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# Caressing Radical Alterity: For a Queer Ethic of Embodiment in Contemporary Films and Literature

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Caressing Radical Alterity: For a Queer Ethic of Embodiment in Contemporary Films  
and Literature.

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## Dedication

To my lovers and their caresses...

## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

This dissertation offers an analysis of the caress through the dual lens of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. I argue that the caress reveals the queerness and ambiguities of perception and that this gesture must be understood as an ethical gesture of opening toward otherness. I discuss different accounts of the caress (Levinas, Irigaray) and expose the misogynistic and/or homophobic bias at work in these theories of the caress. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of touch and other notions that he develops (Flesh, intertwinement, intercorporeality, encroachment, etc.) allow a redefinition of the caress that avoids Levinas and Irigaray's pitfalls. In a reading of the novel *The Silence of the Lambs* and its movie adaptation (1988, 1991), I demonstrate how the body is intertwined with the environment and how the caress is an important symbol of this aspect. In my reading of silent movie *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), I show how the caress can have a negative aspect when the intertwinement with the Other becomes an intrusive presence or encroachment in Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary. Finally, relying on different horror movies (*May* [2002], *Mirrors* [2013]) and on Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, I critique Jacques Lacan's mirror stage for offering an ocularcentric (privileging the sense of sight) account of the constitution of the subject. Instead, I suggest that an haptocentric approach (privileging the sense of touch) of the constitution of the subject offers not only a better account of the body as it is lived and of certain horror themes (the haunted mirror, the evil doll) but also an interesting theoretical framework to the concept of the caress.

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## List of Abbreviations

EE.....	<i>Existence and Existents</i>
EN.....	<i>Entre Nous</i>
ISSP.....	“Sex, Power and Politics of Identity”
TI.....	<i>Totality and Infinity</i>
TO.....	<i>Time and the Other</i>
OE.....	<i>L'Œil et l'esprit</i>
VI.....	<i>Le Visible et l'invisible</i>

## Introduction

In this dissertation, I argue that the structure of touch is a sensory matrix shaping our relation to the world and to the body. As it has been noticed by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, if my two hands touch each other, the sensation oscillates between “my hand is touched” or “my hand is touching,” either a subject of the action or an object of the action. These two dimensions cannot completely overlap. Instead, what is open is a field of queer and unstable sensations, a field of tensions and of different becomings (becoming object or becoming subject). This field of tactile intensities is in fact revealed by the movement of my two hands caressing each other. In this dissertation, I am therefore interested in this image of the caress as a gesture opening a field of differences and becomings, as embodying the ambiguities, hesitations and instabilities that inhabit our lives. However, I seek to resist any ontological account of the caress (what the caress *is?*), and instead focus on the ethical possibility that this gesture offers (to whom this caress is *addressed?*). Acknowledging that the caress reveals the instabilities and the borders of the body, I seek in literature and movies a desire for the caress. If this desire can take the form of a longing for alterity (as in *May* [2002] or at the very beginning of *The Hands of Orlac* [1924]), it can also take the form of a fear of alterity, a fear of what Merleau-Ponty defines as encroachment or *empiètement*, that is to say a fear of the irruption of the other within my body; within the intimacy of my sensitive life. This ambiguity of the caress, suspended between longing and fear, justifies my heavy reliance on the horror movie genre to illustrate the negativity of the caress. I also want to avoid the too

easy romantization of the caress (as in Levinas and Irigaray) and wanted to stress on the contrary its threatening dimension for the “stable” subject.

Thus, this work focuses on the figure of the caress in order to address a specific theoretical question regarding the relation of the subject to the body and its ethical dimension. The second key term of this dissertation is radical alterity. By radical alterity I point to set of theoretical works and theories (psychoanalysis, phenomenology, queer theory) posing the existence of a space beyond consciousness. Whether it is the Kantian *noumenon* or the Lacanian Real, according to these philosophical perspectives, there exists beyond the subject a space unknowable; a space that cannot be reduced to the subjective perspective of the subject. The pen in itself, the apple in itself, the table in itself, remain external to my subjective position and I can only grasp their existence as phenomenon, that is to say, as appearing for and in relation to a specific subjective position.

If the different structuralisms and post-structuralisms subscribe to the existence of a field of radical alterity, they nonetheless approach this specific philosophical problem from the point of view of language. By defining language and the symbolic field as the space of emergence of the subject, that is to say that the subject emerges thanks to language, these theoretical approaches remain in an imperialistic and colonizing relation with the question of radical alterity as best illustrated in Freud’s famous “Wo das Es war, soll das ich werden,” often translated as “There where it was, should I become.”<sup>1</sup> If we take Freud’s affirmation as paradigmatic of the relation of the subject to radical alterity, there are therefore at least two ways to understand this statement. The first way, is to un-

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<sup>1</sup> This is at least Lacan’s translation. The *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* suggests “Where id was, there ego shall be“ (XXII 80)

derstand Freud statement as an ontological description of a conquering process of the id by consciousness. The space of the unconscious, within its zone of mystery and unknown desires, must be slowly conquered thanks to the talking cure. In this version, the radical alterity must be reduced to a conscious knowledge. The other way to understand Freud's statement is, on the contrary, to understand it not as an ontological statement, but as ethical one. In this version this statement is not a description but an injunction, a must or a should, defining the talking cure not as a process of conscious colonization, but as an ongoing and never ending ethical acknowledgement of the irreducibility of radical alterity and defining the I not as a being but as a becoming, (*soll das ich werden*). Following this second understanding of Freud's statement, in my dissertation, I define relation with radical alterity as an ethical one. However, I question the centrality of language in this ethical relation. Instead, I define the body as mediating this ethical relation with radical alterity (*Wo das Es war, soll mein Leib werden*). Developing ideas, concepts and figures borrowed from Levinas, the figure of the caress, and from Merleau-Ponty, particularly his analysis of intercorporeality, I look closely at representations of tactility in literary texts and films in order to flesh out this ethics of embodiment.

These theoretical shifts toward the body as the space of a fundamental ethical experience implies a new look at the question of desire and at the question of the unconscious. In a nutshell, it implies that desire must be understood not as a personal and internal force, but as a spatially ambiguous and relatively impersonal dimension of the subject. Because the lived body is an ambiguous space simultaneously closed, in the sense that I am aware of its limits, but also open, in the sense that my sensation always contests the limits of my body, desire appears within an ambiguous zone between my body and the

world; being neither completely personal nor impersonal, neither completely internal nor external. As I illustrate in the dissertation, if an attractive man enters the room, my desire for him is not some kind of force within me pushing me toward him, but on the contrary, desire springs from a field of given and impersonal bodily sensations, ambiguously internal and external. My desire is simultaneously there, in the erotic aura of his dark hair and chiseled body, but also here, in the acceleration of my heartbeats and the heat of my throbbing cheeks. In other words, the body and its field of sensations draw a contested space within which ambiguity and alterity arise. Even more, radical alterity is not defined as the other, the person in front of me, but it is from the ambiguous field of the sensations that the other and the *I* emerge through a slow and never completely achieved differentiation between interior and exterior. The ambiguity of sensations, the elusive threshold between me and the other, is the very space of expression of radical alterity.

It is from this point of view that the figure of the caress is particularly helpful. Levinas defined the caress in opposition to the grasp. Whereas the grasp aims at reducing alterity in a movement of seizing (in French “to take with,” *comprendre*,” also means to “understand”), the caress seeks to electrify and excite radical alterity instead of reducing it to the dimension of the same and the known. If it can be argued that Levinas’s caress is a mere figure to illustrate a metaphysical statement, I understand that caress very concretely thanks to the touching/touched of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty, after Husserl, notices that when two hands touch each other, this experiment deploys an ambiguous field of sensations and if I try to grasp this sensation, I am either in position of being the subject of sensation, the touching,” and the object of sensation, “the touched,” but I cannot be both at the same time, I cannot reflexively grasp the ambiguity of the field of tac-



tile sensation. From this point of view the caress is an erotic enjoyment of the ambiguities of sensations. The caress is the figure of an ethics of embodiment respecting, electrifying and enjoying the ambiguities of the lived body and its sensations.

I argue that the caress is an interesting concept for queer theory. First, the ambiguity of the caress continues queer theory's traditional emphasis on the notions of porosity, fluidity and ambiguity in order to challenge categorical and binary thinking. Thanks to the attention given to the world sensations, an attention on what cannot be represented but only experienced, the caress escapes from the post-structuralist positions and conceptualization of desires in Judith Butler or Lee Edelman by replacing the lived body at the center of erotic life in a theory of desire closer to Tim Dean's. The body is not only an image, a representation with which I identify, but the space of ambiguous sensations questioning and challenging the supremacy of the *I*. Lastly, The caress as an embodied ethical gesture, demands queer theory to engage with authors that are not traditionally integrated in its corpus, namely Levinas and Merleau-Ponty. This integration of New authors on the queer theory canon aims at offering new perspectives and questionings on the complex relations between desire, the body, and the other.

Therefore, in the following chapters I will analyze the relationship between the body and erotic touch, or in my phenomenological terms, between the Flesh and the caress based on insight from phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Using literary or cinematic texts in which the motive of touch appears and betrays some of the interesting properties of the caress, I will demonstrate that the meaning of the caress is to bring out or to reveal the queer possibilities that the equivocality of the body holds; in other words, the caress is the infinite exposition of the radical singularity or radical difference of the

erotic lived bodies of the lovers. In this sense, each chapter will offer different perspectives of the specific relation between the caress and the Flesh.

In the first chapter, I will offer a critique of the caress as defined originally by Levinas and Irigaray. Levinas' notion of the caress is fundamental in order to understand its relation with radical alterity and to an ethics of Eros. However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, Levinas' understanding of the caress is not only misogynistic (as underlined by Irigaray) but homophobic. By recasting the caress, I therefore affirm that the otherness the caress seeks is not in the mystery of the feminine or in sexual reproduction (as in Levinas), nor in sexual difference (as in Irigaray). On the contrary, I suggest that what the caress seeks is a radical alterity with no precise conceptual or material form (a being) but instead a becoming (an encounter with radical alterity).

In the second chapter, I will develop and open up the initial conclusions of the critique of the caress. Focusing on the idea of a touching knowledge, I want to show that the caress, as meaningful sensation, brings to light a certain knowledge about the Flesh. This knowledge cannot be reduced to a categorical or prepositional knowledge, but the caress is possessed by a certain intuition about the equivocality of the Flesh, that is to say that the caress has the power to expose the transparency of the modern subject to itself as a philosophical illusion, and to undo it by summoning up the thick, heavy, and sensuous equivocal presence of the Flesh. The caress hovers over a transcendent Flesh bleeding out into immanence and exposes the impossibility of the modern subject to perfectly fold onto itself. We will see that due to the recasting of the caress away from Fecundity, one of the essential features of the caress, its reversibility, is carved out. In the caress it is not only the queerness of the Flesh of the other that I expose, but mine as well, to the point where

I don't know where my Flesh finishes and where the Flesh of the others starts. In the caress, the Flesh is made singular. I will offer a reading of both the movie and the novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991, 1988) in order to develop and illustrate Merleau-Ponty's notions of intertwining and intercorporeality.

In the third chapter, I will link the question of desire with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception thanks to an original definition of queerness as appearing within the intertwined field of desire and perception. This definition allows to make sense of the queerness of desire which, like perception, always stands at the threshold of a set a categorical opposition, inside/outside, subjective/objective, transcendent/immanent, I/other, etc. Thanks to a reading of *The Hands of Orlac*, I will introduce the question of negativity. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception and desire are always haunted by an otherness that leaves the body open to new sensations and desires but that also threatens our sense of identity. From this perspective, Orlac's dispossession of his body, specifically his hands, not only illustrates the haunting presence of the other within the field of perception and desire but also offers interesting insight of the crucial role that touch plays in this relation of reversibility with the other.

The fourth chapter will be dedicated to underlining the limits of Lacan's mirror stage and will suggest that in order to offer a better account of the subject constitution the dimension of tactility must be integrated within Lacan's theoretical construct. Based on Merleau-Ponty's development about the ambiguity of touch, Didier Anzieu's Skin-Ego and Françoise Dolto's critique of Lacan's mirror stage, I will suggest that touch allows us to undermine Lacan's occularcentrism and to give a different account of the subject development in which tactility and the other are central. I will illustrate this "skin-mirror"

through a reading of the horror movie *Mirrors* (2008) and show its prevalence thanks to images from other horror movies.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I will link the previous explorations of the importance of the sense of touch for the subject development to the notion of caress and alterity. Thanks to a reading of the horror movie *May* (2002) and an interpretation of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) focusing on three specific chapters ("The Counterpane," "The Blanket," and "A Squeeze of the Hand"), I will show that images of skin and the figure of the caress expresses a longing for different modes of relationality. However, due to the negativity that haunts tactility, I will claim that the caress should not be turned into a utopian politics of tactile intimacy, but must remain a tension toward alterity; a mere tactile exploration and experimentation for otherness expressing our ambiguous desire for an unreachable radical alterity.

