element as non-human ones: the subject and the object, the animate and the inanimate, the body and the prosthesis revert one into the other, according to Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl 1950; eng. trans. 1960, § 44, p. 97). On the other hand, reversibility does not mean annihilation: the terms of a relation are divergent, they cannot be reduced to an undifferentiated identity. Finally, I will point out the problems inherent to this new perspective and to Merleau-Ponty's view, applying it to the relation between humans and digital environments, and disclosing a different way to see posthuman and hybridization.

1. Towards a posthuman turn

At first glance, a discussion about phenomenology and posthuman may seem unusual, since the Husserlian origins of phenomenology are known for an evident tendency to humanism. It is an egology, a philosophical perspective starting from the I and placing the human subject at the center of every process. Here lies the search of a transcendental ego and its *modus operandi*, going through the whole thought of Husserl. The phenomenological gesture of *epoché*, for instance, puts into parentheses the "natural attitude", through which we take the existence of the outside world for granted, gaining awareness that animate and inanimate things, the others, and the world itself are there for us (Husserl 1913; eng. trans. 1982, § 27, p. 51). In the heart of philosophical reflection lies the ego, which should not be intended as the individual, but as a sphere of pure consciousness disclosing the absolute sphere of being, that is transcendental subjectivity. In this respect, after the *epoché*, a "phenomenological residuum" remains (Husserl 1913; eng. trans. 1982, § 33, p. 65), which is nothing but the transcendental ego and the stream of its *cogitationes* (Husserl 1950; eng. trans. 1960, § 14, p. 31), constituting pure life and depending on our being in the world. Interpreting this operation in a Heideggerean way, phenomenological reduction refers to our being thrown in the world, *geworfen* (Heidegger 1927; eng. trans. 2010, § 39, p. 175). This being thrown concerns the individual as a psycho-physical unit, which is situated among other beings (Heidegger 1927; eng. trans. 2010, § 79, p. 387). Being situated means, for both Husserl and Heidegger, being bodies.

What is the sense of “being bodies” in phenomenology? Let us refer to the well-known difference between objective and subjective body, *Körper* and *Leib*. On the one hand, I perceive my body as an object among other objects, as pure matter subject to the laws of physics, on the other hand, I feel it as a living body, as my body through which I perceive the world (Husserl 1952; eng. trans. 1989, § 18, pp. 61-62). Merleau-Ponty, referring to what Husserl writes in the second book of *Ideas*, sees the body as the zero-point of orientation (*Nullpunkt*), the center of my perceptions, and my perspective on the world. Everything I perceive as a part of the outer world is in relation to my body, thanks to its location in space, which is built on the body itself. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states that “I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. 151), which is my point of view on the world. Human perspective is here considered a privileged one, not in a solipsistic, but in an intersubjective sense:

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but rather the sense that shines forth at the intersection of my experiences and at the intersection of my experiences with those of others through a sort of gearing into each other. The phenomenological world is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which establish their unity through the taking up [la reprise] of my past experiences into my present experiences, or of the other person’s experience into my own (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. lxxxiv).

Merleau-Ponty’s early thought shows a phenomenological concept of the world, which shall be intended as an intersection of experiences, the taking up of the other person’s experiences into my own and the taking up of my experiences into the other person’s ones. It is a cultural world, constituted by relations, in both a subjective and intersubjective sense: my relation to the object is due to a shared perspective. Objects and subjects are both necessary for building experiences, however the starting point is human. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of perception is, during the 1930’s and the 1940’s, wholly addressed to understand the concept of body and its relation to the object, the world, and the others.

Although the *Phenomenology of Perception* seems to convey a purely humanist perspective, it contains a small opening towards posthuman. Merleau-Ponty seems detached from Husserl’s pure consciousness. Inspired by Heidegger, he states that “the body is the vehicle of being in the world and, for a living being, having a body means being united with a definite milieu, merging with certain projects, and being perpetually engaged therein” (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. 84). Human body cannot be conceived as separated from the world. This is the reason why Merleau-Ponty uses words such as “being united”, “merging”, “being engaged”: the body is strictly linked to the environment where it is located and acts.

This idea is reinforced by the concept of ambiguity (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. 87; Sapontzis 1978; Weiss 2008, pp. 140-141; Ferro 2020a, pp. 41-42). First, subjectivity is ambiguous, since it is opaque to its self-intuition: it cannot shape a clear thought, without expressing it first (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. 182). Secondly, the subject and the object are not clearly distinguished, as shown by the distinction between the body as *Leib* (subject) and the body as *Körper* (object): the right hand touching the left one feels not only as the subject, but also as the object of perception, since it feels even its being touched, whereas the touched hand feels itself as touching the other hand (Husserl 1950; eng. trans. 1960, § 44, p. 97). *Leib* is turned into *Körper* and viceversa. Such an ambiguity may also be found in the relation between the body and the psyche: their functions are different, so they do not coincide, however the boundary between the one and the other cannot be defined (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. 517; Dupond 2015). Merleau-Ponty will return to these remarks and to the example of the touching hands in his later works, reading them otherwise.

2. The concept of flesh

The ideas of ambiguity and being in the world, which are very important in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, allude to Merleau-Ponty's turn towards posthuman. These concepts are developed in an ontological sense, leaving aside the body as "one's own" or "phenomenal" and giving a different meaning to the term *Leib*. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty decides to translate *Leib* with the French *chair*, "flesh" in English. The latter should not be considered as my own body, but as the body as such: it does not express only subjectivity, but even objectivity. Every sharp boundary between a body and another disappears because the body is common to all beings, it is the "flesh of the world". The flesh is a chiasm, an entanglement between touching and being touched, seeing and being seen, subject and object: the two terms revert one into the other.

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).

The flesh is a hiatus, a relation between single unities of being, the *Zwischen* which is not in a specific place and moment, but “virtually” everywhere. This chiasmatic way of thinking indicates an “originary connectedness” (Clarke 2002, p. 213), wiping away the dualism between subject and object, and giving room to a shared ontological medium, bringing all polarities together without annihilating them. Such expressions used in the *Phenomenology of Perception* as “being united”, “merging”, and “being engaged” (Merleau-Ponty 1945; eng. trans. 2012, p. 84), acquire here a new meaning.

In which sense posthuman in Merleau-Ponty’s thought may be discussed? How the latter could be applied to the digital? Merleau-Ponty died in 1961, decades before the digital revolution even occurred; moreover, he did not have the slightest idea of the existence of smart objects, devices exchanging information through a world wide web². Merleau-Ponty is somehow belonging to the past: everything he writes may be applied to analog environments and, even when he mentions the “virtual”, he does it with a different meaning, very far from the headsets and the simulations of virtual reality. However, his way to develop the concept of flesh may point the way towards a deeper understanding of the present.

In this respect, among the multiple definitions of the word “posthuman” discussed by Cary Wolfe (Wolfe 2010, pp. xi-xxxiv), there are two specific meanings I would like to point out here, since they concern both the anti-anthropocentric perspective and the problem of hybridization. These meanings are synthetically expressed by the two first points of the “Posthuman Manifesto” by Robert Pepperell³. The first principle of the “Manifesto” is the following:

It is now clear that humans are no longer the most important things in the universe. This is something the humanists have yet to accept (Pepperell 2003, p. 177).

Posthumanism opposes the idea that human perspective is a privileged one and sees other perspectives (regarding animals, environment, artificial intelligence, etc.) as equally important. Bruno Latour’s and Graham Harman’s flat ontologies are oriented towards this view. Latour’s concept of “actant”, for instance, implies an unprejudicial consideration of any entity and its only feature is to be autonomous

² In this respect, Luciano Floridi uses the concept of *infosphere* (Floridi 2014).

³ The “Manifesto” is contained in Pepperell’s book *The Posthuman Condition* (its first edition was issued in 1995, the second in 2003) and separately published on the website of the journal *Kainos*: <http://www.kainos.it/numero6/emergenze/emergenze-pepperell-ing.html>

(Latour 1984; eng. trans. 1988, p. 159); Harman interprets Latour's sociological assumptions from the philosophical perspective of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), according to which any object, which differs from other objects and never enters in a whole relation with them, lies on the same level. Harman's pluralist ontology states that dignity must be ascribed "even to the least grain of reality" (Harman 2009, p. 15). Such a statement, erasing metaphysical inequalities among beings, is shared also by Deleuze. However, unlike Latour and Harman, he is not oriented to pluralism, but to monism: Being distributes itself univocally among beings (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, pp. 45-47; Ferro 2020b, pp. 125-126).