## Chapter I: Recasting the Caress

*Sexuality is in us neither knowledge nor power,  
but the very plurality of our existing – Levinas, Totality and Infinity*

### 1.1. The Consistent Inconsistencies of the Foucauldian Body

On December, 7<sup>th</sup>, 1966, Michel Foucault presented two radiophonic conferences on the theme of *Utopia and Literature* on France-Culture, the radio station's wavelengths disembodying and generously dispersing the gravitas of French high culture. One of these conferences is remembered as *The Heterotopias*, a talk that resonates with Foucault's previous insight on space and power (see for instance the figure of the ship of fools as heterotopia in *Histoire de la folie à l'age classique* (1964)) and that anticipates his more systematic reading of the triangular relations between institutional spaces, bodies and power. Sadly, the other talk did not receive the same attention. Though often ignored and underappreciated, *The Utopian Body* is an elegant text where Foucault's writing is at his poetic best, a writing style that recalls the lyricism of *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963). Foucault demonstrates in this text a cunning sense of poetry that does not necessarily appear in his later texts.

It is quite simple to understand why *The Heterotopias* overshadowed its twin brother. Foucault has already introduced his analysis of space as one of the grounds for

the deployment of power and *The Heterotopias* seems to be an intermediary step toward the analysis of spatiality in total institutions (hospitals, asylums, school dormitories, etc.). On the contrary, in *The Utopian Body*, Foucault develops one theme, the relation of texts or discourses with the body, but in a way that is a bit at odds with the general architecture of his thought. In this text, the body is a “pitiless place” (“Mon corps, topie impitoyable”), heavy, materialistic, inescapable, and constantly reflecting the insults of Time: “And it is in this ugly shell of my head, in this cage I do not like, that I will have to reveal myself and walk around; through this grille I must speak, look and be looked at; under this skin I will have to rot” (229). In opposition to this world of density and decay, utopia appears at first as made of colored light fabric animating and giving shape to the specific fantasy of a transfigured body. Then, Foucault distinguishes three types of utopias sharing the same purpose, the progressive erasure of the material limits of the body. The first type of utopia is the world of fantasy, magic and miracles:

the land of faeries, the land of gnomes, of genies, magicians – well, it is the land where bodies transport themselves at the speed of light; it is the land where wounds are healed with marvelous beauty in the blink of an eye. It is the land where you can fall from a mountain and pick yourself up unscathed. It is the land where you are visible when you want, invisible when you desire. It is a land of faery tales, it is precisely so that I may be its prince charming, and that all the pretty boys there may turn nasty and hairy as bears. (229)

The second utopia that Foucault introduces is the Thanatopia, “this is the utopia of the land of the dead, those grand utopian cities that the Egyptian civilization left behind. What is a mummy after all? Well, a mummy is the utopia of the body negated and transfigured. The mummy is the great utopian body that persists across time” (229). Last is the utopia of the soul:

But perhaps the most obstinate, the most powerful of those utopias with which we erase the sad topology of the body, has been, since the begin-

ning of the Western history, supplied to us by the great myth of the soul. The soul. It functions in my body in the most marvelous way: it resides there, of course, but it knows how to escape. It escapes from the body to see things through the window of my eyes. It escapes to dream when I sleep, to survive when I die. It is beautiful, my soul: it is pure, it is white. And if my body – which is muddy, or in any case not very clean – should come to soil it, there will always be a virtue, there will always be a power, there will be a thousand sacred gestures that will reestablish my soul in its primary purity. It will last a long time, my soul, more than a “long time”, when my old body comes to rot. Long live my soul! It is my body made luminous, purified, virtuous, agile, mobile, warm, fresh. It is my body rounded like a soap bubble.” (230)

If utopias appear at first as cultural productions aiming at the destruction and the erasure of the body, Foucault, after realizing that the material body was *in itself* an utopian body, that is to say always simultaneously “visible and invisible,” concludes that these utopias “were born from the body itself, and perhaps afterwards they turn against it” (231). My body is never completely accessible to myself, first, because I cannot see my body from every angle, but more radically, I do not have an intimate and unmediated relation with it. My body is always lacking unity; it is a void of signification that demands cultural indoctrinations and adjustments in order to take shape. Masks, tattoos, make-up, clothes, cover the surface of the body, with rags of signification. The utopian body is therefore never here, but always in the Other. The body is therefore “the zero point of the world”, always open and simultaneously “interior and exterior” to spaces, never here but always “elsewhere”. The utopian body “is like the City of the Sun. It has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate” (233). The utopian body appears to be therefore in an analogical relation with space. The utopian body is made of spatial images as much as space is haunted by body images. These images seem to be produced immanently, as if the body was always, as the body of

the dancer, a mere surface in a universe of spatial surfaces; body and space, interiority and exteriority, visible and invisible, enveloping each other.

Despite the wonderful promises of the utopian body, Foucault makes another theoretical volte-face at the end of the text. Drawing on the mirror stage and the etymology of the word body as corpse in Homer, Foucault argues:

it is the mirror and it is the corpse that silence, and shut into a closure (for us now sealed) this great utopian rage that dilapidates and volatilizes our bodies at every instant. It is thanks to them, thanks to the mirror and the corpse, that our body is not pure utopia. And yet, if one considers that the images of the mirror resides for us in an inaccessible space, and that we will never be able to be where our corpse will be; if one thinks that the mirror and the corpse are themselves in an invincible elsewhere, then one discovers that only utopias can close in on themselves, and hide, for an instant, the profound and sovereign utopia of our body. (233)

The text's complexity is not visible on first reading. The first layer introduces the concept of utopia as literary and religious construction negating the materiality of the body. But Foucault introduces a second layer of analysis, with the concept of the utopian body, a phenomenological shape-shifting body with no real anchor, and shows that the body is already a utopia, that is to say always elsewhere, "a phantom that only appears in the mirage of the mirror" and who is "interior and exterior" to spaces that it haunts, made of visible and invisible parts, unable to perceive itself as a whole and to grasp its materiality. It is the impossibility that the utopian body can acknowledge its materiality (that only resurfaces, according to Foucault, "the day that a toothache crazes in the back of my mouth" (231)), it is this immanent negation, that is projected in the literary and religious utopias.

Considering the dense conceptual richness of the text and its pairing with *The Heterotopias*, it is surprising that the text didn't receive more attention from scholars.

After all, there is here a clear statement on the relationship between body and literary text



that are not common with Foucault. Since Foucault's work focused on the discursive production of truth, literature has not been its major focus, as it is usually more oriented toward the analysis of statements in scientific and philosophical texts. As he stated in the interview with Roger Pol-Droit in 1975, that is to say, after *Histoire de la folie* (1961) and *Les mots et les choses* (1966), "For me literature is something that I observed, not something I analyzed, or integrated into the field of analysis. It was a rest, a thought along the way, a badge, a flag" (*Genealogy and Literature*, 3).

This relative disinterest in the text may perhaps be understood by the argument made in the very last paragraph of *The Utopian Body*. After having stated that despite their ever-postponed presence, the image of the mirror and the corpse were the utopian and elusive reminders of the materiality of the body, Foucault ends his text with a very interesting last shift:

Maybe it should also be said that to make love is to feel one's body close in on oneself. It is finally to exist outside of any utopia, with all of one's density, between the hands of the other. Under the other's fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist. Against the lips of the other, yours become sensitive. In front of his half-closed eyes, your face acquires a certitude. There is a gaze, finally, to see your closed eyelids. Love also, like the mirror and the death – it appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it, it encloses it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it. This is why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love, the body is here. (233)

Here Foucault answers two different authors simultaneously. The mention of the perception of the body as a whole in the mirror is obviously directed toward Lacan's "mirror stage." However, where Lacan sees in the mirror stage the necessary alienation of the subject in the image of the Other, unable therefore to think himself outside the reverse image of the Other, for Foucault the image of the mirror is also a reminder of its material-

ity and closes the body in on itself. In other words, where Lacan sees that the mirror stage introduces already a split in the subject that the language will only solidify, Foucault's body image in the mirror is haunted by the Real. If the mirror produces an image sustaining the Imaginary, it is only a refractive image of the Real, the body in its materiality.

The second critique that Foucault offers is a bit less obvious. Philippe Ariès' monumental analysis of the Western attitude toward death and a remarkable scholarly and popular success monumental started in 1949 and culminated in 1977 with the publication of *The Hour of Our Death*. Known for its tenuous analysis of more than a millennia of Western behavior toward death, the Ariès' work is still a major reference in thanatology. Even if *The Time of Our Death* was published after the conference, the work of Ariès was already known at the time of the radiophonic conference. For Ariès, from the middle ages until now, Western cultures have slowly erased the corporality of the body and its relation to death, passing from a "tame death" to an "invisible death." Perhaps more than his thesis, it is also his method that was surprising for the period. Ariès, alongside Foucault, helped to shape a new type of history, less focused on the major events and personalities, than on the continuity and discontinuity of collectively shared discourses and practices. Foucault alludes to Ariès through the two famous images of Ariès' argument, the remnant statue (*le gisant*) and the rectangular marble as a substitute of the body. But Foucault's critique of Ariès seems somewhat surprising since they both share the same methodological practices. Foucault's account of the utopian body seems to challenge Ariès' reading of the obliteration of death in modernity. Foucault adopts a reading of the concealment of death in modernity that he links less to the historical variations of the utopian narratives (the soul, the thanatopia) than to the more epistemological relation

between space and the body. Therefore Foucault probably detects in Ariès an idealization of the Middle-Ages and of the period of the “tame death.” The Middle-Ages would be the age of utopias whereas modernity would reject directly materiality from the utopian body (the body of masks, make-up and clothes). Modernity and the Middle-Ages are both victims of the immanent negation of the materiality of the body; they only differ from the point of view of the intensity of this negation.

This rejection of historical variations in favor of a more phenomenological point of view is certainly interesting considering Foucault’s life-long involvement with history as a methodology. And if the text remains uncommented and relatively unknown it is because it attests to a longstanding hesitation that haunts Foucault’s account of the body. This is a hesitation between an historical and literary account of the body, where the body is described as a “thing”, as an object and subjected to the outside forces of discursive and institutional practices, and a body described in phenomenological terms. These phenomenological influences are thinly veiled and indicate other sources of influences. Not only the continuous reference to the “here” and “there” imitates the phenomenological style of writing, but the expression “zero point of the world” directly comes from Husserl’s description of the lived body as “the zero point of orientation.” Foucault also points at Merleau-Ponty, his former teacher, through the reference to the entanglement, or *chiasma*, of the visible and the invisible, the outside and the inside, and reveals his familiarity with *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and more precisely with the posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) published only two years before *The Utopian Body* (1966).

If it would be tempting to attribute this hesitation in *The Utopian Body* to the fact that it is written before the development of Foucault's more systematic and historical account of the body in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). This hesitation is indicative of the difference between the historical and the phenomenological body, or the body as object compared to the lived body. This account of Foucault's hesitation would ignore the continuous conceptual and methodological oddities that emerge throughout his work on the body, however.

In her critical article "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions" (1989), Judith Butler pinpoints at a major paradox or inconsistency in Foucault's account of the body and argues:

Although Foucault appears to argue that the body does not exist outside the terms of its cultural inscription, it seems that the very mechanism of "inscription" implies a power that is necessarily external to the body itself. The critical question that emerges from these considerations is whether the understanding of the process of cultural construction on the model of "inscription" – a logocentric move if ever there was one – entails that the "constructed" or "inscribed" body have an ontological status apart from that inscription, precisely the claim that Foucault wants to refute. (603)

Butler notices in *History of Sexuality I* (1976) and in the brief introduction to the journals of Herculine Barbin, that "Foucault seeks recourse to a prediscursive multiplicity of bodily forces that break through the surface of the body to disrupt the regulating practice of cultural coherence imposed upon that body by a regulatory regime, understood as vicissitude of 'history'" (607).

The texts that Butler mentions are not the only ones showing signs of conceptual inconsistencies. Other instances of apparition of a prediscursive body can be found in different interviews ("Sexual Choice, Sexual Act" [1982], "Sex, Power and Politics of Identity" [1982], "An Interview by Stephen Riggins" [1983]), where Foucault discuss

S&M practices as techniques of resistance. In these interviews Foucault is interested in the (dis)organization of pleasures, and the body is described as a source of pleasures rather than in terms of construction: “These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on. [...] The possibility of using our bodies as a possible source of very numerous pleasures is something that is very important” (SPPI, 165). If the S&M experiences revealing the erotic potential of “very strange parts of our body” resonates with the “invisible parts” made visible under the fingers of the lover in *The Utopian Body*, it is with “Sexual Choice, Sexual Acts” that Foucault provides an interesting insight in describing S&M as a “laboratory of sexual experimentation” (151) as it was practiced in San Francisco and New York in the 80’s. In this interview Foucault argues that the aim of S&M is to use “each party of the body as a sexual instrument” (152). In this series of interviews, Foucault not only clearly reintroduces agency in the determination of one’s body’s pleasure, but he describes this determination as a re-distribution of pleasure at the surface of the body rather than a mere construction of pleasure. S&M shapes more than it grounds pleasure. It is a laboratory of sexual experimentation working on an ontologically distinct material, the bodily pleasures.