Returning to Merleau-Ponty, such statements are anticipated precisely by the concept of flesh. Since all the bodies are flesh and the flesh incarnates the world, all beings share a common element: ontologically speaking, men are not higher than animals, plants, or inanimate objects, but everything is on the same level.

It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh, and one knows there is no name in traditional philosophy to designate it (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 139).

Although Merleau-Ponty refers to human perspective, to Myself, this is only a starting point, and we need it since it is the author's one and somewhat "our own" in an intersubjective sense. However, it is anonymous, a "there is" shared by everyone not only as humans, but even as living and non-living beings, as things. It is the pre-objective, pre-reflexive (Madison 1981, p. 212), which founds every single life, just as William James's stream of pure experience⁴. Our perspective is a starting point, but not a privileged one. For this reason, there are thinkers who have joined the recent current of eco-phenomenology, interpreting Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh in an ecological sense (Brook 2005; Smith W.S., Smith J.S., Verducci 2018).

Even the second principle of the "Posthuman Manifesto" suits to my purposes, since it states:

All technological progress of human society is geared towards the transformation of the human species as we currently know it (Pepperell 2003, p. 177).

⁴ "The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality or existence, a simple that" (James 1996, p. 23).

According to this principle, the concept of flesh may be applied to the possibility of hybridization. Technological development, especially after the digital revolution, has gone further and further, leading to the development of devices (smartphones, for instance), extending our way to interact. These devices are currently external, but one day they could be part of our bodies, making us hybrids between nature and technology, something like “digital cyborgs” (Lupton 2015). This process has already started and goes at quite a high speed, giving birth to a philosophical and scientific debate.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh helps us understand that such hybridization could be conceived on a phenomenological basis, since devices may be seen as extensions of our bodies and parts of our flesh, not as detached entities. Anthropocentric vision seems to be overcome in the future, in favor of a multifocal vision of reality.

3. Reversibility and divergence

Merleau-Ponty’s later thought seems a good starting point for post-humanism. In fact, he tries to overcome *Phenomenology of Perception’s* residual dualism. In this work, even if he does not imply a sharp separation between matter and spirit, ego and other person, humans and other animals, etc., his thought is undermined by a residuum of conscientialism. Renaud Barbaras states it in his *Introduction to a Phenomenology of Life* (Barbaras 2008; eng. trans. 2021, p. 75): albeit the concept of ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty shows, terminologically and ontologically, the tendency to see conscience as detached from its object. This is also evident, I would add, from Merleau-Ponty’s continuous references to the debate between empiricism and intellectualism, and to Cartesian thought, which is focused on consciousness. Merleau-Ponty always deals with the issue of consciousness, of how to conceive and relate it to the object. The egological perspective is still there as a background and will never be completely overcome.

However, in his later works, Merleau-Ponty makes an effort into another direction, an effort which remains incomplete because of his sudden death. He theorizes an ontological perspective, whose point of view is neither the typically egoic one, nor the third-person one, usually belonging to the hard sciences. It is an “extended first person”, not in the sense of German and Italian Idealism, which conceive a universal Ego creating the object and constituting reality as a whole, but as a subject which is also an object, since the two terms revert the one into the other. As Luca Vanzago states (Vanzago 2012, pp. 194-195), Merleau-Ponty recurs to a circular dialectic of Schellingean origin, in which

matter and spirit, subject and object, are horizontally polarized, then meet and the one flows into the other. This dialectic is expressed precisely in the idea of flesh, defined by Merleau-Ponty as an “element”, “in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being” (Merleau-Ponty 1964; eng. trans. 1968, p. 139). The element comprehends different terms, so that it cannot be identified with a “substance” (either individual or universal), but only with a “general thing”, which is matter and spirit at the same time, a “style of being” where a “fragment of being” lies. The word “style” is here used to point out what an extended first person mean. According to Linda Singer, style is “the affective or modal consequence of being an embodied point of view” (Singer 1981, 1993 edition, p. 240). The embodied point of view is not intended here as the individual one, belonging to the ego in touch with the world through its own body, but a general, an elemental one: it is the flesh as a whole, as a subjectivity which lies where the single ego is but, at the same time, is connected to the other egos and to all the living beings.

It is neither a unique subjectivity nor the human spirit as a whole: according to Luca Vanzago, “it is not anthropology, but its very opposite, that is an understanding of human subjectivity in terms of living nature. Bodily subjectivity is a paradox of Being, not of humans” (Vanzago 2012, p. 241; my translation). Merleau-Ponty’s point of view is ontological, not epistemological, and is still phenomenological, although distant from Husserl, who starts from the individual ego, turning subsequently to its being transcendental. The starting point is mine, but belongs also to the other person, because it precedes them, not in a chronological, but in a phenomenological and ontological sense: flesh is our common element which lies there and from which we need to start, in order to understand reality.

What are the features of the flesh allowing us to have a better understanding of our era, especially digital worlds and the possibility of hybridization between nature and technology? My interpretation is that these features are two, reversibility and divergence. As I have written before, the concept of reversibility shall relate to the circular dialectic in *The Visible and the Invisible*, a dialectic which may be found in the idea of chiasm. Reality, according to this idea, should be conceived as a two-level element, a material and a spiritual one, a subjective and an objective one, a feeling and a felt one, etc., which have not to be seen as juxtaposed, but in a very tight entanglement. The one is in the other, the one reverts into the other, the more I look for the one, the more I find the other. The two form a chiasm, which

may be conceived as a sort of inter-sensoriality, of dynamism implying an indissoluble link among its components.

However, the figure of the chiasm will be fully understood only if we refer to divergence, not only inter-sensorially, but even intra-sensorially speaking. Let us think to a χ or, if we prefer, to an x: the two lines meet in one point, however, after their meeting, they follow opposite directions. There are four different extremes, making the entanglement even more complex: they shall be seen as couples of two, sharing the same horizontal or vertical line, taking opposite directions, lying above, below, or alongside the other line, forming the intersection of the chiasm. Reversibility is thus inconceivable without “divergence”: the word translates the term *écart*, literally “gap”, indicating a flesh with a double layer, two components which are not coincident but different ways in which being is (Morris 2010). The chiasm contains a duplicity which will never be reduced to one, so that the relation between the two components is never annihilation, but the abovementioned reversibility: it is a “separation in relation”, according to which the different components or perspectives share the same element, an ontological uniformity, not coincidence. For a better understanding of this idea, I refer to Deleuze on the univocity of Being:

the essential in univocity is not that Being is said in a single and same sense, but that it is said, in a single and same sense, *of all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities*. Being is the same for all these modalities, but these modalities are not the same. It is ‘equal’ for all, but they themselves are not equal. It is said of all in a single sense, but they themselves do not have the same sense (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, p. 45).

According to my interpretation of the passage, with the help of Merleau-Ponty, it may be said that the components of the flesh, generally conceived, are different: this applies to the abovementioned couples, but also to the single entities emerging from the flesh. There is not any partition of Being based on specific criteria or supposed hierarchies, but all the entities share the same ontological degree; nothing is more perfect or more relevant than anything else. In this respect, Deleuze writes about a realm which is not hierarchical (analogy), but anarchic (univocity). Merleau-Ponty seems to mention dialectic and divergence instead, so that the background reality is unique, a sort of body shared by all the single different bodies. My body has the same consistence of other bodies, and we all participate of the body of the world (the flesh), however my body is different from other bodies and does not coincide with any of them. Relation is also separation.

4. Flesh and Hybridization

According to my argument, Merleau-Ponty seems to redefine the relation between humans and what surrounds them: compared with other beings, humans have no right to claim their superiority and their perspective should be not considered as a privileged one. As a human, I am not better than a dog, a flower, or a mountain. However, it does not mean that differences should be erased, since a human is neither a dog, nor a flower, nor a mountain. A human being is human, with their own specificities.