Alongside the affirmation of a radical construction of the body, a body that must be understood as discursive and self-referential, we can find throughout Foucault’s work a discreet but nevertheless consistent inconsistency that can be traced back to an early hesitation between two modes of approach to the body. On one side, an original phenomenological descriptive approach of the lived body entangled with a literary critique, and on the other side an historical and objectivist approach to the body as surface of inscrip-

tion that describes it from outside and produces the type of paradoxes that Butler underlines.

My fascination with this moment of suspension and hesitation in Foucault's work does not merely stem from my own personal and continuous involvement with Foucault's texts, but also emerges from my own interest in and critique of queer theory. Considering the deep influence of Foucault's account of the body and sexuality on the development of queer theory, it seems to me that one might benefit from reflecting on this queer moment of suspension. In drawing on Foucault's conceptual and methodological heritage, queer theory might have cast aside another approach of to body. This approach, defined by its phenomenological methodology, would certainly steer away from the hegemony of cultural theory in queer theory and in Humanities in general, but would also certainly avoid the theoretical conundrum on the ontological status of the body. The phenomenological perspective offers other insight, other queer bodily events, another approach to discourses and materiality, in defining queerness not *solely* as a socio-historical construct inscribed on bodies from outside, but as a necessary ontological event appearing in relation to the living-body that *I* am.

## 1.2. Queer, Queerness and Phenomenology

Queer: 1) Unusual, strange, not expected. 2) Gay (often offensive). It is certainly not very original to recall, as if needed, the relation that queers maintain with the strange or the untimely (or in French *l'intempestif*). Queer theory has already exposed the specific association between queerness and queers that is legitimized and naturalized by the introduction of a third term, whether it is through the large and universal notion of (per-

verse) sexuality or (non-conforming) gender. Queers express queerness inasmuch as their sexuality or gender performances do not conform to the set of norms assigned to their sex. However useful this focus on the rich and creative discrepancies between gender, sexuality and sex might be to understand the history and political economy of oppression and social injustices that queers face, feminist methodologies (intersectionality in particular) and relatively recent works in queer studies challenge the evidence of this relation. If the first queer social movements of the 60's-70's perceived their queer sexual practices as a productive and ingenious way to challenge mainstream society and politics and as having an intrinsic revolutionary power,<sup>2</sup> it has become now obvious that in the face of the rise of homonationalisms, pinkwashing, homonormativity<sup>3</sup> and the inequalities at the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality, the relation of necessity between queerness and queers is today exposed as being a bitter, if not amusing, illusion.

If our sexualities and bodies have been colonized and reterritorialized by mainstream society and its different modes of identity consumption (entertainment, health, tourism, politics, etc.), how can we presently account for this specific historical event

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<sup>2</sup> Especially in Europe where the relative tolerance of the different shades of communism and their respective rhetoric of liberation and revolution allowed intersecting with the emerging consciousness of sexual and gender oppression. See Guy Hocquenghem's *Le Desir Homosexuel* (1972) or Mario Mieli's *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (1977).

<sup>3</sup> *Homonationalism* is the redefinition and reshaping of homosexual acts, identities and relations by incorporating them to neoliberal democratic ethics and modes of consumption. *Pinkwashing* is the reshaping of gay identities by political and/or social activists by means of normalizing political and marketing strategies. *Homonormativity* is the set of norms policing homosexual identities, bodies and (sexual) practices and produced by the cumulative effects of political and marketing strategies.

which seemed to fuse queerness and queers in such a symbiotic relationship? If queerness only maintains a contingent and relative relation to sexuality, how can we account for the specific *experience* of queerness with which, as queers, we claim to have a privileged relation?

Queerness: as the suffix –ness underlines, queerness is the abstract quality or state of being queer. However, if we follow closely the network of semantic associations (queer, strange, estrange, extraneous), we must recognize that there is a kind of contradiction in terms between the fact of having a quality or being a quality (my body *is* queer, I *have* a queer body), and this ungraspable exteriority of queerness. And if I can certainly say that my body *has* an exteriority relative to me *being* inside my body, queerness does not have an opposite term with which it could offer a unified set of dichotomous coordinates to interpret reality. Straightness is not the opposite of queerness. Queerness is ambiguity, in-betweenness, elusiveness and undecipherability. This radical exteriority of queerness has already been noticed in queer theory and is often at the core of its most audacious theoretical elaborations. Furthermore, this specific understanding of queerness as radical exteriority is also what unifies different theories of queerness that are often presented as opposites. For instance, if we look at Lee Edelman’s pessimistic *No Future* (2004) or at José Esteban Muñoz’s hopeful *Cruising Utopia* (2009), it is interesting to notice that even if their definitions of queerness are very different, the theoretical strategic value of queerness is the same, that is to say the creation of a radical exteriority.

This radical exteriority can sometimes take the shape of a queer negativity by drawing connections between queerness and the Lacanian transcendental notions of the Real or *jouissance* as Lee Edelman suggests in *No Future*:



Thus, queerness could never constitute an authentic or substantive identity, but only a structural position determined by the imperative of figuration; for the gap, the noncoincidence, that the order of the signifier installs both informs and inhabits queerness as it inhabits reproductive futurism. But it does so with a difference. Where futurism always anticipates, in the image of an Imaginary past, a realization of meaning that will suture identity by closing that gap, queerness undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a *jouissance* that social reality and futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed. (24)

Drawing on Lacan's concept of the *sinthom*, whose purpose is to articulate identity with desire as lack, Edelman stresses the disruptive dimension of sexuality (the Real), in regards to social identities, discourses and practices (the Symbolic). By inheriting from a philosophical tradition strongly linking desire to language, and therefore, arguing that desire always fails to grasp its object because language offers only a representation of this object, never the "real" unconscious object, Edelman sets the parameters of his definitions of queerness. In his very specific definition of queerness, it "embod[ies] the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic order;" that is to say that if queerness always takes the shape of a symbolic figure (the *sinthomosexual* for instance), this figure refers to the impossible access to the radical exteriority of the Real or the impossible *jouissance* of the foreclosed object of Desire due to introduction of the signifier. Queerness is therefore closely associated with the negative space of the Real, a waste or a space that is always outside language even though it is produced by the signifier itself. It is the necessary hole in language and desire, like the hole of the Möbius band in relation to which the enmeshed orders of Symbolic and the Imaginary are shaped. Hence the impossible embodiment of a queer ethic or queer politic in *No Future* since any ethical or political position needs to inscribe itself in the order of language, whereas queerness refers to the disruption of the Symbolic by the figuration of what falls outside the Symbolic and the social norms it sustains.

On the opposite end, and even though in his introduction, Muñoz confesses his admiration for Edelman’s brilliant and inspiring critique developed in *No Future*, he also thoroughly underlines their fundamental differences. To “a here and now”, echoing Edelman’s “the future stops here” (31), and summarizing the anti-utopian stance of anti-social theories, which, according to Muñoz, is “today’s hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda” (10), Muñoz offers a queer position defined as “longing” and “hope” toward a queerness “always in the horizon” (11). But despite these crucial differences, it is obvious that the same relationship between queerness and radical exteriority can be found in *Cruising Utopia*, in the shape of a radical affirmative futurity. “Queerness is not yet here,” opens Muñoz. “Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. [...]. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of aesthetic” (1). Inscribing his ungraspable, unreachable, utopian and always postponed futurity in this radical temporal difference, Muñoz is in fact closer to Edelman than it seems. Even if Muñoz reproaches the anti-social stance its replacement of “the romance of the community with the romance of singularity and negativity” (10), and its bashing of the communitarian and social utopian narratives in order to better affirm “the romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference” (11), they both link queerness to a *formal* space of radical difference or alterity, or more exactly they both intuitively define *queerness as always in tension for being tasked with the contradictory mission of figuring a radical*

*alterity*. Hence the specific forms that queerness can take, be it the one of ambiguity, interruption, irony, or even failure.

This tension, this paradoxical mission of figuring what cannot be figured, whether it is the Real for Edelman or the virtual field of future possibilities for Muñoz, prevents queerness from taking any stable form. This idea will be central to the developments presented in this dissertation and to the specific ethics of the caress that I seek to circumscribe. Approaching queerness, as opposed to “the queer,” demands a philosophical methodology that shuns the question of being and categorical thinking in order to approach queerness from the point of view of its ambiguities, its potentialities, and its relationalities.

Phenomenology. As a philosophical inquiry initiated by the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, which influenced a very diverse swath of philosophers, and which also influenced different philosophical positions (existentialism, psychoanalysis, etc.), phenomenology distinguishes itself by a new approach of reality that takes distance from its objective or transcendental descriptions and underlines the fact the world appears *for* a subject. For phenomenology, reality must be described as a phenomenon (from the ancient greek φαίνόμενον, the thing that appears to view) appearing *for* a subject in its intentionality (the consciousness of the subject is always consciousness *of* something). Therefore, the task of the phenomenologist is to describe these objects and the way they appear to consciousness. Departing from the long rationalist, intellectualist and idealist philosophical tradition, phenomenology focuses on the constituting power of consciousness, not as a rational consciousness, but as an intentional and perceiving con-

consciousness; a consciousness which is already and always open to the world, a “being thrown into the world” as Heidegger famously describes.

This phenomenological Copernican revolution offered new perspectives on the body. In this perspective, the body is not an external object that must be *looked at, observed* and described *partes extra partes* in terms no different than those used to describe other external objects (naturalist and essentialist perspective). The body is not a matter that passively awaits, as a piece of wax, the shaping and constituting power of *a priori* structures or discursive effects (social constructivist position). On the contrary, the body in the phenomenological tradition, is always at the horizons of my perceptual awareness, of the intentional objects presented to me. The body is *my* body, a lived body (Husserl), a Dasein (Heidegger), a flesh with its own intelligence, its own constituting and expressing power (Merleau-Ponty). Without *my* body, I do not think, therefore I am not. My body is the muffled and abhorred secret that holds, in its pervasive presence, the titanic and glorious architecture of my being-in-the-world.

If I decided to take on this phenomenological turn initiated in the field of queer studies by Sara Ahmed’s paradigm shifting *Queer Phenomenology* (2007), it is due to its the constant engagement with the realm of sensation, its original and subjectivist account of the body, and its sustained intellectual effort to think radical alterity. Undeniably, each phenomenologist has knitted these different dimensions in his/her own way to the point that their conclusions are sometimes diametrically opposed (see for instance the intensification of the transcendental Ego in Husserl as opposed to Merleau-Ponty’s engulfing of the subject in the flesh of the world). However, this set of texts nonetheless has commonalities that are useful to reformulate the question of queerness and its relations to the body.

This move can also shed new light by situating the tension between the radical alterity and its expression, not on the tension between the Real and the Symbolic, or between Futurity and its visions, but at the more fundamental level of the body, in the pivotal gap between the objective body and the lived body.

If, as I stated earlier, queerness has only been accidentally attributed to queers, as the processes of normalization, naturalization and reappropriation demonstrates, and only in the sense that it is a relative and yet, a very real and sometimes lethal effect of the discursive borders of a specific heteronormative anthropological construct, then maybe queerness must be sought at a deeper level, not only in its intersectional and historico-anthropological dimensions but, more fundamentally, at its metaphysical level. In placing the question of the body and its sensations as the central and only dimension of Being, a being-a-body, some trends in phenomenology offer interesting theoretical possibilities for situating queerness at the metaphysical level, a queerness intimately enmeshed with the human condition of being-a-body-in-the-world.

Once again, it is hard to offer a unique definition of phenomenological methodology that could be applied without references to the specific interventions that each phenomenologist has made to perfect the initial methods offered by Husserl. I will therefore adopt another position. Having already offered a loose definition of queerness as disruptive and productive inhabited by the contradictory task to figure what cannot be figured, I will be particularly interested in two phenomenologists. The first one, Emmanuel Levinas, is crucial in defining an ethics of eros as tension toward otherness. The Caress, or the relation between erotic life and alterity, is defined as movement, search, exploration of alterity, ideas that are in perfect alignment with my specific project of offering a queer

ethics of Eros. The second, Merleau-Ponty, often coined the philosopher of ambiguity, will help me to reintroduce the question of the body with the rather disincarnate Levinasian notion of the Caress. We will see however that Merleau-Ponty's "body" is a rather counter-intuitive account of the body since for Merleau-Ponty, it cannot simply be reduced to the organic body, but instead the body must be thought *in relation to* the environment. The body is a certain organic *atmosphere* impregnating the whole perceptive life. For Merleau-Ponty, there is not the I and the thing I touch, but a certain interrelation between the I and the thing that makes difficult to clearly isolate where the I "begins" and where the thing "stops". We will see that the paradigmatic example of the two hands touching each other is crucial for Merleau-Ponty's understanding of these interrelations. If my hands caress each other I cannot clearly isolate which one touches and which one is touched, which one is agent and which one is object, and yet, the touching/touched is not given either in a unique sensation, but as a tension, an intensity, defined by the contrast *between* opposite poles. For Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body, this is a crucial experience since it demonstrates the intertwining of the body, or of the embodied subject, with its environment

Despite this ambitious project, the scope of the dissertation is much more circumscribed and modest; I seek, above all else, to open fields of enquiry and experimentation rather than trying to systematically map its abstract geographies. Due to its experimental and hybrid nature, I will obviously rely heavily on phenomenology (as developed by Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) but my method of literary analysis can hardly be defined as strictly phenomenological since I will sometimes rely on different

but congruent accounts of the body and sensations (Freud, Lacan) that are, if they are at all, loosely connected to this tradition.

### 1.3. Phenomenology of the Caress: Levinas & Irigaray

The notion of Caress developed by Levinas and its feminist and queer critique will allow me to introduce the main theme of this dissertation: touch as a paradigmatic figure of the ethical relation to Otherness. One of the characteristic features of Levinas' ethics is its rupture from the Enlightenment's conceptualization of the subject, a subject that takes shape through a solipsist and isolated reflexivity. Levinas' thinking seeks to break free from the paradigm of the Cartesian subject (and Husserl's) – a subject who is the perfect and transparent overlapping of the I on the ego - and his definition of the subject as *res cogitans*. To this egocentric ontology, Levinas opposes a philosophy where the subject is always already and necessarily in relation with the other. Instead of an ethics that will be founded on an ontology, Levinas's original thought resides in this reversal in which ethic founds the ontology of the subject<sup>4</sup>. On that matter, his premises are close to those of other contemporary philosophers such as Jacques Lacan or Georges Bataille, for whom the existence of the subject is irrevocably founded in the other. For Levinas, the subject is here immediately open to the authenticity and tangibility of the world and, be-

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<sup>4</sup> In this sense Lacan and Levinas agree on this point. There is no subject without the Other. On the other hand they disagree on the nature of the relation that I must have with this Other. Whereas for Levinas the subject is always guilty and in debt toward the Other, for Lacan the subject can only fully emerge through a distanciation from the Other, a distance from its fantasmatic dimension and the realization of its purely Symbolic aspect.

fore it can gain access to conceptual thinking, the subject is called to being through the language of the other, that is to say its address, and, as I will argue later, through the Caress. The relation to the other is therefore pre-conceptual, prediscursive, and can never be reduced to a set of predicates or representations that would inevitably precipitate ethics into a philosophical discourse on the nature of being (what *is* the other?); that is to say an ontology.

This foundational ground generates a particular challenge for Levinas: that of accounting for the specific relation that brings the subject to existence, as this relation always escapes from the containing grip of language and representational thinking. In order to account for this pre-conceptual dimension, Levinas will develop the famous and often misunderstood notion of the Face. Instead of appearing in the reflexive turn back of the subject on itself, a conceptual gesture that one could call a volte-face, Levinas argues that the subject is summoned in the face to face with the other. But Levinas gives a specific meaning to his concept of the Face, for as it is often misunderstood, the Face for Levinas “is not the color of the eyes, the shape of the nose, the ruddiness of the cheeks, etc.”(*Entre Nous*, 232). Beyond these sensitive manifestations of the face, it is its power to express the vulnerability, the fragility, the lack-of-being, and the mortality of the other that Levinas retains. The Face therefore must not be understood literally and in a narrow way but through its evocative power. In fact the Face does not even have to manifest itself in a specific face. In a famous example, Levinas insists that if I stand in line outside of Lubyanka in Moscow while waiting for news from friends and relatives arrested for “political crimes,” the exposed neck of the other in front of me can evoke the vulnerability of the other and summon my ethical responsibility as efficiently as his face.



The Face is therefore understood as a concept more than as the center of human expression, a concept that aims to render the immediate and fundamental responsibility that I *experience* for the other's vulnerability. The face "summons me, demands me, claims me: as if the invisible death faced by the face of the other – pure otherness, separated somehow from all unity – were my "business"" (145).

Levinas' understanding of the Other is the third aspect of his philosophy that needs to be developed in order to understand the originality of his perspective. As we have already seen, Levinas greatly distrusts the way in which the metaphysical tradition attempts to make sense of the other in a strictly conceptual way without taking into account the more fundamental *experience* of alterity. For Levinas, the gesture that consists in *thinking* the other instead of experiencing it, is a gesture that aims at containing, mastering, and trapping the unsurmountable otherness of the other in the web of conceptual abstractions that the philosophers spread into the world in order to make *sense* of it. As Levinas insists "Thought, *qua* learning [*apprendre*], requires a taking [*prendre*], a seizure, a grip on what is learned, and a possession. The 'seizing' [*saisie*] of learning is not purely metaphorical... The being that appears to the knowing subject not only instructs it, but ipso facto gives itself to it." (EN, 125-26). To this seizing of the other, Levinas opposes an intersubjective relation whose excess can never be fully rendered. Even if the face-to-face brings the subject into existence, it is a subject of mastery. On the contrary, because of its ungraspability the encounter with the other interrupts my sovereignty and my power to assign meanings to the world. For its fundamental resistance to domestication, the other is "a gap in the horizon", an infinite "relation with a depth", a hole is punctured in the constraining fabric of my discursive sovereignty.

For Levinas, the other does not even present itself as *a* being that could be reduced to a genus, “He does not enter entirely into the opening of being in which I already stand as in the field of my freedom. It is not in terms of being in general that he comes toward me” (EN, 9-10). The singularity of the other is therefore preserved in the face-to-face. It is in this context that one can make sense of Levinas’ assertion that “The other is the only being that I can want to kill” (EN, 9) since despite the diversity of specificities that covers and shapes the existence of the other, it is the interruption of my being that the other provokes that is the object of my violence. In the face-to-face, I experience the vulnerability of the other as well as my own, and this radical experience pierces the sheath of my being as a genus (white, male, middle class, etc.) that I cannot even soothe with a humanitarian and universalist philosophy since the very common ground on which it is founded (the identification of a shared and *same* humanity) crumbles under the infinite excess of the Other.

This radical understanding of the face-to-face, that is to say its fundamental untamable excess and its power to break “the ‘rigor’ of being,” is probably one of the most polemical and useful aspects to develop a queer ethics. Contrary to Slavoj Žižek’s argument that Levinas’ otherness is somewhat dumbed down, Levinas manages to offer a conceptualization of the other that is both dynamic and concrete. Since the other always appears in and as a singular experience, the generality of language (and socio-historical categories) can never fully exhaust its existence. There is therefore no definable subjective position that can guarantee the access to the other since its “*surplus* of significance” always escapes the tangled olio of my conceptual thinking. In fact, far from fetishizing the other by covering its otherness with socio-cultural signifiers, Levinas invigorates the

experience of otherness to a transcendental climatic point where it becomes conceptually ungraspable and yet fully tangible.

The notion of the feminine in relation to the figure of the caress as the epitome of Levinas's ethics of Eros appear in Levinas's early works of 1947 (*Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*). Although it is absent in his writing of the 1950's, it reappears in a different form in *Totality and Infinity* (1960) and an article of the same period, "Judaism and the Feminine" (1960). Since the caress and the feminine are intertwined notions it is important to underline their different meanings throughout Levinas' work in order to follow the shift in Levinas' thought and to eventually offer a queer reading of the caress. In *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, Levinas distances himself from his early commentaries on Husserl and Heidegger to offer his own philosophy. Levinas reproaches Husserl and Heidegger to be unable to analyze the relationship with the other since "qua phenomenology it remains within the world of light, the world of solitary ego which has no relationship with the other qua the other, for whom the other is another me, an *alter ego* known by sympathy, that is, by return to oneself." (*Existence and Existents*, 86). To this conception of the other who would be mere projection of myself, identical in essence and only differentiable by its general specificities, Levinas opposes a philosophy in which the other would keep his radical otherness in an "absolute alterity". For Levinas this alterity is not due to the fact that the other would hold features that I do not possess, nor is it an effect of space which "keeps separate what conceptually is identical" (EE, 98). As Diane Perpich summarizes "it is not a formal, logical characteristic: it is not the reverse of identity (I and not-I), nor is it produced through negation. For Levinas, the other is not other relative to me, but *absolutely*" (2001 31).

As I have argued, the feminine is identified as radical otherness in Levinas' works from 1947. The feminine isn't thought of in opposition to the masculine, since this would turn it into a relative alterity. On the contrary, Levinas poses the feminine "as the very quality of difference", a figure that affirms positively its radical alterity. Rejecting the romantic conception of love as the fusion of beings, Levinas suggests that the lovers face the "insurmountable duality of beings" (*Time and the Other*, 86). Even if in Eros the lover seeks the other, the other remains radically estranged. Therefore the alterity of the feminine cannot be overcome, or negated or lessened. The feminine is opposed to the world of light, consciousness or appropriation, the mode of being of this alterity lies in "the withdrawal into mystery", in "hiding" and "modesty" and escapes the grasp of the *comprendre*.

However, if Levinas will later revise his idea of the feminine (probably after the feminist critiques of the caress, especially the one voiced by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and Irigaray in "Fecundity of the Caress"), it seems to me that beyond the misogynistic perspective shaping the notion of the caress, it stands on a patriarchal ground that a queer critique also needs to address. In *Totality and Infinity*, but already in *Time and the Other*, the caress opens a transcendence for the subject in the figure of the child: "By a total transcendence –the transcendence of transubstantiation– the ego, is in the child, another" (TI, 299). If Levinas succumbs without a doubt to the voices of the reprofuturism's sirens<sup>5</sup>, it also reaffirms its patriarchal ground:

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<sup>5</sup> I here refer to Lee Edelman coined term of reprofuturism defining a specific ideology in which theo-political discourses links futurity with sexual reproduction. Central to this reprofuturism is the figure

Possession of the child by the father does not exhaust the meaning of the relationship that is accomplished in paternity, where the father discovers himself not only in the gestures of his son, but in his substance and his unicity. My child is a stranger (Isaiah 49), but a stranger who is not only mine, for he *is* me. He is me a stranger to myself. He is not only my work, my creature, even if like Pygmalion I should see my work restored to life. The son coveted in voluptuosity is not given to action, remains unequal to powers. (TI, 267)

After having set such a high level of expectations when defining his radical alterity in the figure of the feminine, one can only wonder how the figure of the child that, interestingly enough is turned throughout his argumentation, in a *glissement de sens*, into the figure of the son, can actually encounter such a transcendence despite the necessary *re-presentation* of the father through the son. Or as Simon Critchley puts it in *The Problem with Levinas* (2015):

The term *filis* always has a relationship to the filial and to filiality, to the thread, to continuation. [...]. Unfortunately, the continuation of formal, male existence needs to pass through the feminine medium of materiality. [...]. The main point is that eros permits a patrilineal, a pater-familial, order of succession. Levinas's radical discourse on eros nevertheless clings to the rock of patriarchy. (97)

We can therefore ask: what about the daughter? Here, Critchley offers a hint without development but which is of a very special interest for a queer critique of the caress. Critchley points to Derrida's text "At this Very Moment in This Work, Here I am" (1980) which focuses on the specific question of the daughter in Levinas' philosophy of Eros. In this text the daughter is "the *crypt* within Levinas' work, both in the sense of the secret and the tomb. The daughter is a crypt, an entombed, perhaps, stillborn, daughter. It is over this crypt that the edifice of Levinas' work is built." (Critchley, 99). Bridging Der-

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of the child and of the children to come invoked in order to rhetorically hide the homophobic, racist, misogynistic and/or imperialist agenda that reprofuturism support.

rida's analysis of the dead daughter and Edelman's critique of reprofuturism, one can realize how the daughter's crypt embodies in fact what Levinas offers in the caress and then negates and erases in his notion of Fecundity, the impossibility of the sexual relation.

Despite his ambiguously disembodied account of the caress, Levinas' notion stresses the impossibility of fully grasping the other, the impossibility of making *sense* of the sexual encounter with the other. From that perspective, Levinas seems to follow Lacan and the famous impossibility of the sexual relation: "This extreme fragility [of the Other] lies also at the limit of an existence 'without ceremonies,' 'without circumlocutions,' a 'non-signifying' and raw density, an exorbitant materiality" (TI, 256). In face of this Real always in excess, the caress can only be this *exploratory* contact: "[La caresse] *searches*, it forages. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible" (TI, 258). However, this negativity of the sexual encounter and the necessary failure and undoing of the Symbolic that it entails, is evacuated in the double movement of affirming the patriarchal account of fecundity and the burying of the daughter. The patriarchal mythology of the salvation of the father that Levinas offers through the futurity's figure of the son is only made possible not only by the killing of the daughter, the forclusion of the feminine, but also of the son who wants to be a daughter, a forclusion that Derrida exposes in the space of the crypt.

In Levinas' deafness to the voices of the sons who want to be daughters and to the daughters who want to be sons, what is in fact at the heart of the caress, that is to say an exploratory, experimental, unbridled, philosophy of Eros, is rendered meaningless in front of the greater goal of Fecundity. A Fecundity that, despite Levinas's lyricism, is still a reproduction of the Same : "Fecundity engendering fecundity accomplishes goodness :

above and beyond the sacrifice that imposes a gift, the gift of the power of giving, the conception of the child” (TI, 269). The very formal repetition of fecundity betrays and exposes this reproduction of the Same. This is precisely through the sacrifice of the caress, through the meaningful sacrifice of the *meaningless* playfulness of the caress, that the goodness of reproduction, always affirmed in the erasure and against the alterity of *sinthomosexual* caressing subjects, can give birth to a child.