This very simple argument may be applied to the issue of hybridization. A digital prosthesis can become part of me and I may be able to interact with other objects through it. If I was blind and a bionic eye was installed on my body, the eye would allow me to see, to gain access to a whole series of sensory data, which I could not perceive otherwise. Through an ocular prosthesis a blind person could regain their sight and perceive the world similarly to a sighted person. Moreover, technological developments allow the user of the prosthesis not only to “catch up” with the others, but even to gain access to extra information. Let us think to a bionic eye looking at a monument in a square and, at the same time, seeing basic information about the monument itself or about the modalities of its being built. This is augmented reality, to which our body may gain immediate access.

I have used an example coming from visual perception, but the same could be said about prostheses concerning other sensory spheres or the overall configuration of movement. Let us think to a bionic hand, which would be able not only to take objects, as already happens today, but even to obtain (or re-obtain, in case of mutilation) haptic sensibility. There may be, even in that case, extra information, for instance the exact temperature of an object, through a voice perceived by the ear, or something written on the hand itself or through another prosthesis (just as the abovementioned bionic eye).

All these cases concern hybridization (Pedersen, Iliadis 2020). They are not about external devices, which can be turned off or removed any time, just as computers, smartphones, and domotic objects: they are extensions of our body linked to its perceptual modalities, entangling with the latter and allowing the body itself to feel differently from when prostheses are not there. As it was said before, this leads to an acquisition of a 360-degree sensibility and perception, and to an information exchange with the surrounding environment and with other smart objects. Does it lead us to become cyborgs or to blend into prostheses? I do not think so, according to my interpretation of Merleau-Ponty. The digital prosthesis may become part of me, but only a part extending a certain way to per-

ceive, however I do not coincide with the prosthesis: I am not a bionic instrument, I am something else, I am human.

We are not becoming cyborgs, but hybrids between humans and cyborgs⁵, hybrids maintaining our bottom humanity, albeit extending our bodies and minds, overcoming, in a certain sense, both humans and machines. The concept of *devenir machine* was developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze, Guattari; 1980 trans. 2004), considering the possibility to become machines and developing a materialistic political body. Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti (Haraway 1985, 1991 edition; Braidotti 2013) follow this direction, giving birth to critical posthumanism. According to Braidotti, it is “the actualization of a virtuality, travelling at different speed from capitalist acceleration. The point of this actualization is to provide an adequate expression of what bodies – as both embodied and embrained – can do and think and enact” (Braidotti 2019, p. 51). I agree with Braidotti on the importance of embodied and embrained technology, however my position does not focus on becoming machines, at least not totally, but on a “hybrid intentionality” (Verbeek 2008), maintaining our being humans and, at the same time, extending our bodies and minds.

In this way, anthropocentrism to which we are accustomed fades away, leading us to a direction towards posthuman, not opposing our being humans, but redefining the latter: it is a different way to conceive humanism, maybe more human than before, according to an idea of humanity which is not pure, but extended, hybrid, encountering different perspectives, different bodies, reconfiguring itself through the latter. Following Merleau-Ponty’s suggestions, our flesh is entangled with the flesh of the prosthesis, of the digital, of technology, thus accomplishing a *flat ontology*, not only conceptually, but even actively speaking. On the one hand, a common element has been discovered, along with the possibility of reversibility between natural and artificial, limb and prosthesis, human and cyborg, on the other hand, the two terms do not coincide and remain divergent.

The distance between the terms does not regard only two or more different entities, but takes place even inside the same being: it is both an intra-ontological and extra-ontological distance, according to a chiasmatic ambiguity. Flesh itself is distance, gap, circular dialectic. The distance

⁵ A cyborg is defined as a hybrid between the cybernetic and the organic (Clynes, Kline 1960): in this case, hybridization is strong and implies that humans cannot survive without their cybernetic components. I am suggesting here a milder kind of hybridization, which does not necessarily involve survival. For instance, a person without a leg and with a cybernetic prosthesis (hybrid between human and cyborg) may live in absence of the latter, whereas a person with a pacemaker (cyborg) needs the prosthesis to live.

between myself and the other person, which has become more evident during the pandemic, seems multi-faceted. If I am at a conference sitting at a table, my fellow speaker will be located at a certain physical distance from me: safety precautions force us to increase distance, I mean extra-ontological distance. The same could be said for the public sitting in front of us, but not for the people following us online: they would see and hear us, even if they were halfway across the world. Physical distance between us and them is undefined, however digital technologies allow them to follow our conference and discuss with us. On the other hand, both my fellow speaker and I perceive the enormity of this distance, because we cannot perceive the emotions of the public, understand if our words convince them or not, especially if their videos are turned off. The distance between us and the others is mediated by digital technology, which reduces the spatial gap, but imposes a more evident detachment.