Despite Levinas’s poetic insistence that the futurity opened by fecundity is not a “future of the Same” since through the son, *I* remain in the field of the Identical while simultaneously renewing it thanks to the “duality of the Identical” (TI, 268), his definition of fecundity as “irreducible to the power over possibilities” is still indexed on the possibility of a Child, that is to say it is still indexed on the heteronormative structure of reproduction. Therefore, in order to offer a queer reading of the caress as a way to introduce a philosophy of Eros that would take seriously the relation that queerness maintains with radical alterity, it is necessary to sever its heteronormative relations with fecundity and to suspend, momentarily, the question of futurity.

This is not however, the only critique that must be addressed. As Luce Irigaray already underlined, the caress maintains an ambiguous relation with the transcendental field. As we have already seen, Levinas seeks a relation to the Other that does not reduce it to the Same. Therefore, categorical knowledge and language (as the “said”) are excluded from this relation, however Levinas is much more hesitant on the relation that the caress has with sensation. See for instance the two definitions that Levinas gives of the caress. The first one from *Time and the Other*: “The caress is a mode of the subject’s being, where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. Contact as

sensation is part of the world of light. But what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking” (TO, 89)

This “properly speaking” concedes in fact that if the caress has something to do with sensation it is not the essential. But still, how can this sensation - that belongs, according to Levinas to the light - at some point go “beyond”? How can the immanence of the contact be turned into the transcendence of the caress? The definition that Levinas offers in “Totality and Infinity” seems to offer new developments:

The caress, like contact, is sensibility. But the caress transcends the sensible. It is not that it would feel beyond the felt, further than the senses, that it would seize upon a sublime food while maintaining, within its relation with this ultimate felt, an intention of hunger that goes unto the food promised, and given to, and deepening this hunger, as though the caress would be fed by its own hunger. The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it forages. (TI, 257-258)

Consistent with his initial definition, Levinas wants to keep the field of the sensible separate from the field of the transcendental, but, as with the concept of the face, with no sensible ground this ethics and therefore this caress becomes not only literally unthinkable, as Derrida confirms in “Violence and Metaphysics”, but more problematically, impossible to experience. How can this “seeking intentionality” escape from its own light? Even more, how can the immanence of the sensible give way to an ethical *experience* without sensibility. Using Merleau-Ponty against Levinas, how can this experience remain situated in a first-person perspective, in my living-body, without being fully and inherently sensible? As Chanter observes: “Levinas falls prey to the most traditional trope – the inability to resist the temptation to maintain the transcendental and the sensible as separate from one another” (180).



This impossibility, reminiscent of Edelman's "impossible" ethical stance, is in fact upheld by Levinas himself who is conscious of the difficulties that his account of ethics raises. It is in fact in this "impossible" that Levinas' ethics shows its full potential. The caress is sometimes described in the same terms as the ethical face-to-face, where the caress challenges intentionality (TI, 206), and goes beyond the light and seeks what "is not situated in a perspective and in the light of the graspable (TI, 258). These descriptions support an interpretation of the caress as genuinely transcendent. However, the desire of love falls short of genuine transcendence. The desire of love "is broken and satisfied as the most egoist and cruelest of needs" (TI: 263), love becomes the reverse of the ethical, "without responsibility" and descends into "animality" (TI: 263).

However it is precisely this ambiguity of Eros that Levinas wants to stress. Interpreting Aristophanes's myth of the two halves of being as the mixing of immanence and transcendence in an impossible "jouissance", Levinas insists:

An enjoyment of the transcendent almost contradictory in its terms, love is stated with truth neither in erotic talk where it is interpreted as sensation nor in the spiritual language which elevates it to being a desire of the transcendent. [...] this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal* par excellence. (TI, 255)

Here one can see how Levinas' philosophy of Eros embodied in the seeking caress challenges the simple dichotomies since it always appears in a *clair-obscur*. Therefore one has to follow Chancer's analysis when she states that "the effect of [Levinas's philosophy of] eros then, is to recast a subject who has learned to control its world, who has achieved mastery of itself, back into a state of flux where the borders of self and other, between the I and the world, are no longer so clear, where the gap between the I and the other is not so well-defined, nor easily grasped." (2001). In other words, the Caress by its

intrinsic ambiguity and equivocity undoes the modern subject as a pure transcendental substance.

Despite the queer possibilities that this definition of Eros and of the caress opens, Levinas shutters them immediately by recasting the Caress in the field of Fecundity and in the patriarchal intimacy of the Father and the Son. This is precisely the critique that Irigaray addresses to Levinas in her famous essays “The Fecundity of the Caress” (1986) and “Questions to Levinas” (1991). Even if Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference is deeply rooted in Levinas’ radical philosophy of alterity, she is also highly critical of the patriarchal and heteronormative bias undermining his project. Not only does Irigaray successfully demonstrate that the other *as* the femininity is reduced to the animality of desire, whereas the man is the one left with the power of transcendence, but she also opposes Levinas when he reduces the meaning of the equivocity of the caress to the meaningful relation of the Father with the Son. Irigaray focuses on the sense in which eros is fecund “prior to any procreation”, and argues, contrary to Levinas, that “The son does not resolve the enigma of the most irreducible otherness” (2001). In fact, one has to go further in this critique. If the Other cannot be thought or experienced by sensible means, and cannot be reduced to any totality either, in other words if this Other is radically transcendent and infinite, it can only unfold itself in multiplicity. The otherness that the Fecundity describes is only one of the infinite queer textures that the caress encounters.

Therefore if the equivocal and the always-in-excess Other cannot be reduced to Fecundity, what is this Otherness that the Caress is aiming at? If the queering power of the caress is already at work between the lovers, without references to Future, Fecundity, or the Son, as (biased) figures of radical alterity, what is the figure of radical alterity that

the caress touches without giving it a shape? Here Irigaray gives us important cues to follow when she states that the caress “binds and unbinds two others in flesh that is still, and always, untouched by mastery,” this touch “seeks out and affirms otherness, while protecting it” (2001).

Once the caress has been wedded out of its patriarchal, heteronormative, and reprofuturist prejudices, we are left with another figure of radical otherness, the Flesh of the lovers. Capitalizing on authors like Michel Foucault and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I want to argue that the phenomenological body, understood as Flesh, constitutes not only the ambiguous object of the caress, but also the essential ground from which radical alterity appears, and ultimately the *clair-obscur* horizon from which queerness can be defined. What the touch of the caress aims at is not a transcendent disembodied Other, but on the contrary, the very flesh that constitutes its being-a-body-in-the-world. The caress is thus suspended, exploratory, undetermined, equivocal touch hovering over the dark “sensible transcendence” of the Flesh, and exposing its fundamental queerness.

#### **1.4. Toward a Queer ethics of the Touch: Literature as Betrayal**

Capitalizing on my critique of queerness and of Levinas’ caress, I want to insist on the perspectives opened by this redistribution and redefinition of terms. Taking the detour of the Caress, we ended up encountering once again the phenomenological body, and we are left exactly at the same place that Foucault left us with his *Utopian Body*:

to make love is to feel one’s body close in on oneself. It is finally to exist outside of any utopia, with all of one’s density, between the hands of the other. Under the other’s fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist. Against the lips of the other, yours become sensitive. In front of his half-closed eyes, your face acquires a certitude.

There is a gaze, finally, to see you closed eyelids. Love also, like the mirror and like death – it appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it, it encloses it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it. This why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love the body is here. (23)

However, we are now in a better situation to articulate the facticity of the body that Foucault discovered at the end of his meditation (“in love, the body is *here*” [23]) and the utopian fictions fleshing out the body’s transcendence. Literature, but more generally discourses, *betray* the equivocity of the body. If I say betray it is because discourses are both always colonizing and objectifying the fundamental ambiguity of my being-a-body-in-the-world, or the Flesh, but they betray the equivocity of the Flesh precisely because they *reveal* it as a contested site, as a site of tensions, plurivocity, and plasticity. Due to the Flesh’s relation with a radical transcendence, its void is the site of infinite literary and utopian attempts to flesh it *out*. In Foucault’s version of the Caress, love is “closely related to the illusion of the mirror” because love and the utopian representations both aim at the transcendence of the body. However, where the utopian representations aim at grasping, putting to light, objectifying and *ex-torting* its transcendence, love, or what we will call the caress, electrifies, excites, and galvanizes its transcendence through the immanent power of erotic enjoyment. The body is no longer in space *partes extra partes*, but in a deictic and situated embodiment. Maybe it should be added that the fingers of the lover not only reveal the “invisible parts” of my body, but also expose its invisible and unexpected erotic possibilities and properties. In the caress, my body is paradoxically “here” and estranged, immanent in the depth of its chthonian power, transcendent in its unforeseen erotic promises, concealed in the diaphanous fabric of history, and exposed in the impenetrable bareness of its skin. Alchemical Mystery of the Caress.

Therefore, if the Flesh is a contested site where discourse inscribed meanings on the surface of the body, it is also the site where bodies ex-scribed and ex-space their fundamental equivocality into texts and spaces. This perspective obviously has methodological consequences. Texts are not solely sites of construction where meanings are branded on the body's surface at the white hot tip of power's goads, but they also are magical treasure maps, with changing directions and orientations, with exotic dwellings, unfathomable dark chiasms and gleaming citadels, where the body takes distance from itself (*s'espace* or *s'excrit*, it is the same), ex-forms its fundamental plasticity or equivocality, always expresses its real and virtual queer possibilities. I am therefore sympathetic to Peter Brooks's methodology developed in *Body Work* (1991) when he states that "in imaginative literature the body has always been an object of fascination, at once the distinct other of the signifying project [...] and in some sense its vehicule" (1). I can only follow him when he stresses that a history of representation of the body would run parallel to a representation of reality since "representation of the body is part of representing 'external' reality as a whole". I need to object that the body is not a re-presentation, it is presented to myself, or more precisely it presents itself as Flesh. In fact the very notion of representation cannot account for this porous relation between body and space, but can only be understood by stressing that the limits of my body are always equivocal, always contested and situated. The Flesh always *s'ex-crit* or *s'espace* in relation to space because it is equivocally a site where *my* desires, *my* dreams and *my* fantasies take *place* or *s'espacent*, but also because it is an objective space along other objective spaces, equivocally outside and inside. This is precisely that equivocality that is left behind in any social constructivist approach to the body. Social constructionism cannot account for the poetic (as *ποίησις*)

and ex-pressive power of my body because the body for social constructivists is solely an objectal body, one of matter awaiting imprintings, whereas the body is, from a phenomenological point of view, a lived body, deeply ambiguous and rich of agential and expressive possibilities and powers. There are, without a doubt, traditions of representations of the body, but these traditions never completely “stick” to the body because they ignore its equivocality. In fact the approach relying on the study of representation of the body reinforces the isolationist perspective on the modern subject since the representation has to mean something *for* a subject or creates the illusion the subject only sustains discursive relations with its body, or discursive truth relations. My body is simultaneously here and not here is not a matter of discursive or apodictic truth, is a fact given to me, it is what Being-thrown-in-the-world means for a sentient life; the body is originally an equivocal given and not a meaningful construction.

It is due to its equivocality that the body has to be interpreted, as psychoanalysis defends, but this interpretation cannot end up being reduced to the Lacanian “linguistry,” and it is an interpretation that never ends. Saying that there is an unconsciousness of the body is to say with Guattari that the unconscious is not structured *solely* as a language.<sup>6</sup> Because of the equivocality of the body, the unconscious also appears in the spatial textures of my perceptive life. In that sense, it is because the flesh actively participates in the background of my conscious sentient life, in the construction of sensations’s meanings (the tactility *as* Caress for instance), that all Combray -- its flowers, water-lilies, good

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<sup>6</sup> “Si l’on devait encore parler de structure à propos de l’inconscient – ce qui n’est pas évident, nous y reviendrons -, nous dirions plutôt qu’il est structuré comme une multiplicité de modes de sémiotisation, dont l’énonciation linguistique n’est peut-être pas le plus important“ pp. 19, (2011).

folks, churches, towers and trees -- spring out from the narrator's "cup of tea" rather than from some linguistic chain or some neural network. Involuntary memory, as Deleuze successfully establishes, demonstrates that the sentient life of my body is the real site of the unconscious, the heart of the body's equivocity and of its queer possibilities.

## Chapter II: The Possibility of a Caress

*“Consciousness is much more than the thorn,  
it is the dagger in the flesh” - Emile Cioran*

### 2.1. Reversibility and Intercorporeality in Merleau-Ponty

At the very beginning of *The Symposium*, in an often uncommented passage, Agathon, the host of the banquet, pleads Socrates to come sit close to him: “that I may touch you’ he begs ‘and have the benefits of that wise thought [...]”. This surprising transfer of knowledge through touch does not fail to trigger Socrates’ proverbial sense of irony:

How I wish, said Socrates, taking his place as he was desired, that wisdom could be infused by touch, out of the fuller into the emptier man, as water runs through wool out of a fuller cup into an emptier one; if that were so, how greatly should I value the privilege of reclining at your side!

Whereas Agathon’s understanding of knowledge transmission is wrapped into the intimacy of bodies, Socrates remains numb in front of Agathon’s beckoning touch and reduces this erotic transference to the mere physics of inanimate objects. What disappears in Socrates rendering of Agathon’s erotico-philosophical touch is the life, the sentient bodies and the desire to reach the other, dimensions that precisely hold touch and knowledge together.

Considering the idealist and disincarnated philosophy of Eros that Plato develops in his main three dialogues on love (*The Symposium*, *The Phaedrus*, and *Lysis*), and Pla-



to's understanding of knowledge as emerging through dialogues and dialogic exchanges, even when it is inspired by some divinity or muse, it is not surprising that Agathon's expert touch does not resonate in Socrates' mind. However, if Socrates' ironic dismissal of Agathon's knowledgeable contact is fairly prompt, one has to wonder what exactly Agathon has in mind when he links so spontaneously and naturally bodily contacts and knowledge. What sort of knowledge and mode of exchange is Agathon striving for and on which of Socrates ironises? Do we not, as Socrates, swiftly forget Agathon's suggestion that from the contact of the bodies some sort of knowledge will extemporaneously emerge? If we take Agathon's touching invitation seriously, do we have to understand this tactile transference of knowledge as a mythical variation on Midas' touch, that is, as a consequence of an idiosyncratic and extraordinary magical capacity that Agathon would have acquired through the intercession of a generous but tricky divinity? Or, on the contrary, is this touching knowledge so commonly embedded in some sort of universal human nature that it becomes invisible, obscured by the banality of our sentient lives?

We have already seen that for Levinas, perception is already grasping, is already *com-prendre*. In perception, otherness is put to light and a shape is given to what must remain untouched and ever-elusive. However, in his last book, *Entre Nous* (1991), Levinas, influenced by Merleau-Ponty, considered the possibility of a perceptual knowledge that would not be associated with the *com-prendre*, but would reach for the intangible. In the section "The Sensed as the Embodied Thought" Levinas develops his new idea on perception:

So there is a singular anachronism in the immanent structure of knowledge: the world or part of the world enveloped by the *I think* or comprehended in experience is in fact already among the enveloping elements, and somehow belongs to the flesh of the *I think*. Which is not a metaphor either, but

the very paradox of an embodied *I think* which the notion of mental synthesis “associating” thought and corporeity does not succeed in justifying. “Transcendental apperception” would not suffice here. Hence the notion of the *body proper* quite *other* than the objectively identifiable body, a part of the world, as it appears to me in the mirror, as a physician sees it while examining me; and, at the same time, the same as that body! A relationship between the Same and the *I think* and the Other of Nature, for which culture as knowing cannot account. Would the hand as the articulation of knowledge, whose “contemplation” becomes hold and grasp – as I said earlier – already be an incarnation of the subject, older than the state of pure interiority of Descartes’s *res cogitans*, absolutely distinct from the *res extensa* and which, “without the help of God,” can be known only through the cogitation of the thinker? (182)

To fully understand the revolution this paragraph represents in Levinas’ conceptual architecture, it is important to engage with Descartes, whose ideas on knowledge are being challenged. One has to remember that Descartes is very unsatisfied with the knowledge of his time and decides to reject everything doubtful and to undertake a philosophical meditation that does not have any other goal besides that grounding knowledge in absolute truth. Perception is quickly dismissed as a source of apodictic truth since “it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to anything by which we have once been deceived” (17). Therefore, it is in the famous cogito that Descartes will find the absolute truth from which, like in Proust’s cup, the world and God will spring out in absolute truth. But it is important to emphasize that for Descartes, the cogito is a formal truth, unrelated to specific contents or thing perceived. Since my representations of the world can be the product of a trickster God, none of the representations or none of the utterances that I can make about the world can be trusted. The body, as a worldly entity, a *res extensia*, is completely severed from the subject of the meditation: “I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood or any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things” (16). Therefore, it is not in the content of thinking that an apodictic truth can be found, but in the very form

of thinking itself. Descartes doubts the content of his thinking however, “I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I *pronounce* it, or that I *mentally conceive* it” (italics mine). It is important to stress here first that, for Descartes, there is a radical ontological disconnection between the cogito and the *cogitations*, but, more importantly, the cogito appears in discursivity, it is an effect of my ability to speak. As a consequence, in the redeployment of the cogito affirming the truth of the world, sensations must fall in the field of discursivity in order to lose their vagueness and to be saved from radical doubts. Feeling (*sentir*) becomes just a mode of thinking (“What is in me feeling [...] is no other thing than thinking”), always alienated to the grasp of consciousness and discursive knowledge.

If Levinas is highly suspicious of the Cartesian subject, as a subject without transcendence, without otherness, since everything springs out from the absolute truth of the Cogito, he nonetheless inherits from Cartesian prejudices in the way he understands sensation. Since Levinas never challenges, in his previous works, the idea that sensation is just subordinated to the *I think* (the *I feel* is always dependent on the *I think*), his understanding on perception leads him to equate sensation with grasping. However, in Merleau-Ponty’s work, sensation reclaims its proper place and affirms that its knowledge is not of the same nature of discursive and categorical knowledge. There is, “older than the state of pure interiority of Descartes’s *res cogitans*, absolutely distinct from the *res extensa*”, there is my living-body-thrown-in-the world. The *I think* is not isolated from the world, but the *I think* appears between my body and the world, because it is not pure transcendence but embodied existence, the I immanently spreads from a universe of sensations. Therefore, because of the embodied nature of the *I think*, one cannot claim a radical difference between the cogito and the think perceived, between form and content, the *I*

*think* is already, at least, a *voice*, a perception. As Jean-Luc Nancy (*Being Singular Plural*, 1996), observes, even when Descartes affirms the absolute transcendence of the *I Think*, he still needs to resort to the body, to *pronounce* it, in order to affirm it. The *I Think* is not possible before the “older”, absolute, and ontologically ambiguous knowledge or relation (*rapport*) of my being-in-the-world. My body proper is “the flesh of the *I think*.” It is also this haunting presence of the sentient body appearing precisely when Descartes affirms his radical emancipation from it that Judith Butler underlines when she states “the effort to excise the body fails because the body returns, spectrally, as a figural dimension of the text” (*Senses of the Subject*, 32).

In fact, in her *Senses of the Subject* (2015), Butler also summons, through a critique of Descartes, the haunting presence of a prediscursive body. As she clearly states “the body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so, too, does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that very escape” (21). In other words, since the epistemic relation with our body hinges on language, something of the materiality of the body can never be fully articulated, something is always in excess. Further, the epistemic transcendental subject, the *I think*, hinges on concealment of the body; the enlightened subject demands the obfuscation of the body’s deitic presence. As Butler carefully demonstrates, Descartes’s famous rhetorical question “How could I deny that these hands and this body here belongs to me?” a rhetorical *and* narrative device cementing Descartes’s fiction or *mise-en-scène* of his *Meditations*’ narration of his radical doubt. The trace of the *Meditations*, the text itself in his narrative power, is only possible if the real hands disappear as the real writing agent; the agent of the trace the text is. The relation of meaning that the hand traces hinges on the self-referential power of language. The real referent might well

be the writing hands of the body but they can only appear as, “these hands”, that is to say caught in the self-referential web of Descartes’ narrative. As Butler summarizes: “It seems that Descartes’s text cannot but figure the body, that does not reduce the body to its figuration, and if that figuration turns out to be referential, that does not mean that the referent can somehow be extracted from its figuration” (33). Because of the ungraspability of the referent due to the self-referential nature of language, writing can never fully grasp the body. Further, not only the narrator and the subject of the narration become indistinguishable because of language, but the transcendental subject of the Meditation is conditioned on the concealment of the body (“*I pronounce it*”). Therefore, the truth-knowledge of the Meditations hinge on an effect of language, hinges on its power to *simultaneously* posit (a subject, a body) and figure (ensnarls in a web of linguistic self-reference) in a performative act that “covers over or dissimulates the substitution, the trope, by which language appears as a transitive act, that is to say by which language is mobilized as a performative that simultaneously does what it says” (21). However, if the transcendental subject of the *I think* can only exist in a performative act overshadowing the body, the body can always come back as *lettre morte*, as trace, as undead. That is to say the body threatens the transcendental subject by its haunting and de-meaning presence, an ungraspable presence, which I will argue, defines queerness. In fact, the “construction of the body,” the signs, cultural code, and discourses giving a cultural meaning to the body necessarily summons its spectralization and signals its own deconstruction. Something always escapes the net of language; something assuming an ungraspable spectral existence, here and yet, elsewhere.

As for Butler, Descartes is not the only one to have doubts on the ontological status of the body. It is tempting “to conclude that this means that the body exists outside language that it has an ontology separable from any linguistic one, and that we might be able to describe this separable ontology” (21). However, this is where Butler begins to doubt, perhaps a performative doubt but a performative that suspends instead of positing, or more accurately, that posits a suspension. This is a doubt that somewhat reminds us of Foucault’s hesitation:

I would hesitate, perhaps permanently, for as we begin that description of what is outside language, the chiasm reappears: we have already contaminated, though not contained, the very body we seek to establish in its ontological purity. The body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so, too, does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that very escape. The very description of the extralinguistic body allegorizes the problem of the chiasmatic relation between language and body and so fails to supply the distinction it seeks to articulate. (21)

If the epistemic subject undertaking the task of defining the ontological status of the body will always remain in language and is therefore condemned, like Narcissus, to only grasp its linguistic image instead of what remains in essence exterior to language, then Butler demands through her performative hesitation the limits of the relations that the subject can maintain with its body to only retain the relation of knowledge. In other words, Butler seems to hesitantly posit that the epistemic relation is the only one I can have with my body while other modes are *de facto* cast out in the prelinguistic Tartarus. Or, to be fair, if the exploration of other modes of relation are not the focus of Butler’s essay, her permanent hesitation, this continuously reiterated forclusion, certainly dramatizes and galvanizes the absolute exteriority of the body.

In fact, if I agree with Butler on the impossibility of defining the ontological status of the prediscursive body due to the self-referential nature of language and discursive

knowledge, I want, however, to insist on the fact that other relations are possible, and in fact, are always already here. We have seen that for Levinas the relation with the Other is what defines the ethical relation. This relation is ineffable, “ungraspable”, and yet conditions any ontological discourse. I need to acknowledge a certain *Il y a* (a “there is”), something radically exterior to me, something exterior and prior to me in order for me to start to define its being. If, in his work, Levinas associated perception to the realm of light, to the conversion of the ethical into the ontological, we just saw that, influenced by Merleau-Ponty, Levinas becomes more sensitive to the hidden face of sensation. It is a particularly interesting turn for this analysis of the caress since it has already been mentioned that for Levinas, the Otherness on which the caress opens, is the Fecundity<sup>7</sup>, the relation between the father and the son. Irigaray, Derrida, and Edelman have exposed the patriarchal, heteronormative, and misogynistic dimension of this conflation of the Caress with Fecundity. While Irigaray suggests that other relations with Otherness exist and must be invented, through an ethic of Eros for instance, she does not demonstrate how this Caress is possible from the Levinassian premises on which she grounds her ethics. However, by exposing the reasons of Levinas’ turn toward Merleau-Ponty, the possibility of a caress appears.

So, what does Levinas discover in Merleau-Ponty that changed his thought on perception? For Merleau-Ponty, the body is always already in the world and this specific human condition entails a contradiction at the anthropological and ontological level. *I am a body and I have a body*; in other words my embodied existence is continuously balanc-

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<sup>7</sup> Fecundity is for Levinas the openness to the other through reproduction. Through the relation between the Father and the Son, an otherness appears.

ing between two opposite spheres of existences, objectivity/subjectivity, passivity/activity, sensed/sensing, touched/touching, viewed/viewing. For Merleau-Ponty, this specific structure of the embodied being explains why perception is not a passive reception of sense-data, but an in-forming activity. Because I lend my ambiguous body to the world in order to perceive it, perception acquires a meaning *for* my body, a meaning produced in relation to my body and situating my body in return. The book in front of me is not just a surface reflecting different light waves and hitting the rods and cones of my retina to form a two dimensional image that my central nervous system will identify as “book.” The book appears with certain silent characteristics, its graspability, its capacity to be opened, and fitting my bodily project to seize it in order to read it. It also has an aura of potential imaginary associations wrapped around it presenting the book in a certain orientation and awaiting for my intentionality, like Proust’s madeleine, to open its being as a new horizon<sup>8</sup> in the general horizon of my perception. I do not live in a world where I would have to continuously produce an interior symbolic discourse to make sense of the world; the sense of the world is already given in my perception. My relation to the world has certain circularity in which I lend my body to the world and the world situates me into a world made of fleshy non-predicative and prereflexive meanings.

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<sup>8</sup> Retracing the history of the concept of horizon in phenomenology would go beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, for Merleau-Ponty, the horizon of perception can be defined as the field encompassing the totality of the perceptions given to a conscious. Within this field, certain objects selectively appear in the foreground depending on the task one aims to perform. The field of perception is therefore shaped by psycho-motor projects.