The digital modifies distance, configuring it differently, shortening and widening, at the same time, spaces between physical bodies. If I spoke through a vocal prosthesis, instead, distance would be intra-ontological between me and myself, my organs and my prosthesis. However, through a long-term use, I could stop thinking of using a prosthesis and would speak plainly with my bionic voice: maybe it would not be the annoying robotic voice we use to hear in the movies, but a velvet, suave voice, without breaks or smudges. Maybe it would be aesthetically more pleasant, but who knows if it would convey the same emotions as my imperfect bodily voice or hide them behind an opaque coat instead. Becoming hybrid opens to the risk of becoming machines.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed my hypothesis, according to which a posthuman turn takes place in the thought of Merleau-Ponty after the *Phenomenology of Perception*, a turn which starts in the latter book with the concept of ambiguity and is brought on in his later works. Merleau-Ponty decentralizes the human subject and calls into question his own conscientialism (Barbaras 2008; eng. trans. 2021), opening to the possibility of overcoming both dualism and anthropocentrism. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, there is evidence that this turn was at a certain stage of maturity and that the concept of flesh may be considered its point of arrival. Surely Merleau-Ponty's sudden death has left many scenarios open: he had not enough time to develop this idea and its consequences on our way to perceive ourselves, the others, and the surrounding world. He had not enough time to see the development of cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and internet. However, he had enough time to give birth to

a revolutionary concept, which is the idea of an extended corporeity, of a living being shared by its individual manifestations, and opening to the possibility of bringing together humans and non-humans, natural and artificial, bodies and minds.

According to my interpretation of the chiasmatic nature of the flesh, it does not imply reducing every component to the other and annihilating their differences, but entering a circular dialectic, where polarities are both necessary and separated by blurred boundaries: this is the meaning of reversibility and divergence. The idea of flesh, which is a style of being and not an individual substance, is also considered a key concept of the idea of hybridization between human and technology, which may be developed and led to a better understanding of this phenomenon, especially after the development of smart objects and increasingly performative prostheses. The latter could be made in the future with the idea of helping people with disabilities to catch up with the others, but also of extending the possibilities and the boundaries of our natural bodies. At a first glance, it seems that I have in mind a distant future and argue for a positive and naïve concept of progress, when humanity will be potentiated and improve its material conditions and knowledge. On the contrary, I am persuaded that such a future is closer than we think and needs to be faced through a specific discussion about the digital, hybridization, and the consequences on other beings (animals, plants, and nature in general). I also think that a posthuman perspective may be a good starting point, especially if it is not meant to cancel humans as such, but their supposed superiority, seeing them in a fair relation with non-human beings. This perspective is based on a flat ontology and may be developed thanks to Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh and to his different ways to understand humanity during his life.

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Merleau-Ponty and the Digital Era: Flesh, Hybridization, and Posthuman

The paper discusses a posthuman reading of Merleau-Ponty's later works and an application of the concept of flesh to the digital dimension. Whereas, in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the world and other beings are seen from an egological and human perspective, in *The Visible and the Invisible* this perspective is reshaped. Human body is made of the same stuff of other bodies, and they constitute a common being, the flesh of the world. Merleau-Ponty sets out a path through flat ontology and posthumanism, opposing human perspective as a privileged one. His posthuman turn passes through the concepts of reversibility and divergence. Humans are made of the same stuff as non-humans, so they *reverse* into one another, but, on the other hand, they are not reduced to an undifferentiated entity, because of their *divergence*. Merleau-Ponty's problematizing perspective is here actualized and applied to the hybridization between human bodies and digital prostheses.

KEYWORDS: Merleau-Ponty, posthuman, flesh, reversibility, divergence, hybridization.