Therefore, from the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) the world acquires its fleshy texture in response to projects implying pre-reflexive motor habits. When I type on this computer to create sentences, a certain spatialized knowledge (where is the “i” on the keyboard”) lies in my fingers dancing over the keyboard becoming a kind of extension of my body; and as in a David Cronenberg movie, the computer becomes flesh. The *I know* is here an *I can* that does not reside in a part of my brain or my spinal cord but that is embodied in my hands. It is an embodied knowledge lived without reference to the actual organic organization of my body, and which, furthermore, incorporates the objects of its intentions blurring the limit between my body and its environment. In fact, as when playing drums, I had better not think about what I am doing since my body knows better than I do, my typing involves the disappearance of self-reflexivity in order for the symbiotic relation between my body and the keyboard to fully appear. However, formulated in terms of “lending,” this account of perception justifies at first sight Levinas’ doubts in thinking of an Ethics of Eros based on the Caress. If Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception frees perception from the self-reflexive *I think*, it is still a kind of grasping since the world is reduced to the body sensorimotor and sociocultural habits. What interest Levinas more is the ambiguity of reversibility<sup>9</sup> and the way this reversibility blurs the lines between the transcendental and the immanent, the exterior and the interior, by intro-

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<sup>9</sup> Reversibility is a key concept in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of perception. Merleau-Ponty claims that in natural perception, the observer is not “outside” the world, natural perception is “in between” the subject and the world thanks to the reversibility. In *Le Visible et l’invisible*, Merleau-Ponty states: “My body is the only way I can go to the heart of things, by making myself world and making them flesh” (1766). This sentence illustrates what Merleau-Ponty describes as reversibility.

ducing a game of difference and identity. In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, the body image is a conglomerate of these different *captations* (attunement, appropriation) amalgamating into a certain style, a way of walking, moving, certain facial expressions, habits, etc. However as the image of the hand touching the other hand demonstrates, the reversibility is never complete, is never superposition. The sensing hand cannot be *simultaneously* the sensed hand. The two faces of the reversibility never completely superpose but give instead an ambiguous sensation making sense for my body but not for self-reflexivity that cannot fully grasp the experience. Therefore, in the reversibility or intertwining of the body with other bodies, the other is never completely reduced to the self: “There is thus a system (my visual body [as it appears to others], my introceptive body [as I live it], the other [as I perceive them]), which establishes itself in the child, never so completely as in the animal but imperfectly with gaps” (*Le Visible et l’invisible*, 1969. Translation mine). This “syncretic sociability” is what Merleau-Ponty calls this system of intercorporeality in which I am in relation with the other without reducing it to the same, or in which the other is always different from itself because she is perceived in a set of always changing relations (with my body, the world, etc). I can obviously perceive the other, but this perception is not a seizing and will be intertwined with my own situation (spatial position but also habits, cultural prejudices, projects, etc.) in the world. Because of intercorporeality and its gaps, perception always offers a potential ambiguity, an openness to other perceptions.

It is, for our discussion, important to underline the fact that for Merleau-Ponty, the sense of touch offers a privileged perspective on this question of reversibility because “the questioning and the questioned are closer, and the reversibility of the eye is only,

after all, a particular variation” (*Le Visible et l’invisible*, 1759. Translation mine). In tactility there is a direct experience of reversibility, of its gaps, and its ambiguities. The experience of tactility is the matrix of a certain way to relate to the world and to other in which I and the other are in syncretic relation without being reducible to one of the terms. So, to go back to our touch expert, Agathon, if he remains silent maybe it is because the knowledge he has in mind does not just transfer discursively from one body to another, but is already there, in the reversibility and folds of our perceptions, a knowledge that the other is irremediably part of me as I am part of the other, a relation to the other best experienced in touch. However, this silent knowledge creates difficulties if we want to catch this silent knowledge in action. It cannot be exposed directly but only transversally, in expressions of the body or in the fictions of the body. We will have to seek in the unsaid of language, in its gaps and ambiguities. We, the touched and inquiring readers, have as our only solution to resort to the method of textual collage, unorthodox and anachronistic as it may be, and see if some texts, by being in touch with each other’s wouldn’t be able to give us some meaningful and hermeneutical insight about Agathon’s knowledgeable touch.

## **2.2. Touches, Caresses and Initiation in Embodiment in *The Silence of the Lambs***

In this section, I offer a reading of both Thomas Harris’ novel *The Silence of the Lambs* and of its movie adaptation directed by Jonathan Demme (1991). This reading will show how Merleau-Ponty’s concept of reversibility allows us to not only define the specific non-discursive knowledge residing in sensations, but also to underline the specific sensory dimension grounding Dr. Lecter and Clarice’s relation. Even if the two texts rely

on different medium, I would argue that they nonetheless belong to the same fictional universe. Despite the minor variations between the two texts, I consider that one of the “laws” of the universe of *The Silence of the Lambs* spreading from by both texts, is defined but Lecter’s hypersensitivity to the environment and it is on this ground that my simultaneous reading stands. However, in order to avoid confusion, and sometimes, to stress differences between the two texts, I will clearly mark whether I refer to the movie or the novel when an ambiguity emerges.

In Thomas Harris’ novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) top FBI student Clarice Starling is mandated to interview the infamous psychiatrist and cold-blooded cannibal Dr. Hannibal Lecter in his closely guarded cell at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Dr. Lecter’s “impenetrable” and “sophisticated” (11) analytical and deductive intelligence might prove useful to the FBI in the pursuit of a serial murder nicknamed “Buffalo Bill” who has the chilling hobby of flaying his female victims. Given Clarice’s past, haunted by her father’s premature death, and the three masculine figures she has to confront while the story unfolds (the libidinous head of the Baltimore hospital, Frederick Chilton; the Behavioral Science Unit Agent-in-charge, Jack Crawford, and finally, Dr. Lecter himself), Harris’ novel is prompted to be read as a *rite de passage* in which Clarice has to face the different threats that these paternal figures embody. While I do not necessarily disagree with this set of convergent interpretations,<sup>10</sup> it is however necessary for the purpose of this movie/novel collage to insist on the specific psychological and sensitive relations that Clarice develops with Dr. Lecter. The infamous psychiatrist is indeed kept at bay from the contact with society and natural environment. This

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance Armen, M. E., “My Dialogue With Hannibal.”

chthonian devouring father figure is locked up “down in a region where there can be no window and no mixing” with other inmates, a place where the “natural light [is left] behind” (12). Interestingly, what is relentlessly stressed in the elaborated and the strict instructions given to Clarice before her first meeting with Dr. Lecter is the complete and unnegotiable prohibition of touch:

Do not reach through the bars, do not touch the bars. You pass him nothing but soft papers. No pens, no pencils. He has his own felt-tipped pens some of the time. The paper you pass him must be free of staples, paper clips, or pins. Items are only passed to him through the sliding food carrier. No exceptions. Do not accept anything he attempts to hold out to you through the barrier. Do you understand me? (11-12)

Not only any physical contact with Dr. Lecter is the object of a lethal taboo, as reminded by Dr. Chilton when he passes to Clarice a gruesome forensic picture of an absent minded nurse whose jaws has been broken and her tongue pulled out in Lecter’s cannibalistic fury, but the space of the cell itself is, by contagion, subjected to the same tactile prohibitions. The space of Dr. Lecter’s cell, impenetrable – even by the phallic pens and pencils - at the end of a subterranean, long and dark corridor, may well be saturated by an anal symbolism, but it is not its only function or, more precisely, this anal dimension is made more complex by a prohibition of touch that defines this space as strictly psychological. Indeed, it is in this particular space, this untouchable psycho-analytical space echoing the famous Freudian prohibition of touch that Dr. Lecter and Clarice will gauge and tame each other through a game where information, interpretations, patients’ confessions and childhood memories acquire an exchange value and where the anal economy of retention and expulsion determines who the winner is.

That is at least the anal retentive reading of the first encounter between Clarice and Dr. Lecter, a reading that has the problem of defining the characters solely by their

anality, that is to say as strong characters, manipulative and masterful, each of them immured in their specific ethos and logic of estrangement. On one side the emotionally unavailable and in-(potty)-training Clarice who, despite her inexperience, follows conscientiously the sadomasochistic ethos of the FBI, a dimension that the film adaptation of the movie underscores in the opening scene<sup>11</sup>. On the other side, the psychologically and physically immured cannibal, endowed with an animalistic strength, whose strict and sophisticated sense of respect for the rituals of politeness betrays an obsessive and relentless fight against his own depraved and dirty drives; a psychological split that Clarice does not fail to notice when she asked at the end of an humiliating and uncannily accurate interpretation of her upbringing given by Dr. Lecter:

- You see a lot, Dr. Lecter. I won't deny anything you've said. But here's the question you're answering for me right now, whether you mean to or not: Are you strong enough to point that high-powered perception at yourself? It's hard to face. I've found that out in the last few minutes. How about it? Look at yourself and write down the truth. What more fit or complex subject could you find? Or maybe you're afraid of yourself.
- You're tough, aren't you, Officer Starling? (23)

This exchange and its rhetoric of sadomasochistic strength (“are you strong enough”, “You're tough”) certainly illustrates that a psychoanalytical reading of the two characters can be offered through the lens of anality and retentive relations, an anality that interestingly enough could potentially undermine any interpretation in terms of gen-

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<sup>11</sup> In this scene a sweaty and dirty Clarice runs on a military-like training trail, and demonstrates prowess of muscular strength, while the camera focuses on a wood boards nailed on a tree reminding what seems to be the FBI's training ground moto: “Hurt – Agony – Pain – Love it”, already announcing the specific sadomasochistic anal relation that she will develop with Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

der relations. It is also, without a doubt, a relation of initiation and of apprenticeship (“It’s hard to face. I’ve found that out in the last few minutes”) that will grow throughout the novel. However, if I am not denying the anal dimension of the narrative and characters, my interest is to broaden the reading’s possibilities by focusing on other events. As Deleuze and Guattari have argued, if the Freudian discovery of the fundamental perversity of partial drives certainly liberated sexuality from its traditional understanding by insisting on what Lacan will famously sum up as the inexistence of sexual rapport and the impossibility of *jouissance*, psychoanalysis also immediately reterritorialized the body in the field of capitalistic and bourgeois production. Therefore the Oedipus complex and all its stages, prohibitions, and dramas, has no other purpose than to normalize the subject in relation to the current modes of productions and governance.

Therefore, focusing on the anality of the relationship (or any other psycho-affective organic function) between Clarice and Hannibal Lecter may just reinforce the Oedipal reading, and project a shadow on other richly textured unconscious dimensions. For instance, the saturation of sensory descriptions in the novel has been ignored to the detriment of more classical psychoanalytical readings. It is however, as defended here, an essential dimension of the narrative; a sensory dimension that might drive us toward other modes of relation and knowledge production by resisting and disrupting the conventional grid of psychoanalytic interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a more traditional reading of the movie see Greven, D., “Male Medusas and Female Heroes: Fetishism and Ambivalence in *The Silence of the Lambs*,” *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush*, Univ. of Texas Press, 2009.

As any *The Silence of the Lambs*' universe enthusiast knows, if the movie adaptation follows scrupulously the main events of the novel, the end however is altered. In the last scene of the movie, Clarice is receiving the well-deserved honors for killing the infamous serial killer Buffalo Bill, when she receives a phone call from the other infamous serial killer and runaway, Hannibal Lecter. Dr. Lecter is calling from Haiti and is about to board in a plane with Dr Chilton, his previous psychiatrist and against whom he holds a cannibalistic grudge. While Hannibal the Cannibal asks her if the lambs have stopped screaming, the *mise-en-scène* implies that Dr. Lecter is hunting down his psychiatrist in order to probably turn him into a delectable and elegant dish (Movie). Sadly, this alternative final scene obfuscates a central symbolic element, sort of *point de capiton*, that allows yet to avoid the oedipal syntax and to reread Clarice and Dr. Lecter's relation, as well as Clarice's *rite de passage*, in sensorial terms.

In the last two pages of the novel, instead of calling Clarice, Dr. Lecter writes a letter to her. If the movie repeats the iconic question "Have the lambs stopped screaming?" it also leaves out important meaningful parts that shed new light on Clarice and Dr. Lecter's relationship. Commentators of the movie have underlined the relation of apprenticeship between the two characters, often underlining that Dr. Lecter actually trains a psychologist, and, to be fair, it is after all how their first encounter starts ("Doctor, we have a hard problem in psychological profiling. I want to ask you for your help" [16]). However, the letter offers different perspectives on the very specific type of skills Dr. Lecter is pushing her to develop: "Orion is above the horizon now, and near it Jupiter, brighter than it will ever be again before the year 2000. [...]. But I expect you can see it too. Some of our stars are the same" (366-67). Used to the cryptic language of Dr. Lecter, and the



meditative gesture that he accomplishes before writing this paragraph “Dr. Lecter touched his pen to his lips. He looked out at the night sky and smiled” (366), it is obvious that the unexpected allusion to planets is a riddle veiling an important latent discourse. Not surprisingly, Jupiter is the planet of higher knowledge, the planet of philosophers, judges and intellectuals, and there is no doubt that Dr. Lecter considers himself and Clarice to be thinkers whose intellectual energy is directed toward deciphering behaviors and discourses. But more interesting is the mention of the constellation of Orion, the Hunter. If as Dr. Lecter insists, “some of our stars are the same”, then he is not training only a psychologist, but also a Hunter. What Hannibal saw in Clarice, maybe since their very encounter, is a psyche moved by a very strong drive to hunt, as himself. In the letter, after the famous question “have the lambs stopped screaming?”, Hannibal Lecter anticipates the answer:

I won't be surprised if the answer is yes and no. The lambs will stop for now. But, Clarice, you judge yourself with all the mercy of the dungeon scales at Threave; you'll have to earn it again, the blessed silence. Because it's the plight that drives you, seeing the plight, and the plight will not end, ever. (366)

As the cannibal Hannibal Lecter, Clarice's behavior is driven by a compulsion of repetition, a drive, and if Clarice and Dr. Lecter certainly do not hunt for the same purpose and the same game, they are nonetheless predators with a set of identical skills.

This new light shed on the relationship between Clarice and Dr. Lecter, allows therefore now to make sense of the ubiquitous sensory dimension of the novel. As Lecter is training a hunter, a specific set of skills needs to be developed, a specific attention to senses and environment. As Merleau-Ponty underlines, apprenticeship (*apprentissage*) necessitates a certain reversibility that is not simply imitation but an exchange or a mutual and pre-discursive attunement in the system of perception-expression. Perception is

never pure passivity, but is already shaped by a practical field made of my motor responses and intentions. Not only does perception imply unconscious motor activities (micro movements of the eyes in perception of colors and shapes for instance), but it is also given to answer spontaneous intentions and desires that perception shapes in return. Perceptions are given within a practical field (I turn toward the computer if I want to write), and shape that practical field in return (the perception of a nice body shapes new libidinal projects). However this formulation is inappropriate since most of your sentient and expressive life appears without reflexivity, in a certain atmosphere of generality. If there is certainly the specific perspective given by my body, there is properly speaking no *I* to make sense of my perception and projects. Therefore, the reversibility of intercorporeality, as the process underlying the system of perception and expression is always silent, it is already given and only appearing through the phenomenological enquiry. Perception for Merleau-Ponty is always an attunement with bodies and reactions to them. The body is, because of the process of reversibility, a conglomerate or sedimentation of bodies, specific responses, postures, images that Merleau-Ponty calls style. My bodies are made of a series of signs that, taken together, have a certain specific and recognizable generality, a style. Perception demands an attunement with these signs, an attunement that cannot appear without a certain seizing of a style.

Using Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary, one can say that hunting implies a certain becoming-animal, an attunement with the behavior and the signs left by the specific game hunted, the relationship between Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling must be understood as a relation of reversibility, a certain becoming-hunter or a becoming-killer.

Therefore, Hannibal Lecter is not only mentoring, training, teaching, advising, but emitting signs that Clarice needs to uptake in a process of becoming-killer.

That, in fact, the real power of Hannibal Lecter resides less in his unique analytical intelligence than in his animalistic perceptive capabilities is stressed many times throughout the novel. This excessive sensuality is obviously present since the very beginning when Dr. Lecter can tell, despite the spatial and temporal distance, what cosmetics Starlings usually wears (“You use Evyan skin cream, and sometimes you wear L’Air du Temps, but not today” [18]), a sense of smell that he even uses in his diagnostics. There is also the cunning throw-shades analysis that Dr. Lecter makes of Starling based not only on what he can see from the way she dresses, but also on what he can *envision* her wearing (“Back in your room, you have a string gold add-a-beads and you feel an ugly little thump when you look at how tacky they are now, isn’t that so?” (22). If Lecter is certainly gifted with a cunning sense of smell and sight, the perfectly functional sixth finger on each hands embodies a monstrous tactility. What would be cannibal Dr. Lecter without his legendary sense of taste, a sense of taste that must be understood literally and metaphorically when he exposes the precise and elaborate way of cooking the different human organs. And even if the novels states that “His inner world has intense colors and smells, and not much sound,” Dr. Lecter greatly appreciates classical music, especially Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. Despite this hyper sensitivity, Dr. Lecter does not zero in on the details, but aims at the general style: “Dr. Lecter’s eyes are maroon and they reflect the light in pinpoints of red. Sometimes the points of light seem to fly like sparks to his center. His eyes held Starling whole.” (16) It is through perception of style that Dr. Lecter is attuned with his “patients.”

That Dr. Lecter's eeriness lies in his perceptive capabilities is not unknown to Clarice. After being violently psychologically dissected by Dr. Lecter, Clarice perfectly understands that Dr. Lecter's dense perceptive life is the secret of his monstrous power: "You *see* a lot, Dr. Lecter. I won't deny anything you've said. But here's the question you're answering for me right now, whether you mean to or not: Are you strong enough to point that *high-powered perception* at yourself?" (23, *italics mine*) Obviously, perception here cannot be understood as the simple passive receptivity, but as intelligence, as the dynamic flesh of life, a flesh made of intentionality and intercorporeality. This is this specific knowledge, this specific relation to embodiment and sensitive life that is a stake in Dr. Lecter's initiation of Clarice.

This initiation process between Clarice and Dr. Lecter, process that I call a becoming-killer, has less to do with their verbal exchanges than with attunement with the bodily style of being. Dr. Lecter is not a big fan of cognitive and behavioral psychology, and in fact, what triggers Dr. Lecter's violent interpretation during their first encounter is Clarice's questionnaire "You'd like to quantify me, officer Starling. You're so ambitious, aren't you?" (22) It is not the first time in the novel that Dr. Lecter emits reservations about behavioral psychology which he already described as "simplistic," "puerile," and produced by "ham radio enthusiasts and other personality-deficient buffs" (20). But this time he specifies his critique. According to Dr. Lecter, psychology is probably less a science (whose goal is always to produce generalizable and universalizable statements), than a certain style or position toward life. For Dr. Lecter, psychology aims at the particular, the dynamic, and drives of life, and at what he will later call "simplicity". Perhaps his answer to Clarice's question "How would you change the classification?", "I wouldn't"

(20), must be heard as a refusal to break down psychic elements without grasping their dynamic articulation, their specific and simple style. In that sense, it is not the classification that must be changed, but the whole understanding of the psyche. This anti-intellectualism is best expressed during their second encounter. Dr. Lecter tests Clarice on her ability in profiling and diagnosing mental illness:

- You have some psychology, some forensics. Where the two flow together you fish, don't you? Catching anything, Clarice?
- It's pretty slow so far.
- What do your two disciplines tell you about Buffalo Bill?
- By the book, he is a sadist.
- *Life* is too slippery for books, Clarice; anger appears as lust, lupus as hives (146, italics mine).

We can hear here some Levinasian and Merleau-Pontian inflections here in the specific stance that Dr. Lecter is asking Clarice to adopt. The other cannot be reduced to categorical knowledge but must be approached through an embodiment in its sentient life, one has to crawl under the other's skin, a particularly important image when hunting a serial killer who fetishizes women's skin, in order to *feel* its life. It is in perceptive life that Clarice must dig in order to understand and catch her prey. Following Dr. Lecter's demolishing of Clarice's bookish psychology, he initiates her to a more sensitive reading when they discuss Sammie's diagnostic:

- “You believe he is a catatonic schizoid?”
- “Yes. Can you *smell* his sweat? That peculiar goatish odor of trans-3-methyl-2 hexenoic acid. *Remember* it, it's the smell of schizophrenia.” (149, italics mine)

Aside from the fact that his injunction to remember demonstrates their relation of initiation, it also confirms that it is in perceptive life that Dr. Lecter bases his dreadful method of analysis. It is not in language that the other appears, but through its embodied life and

it is through sensation that the other must be approached. This is the same stance toward life that Dr. Lecter calls “simplicity,” a reduction not to a general category but to a general embodied desire, a certain style. A principle of simplicity that Clarice will only understand retrospectively when she will try to hunt and to locate Buffalo Bill by focusing on the signs, that is to say the victims’ bodies that Buffalo Bill left behind: “What does he do, Clarice? What is the first and principal thing he does, what needs does he serve by killing? He covets. How do we begin to covet? We begin by coveting what we *see* everyday” (296, italics mine).

This marks the turning point of Clarice’s initiation. From there Clarice starts thinking in terms of perception, space, and proximity of bodies: “Maybe [Buffalo Bill] lives in Belvedere, Ohio, where the first victim lived. Maybe he saw her every day, and killed her sort of spontaneously” (297). Following this new stance, Clarice decides to go back where Frederica Bimmel, Buffalo Bill’s first victim, lived. It is a common trope of the detective novel, a trope that speaks about the specific attitude that the hunting of a criminal demands, an attitude where feelings, perceptions, intuitions are the flesh of the hunt. But interestingly enough, in order to get an idea of “where the kidnapper might have seen Frederica” (308), she decides to examine her room, as if, Frederica’s personal space, her body and Buffalo Bill’s were somehow intertwined, as the side of a prism, when looked through, reflects the other sides. This trope of the coming back to the victim’s environment only makes sense in a philosophy where bodies and spaces are in constant interaction and shape each other as in Merleau-Ponty’s intercorporeality. As the trope usually goes, Clarice comes back where other inspectors have already examined the room, testifying that there is specific knowledge that can only be sensed through the body

in the situation. Coming back to Frederica's room, Clarice brings herself in that equations of signs, she tries to open herself to a style of being in which she can maybe hear the distant echoes of a criminal other.

Clarice's analysis of the room is obviously submerged by perceptual influxes. Sight, smell, touch, all participate to give Clarice a certain *sense* of Frederica's life: "there was an echo of desperation in it" (315). The photographs left in her room open lines of conjectures: "Could Frederica bring her friends up here? Did she have a friend good enough to bring up those stairs beneath the drip? There was an umbrella beside the door" (316). Each object still vibrates and resonates of a life now gone but through which Frederica's style still pulsates. It is also in this room that the intertwinement of bodies clearly appears:

Look at this picture of Frederica, here she's in the front row of the band. Frederica is wide and fat, but her uniform fits better than the others. [...]. Remember, he doesn't look at woman as a man looks at them. Conventionally attractive doesn't count. They just have to be smooth and roomy. Starling wondered if he thought of women as "skins," the way some cretins call them "cunts." (316)

First, this passage illustrates Clarice's embodiment of Buffalo Bill. Sensing Frederica's life, she senses, in perfect reversibility, the traces, perceptions and desires of her murderer. The literary form resorts to representations and words betray what is in fact happening in this room. The novel presents Clarice's inspection as an internal discourse she would produce constantly to make sense of her perceptions, but this is a trick of the literary form which has to *translate* these perceptions for the reader, a trick to describe what remains under the surface of Clarice's consciousness, and of which she can only sense the tremors. One has to in fact imagine that sensations are given to Clarice without an *I* keeping them under its grip:

She *became aware* of her own hand tracing the line of credits beneath the yearbook picture, became aware of her entire body, the space she filled, her figure and her face, their effect, the *power* in them, her breasts above the book, her hard belly against it, her legs below it. What of her experienced applied?

Starling saw herself in the full-length mirror on the end wall and was glad to be different from Frederica. But she knew *the difference was a matrix in her thinking*. What it might keep her from *seeing*. (316)

“She became aware”, as if the inspection had been done in a hypnotic trance in which reflexive “thinking” has to dim its power to let the body do its work. It is Clarice’s pre-reflexive body who leads the action and knows what to look for. What the body is looking for is a moment of confusion when Clarice stares at Frederica’s picture, it seeks the queer intertwinement with Frederica. If the paragraph starts with “She” referring to Clarice, the pronoun “her” slowly introduces confusion. Who is “her” in this paragraph? Clarice or Frederica. “What of experienced applied?” to what if not Frederica’s experiences themselves. The “her” is taken in a mirroring game as the next paragraph testifies. The following paragraph exposes this slow intertwinement of the bodies remaining estranged and “different” only because of a reflexive process that prevents “her” from seeing through “her”. It is in fact through Frederica’s body that Clarice takes conscious of hers, and it is through Clarice’s body that Frederica comes back to life. “How Frederica wants to appear?” starts the next paragraph as if to answer Clarice’s summoning of their inter-corporeality “what was she hungry for, where did she seek it? What did she try to do about herself” (317). This set of questions resonates with Dr. Lecter’s stance toward life (“what does he do? He covets”) who is also now summoned in this promiscuity of styles. Soon, it is the other victim’s bodies appearing in this queer inter-corporeality, victims have the same characteristics of being large and strong, a line of thinking that is



triggered when Clarice stares at Frederica's closet. It is in this mass of cloths and rags that the ideas unfold: "Did Buffalo Bill watch fat stores, select a customer and follow her? Did he go into oversize shops in drag and look around? Every oversize shop in a city gets both transvestites and drag queens as customers" (319). Clarice, inhabited by these bodies and sensations, undergoes a schizoid experience:

Kimberly was lonesome. *Don't start this.* Kimberly, obedient and limp, past rigor mortis, being rolled over on the mortician's table so Starling could fingerprint her. *Stop it. Can't stop it.* Kimberly lonesome, anxious to please, had Kimberly ever rolled over obediently for someone, just to feel his heart beat against her back?" (320)

Something else speaks for her through her body, something that speaks underneath and before her own consciousness, and now connecting with Kimberly, another victim of the serial killer. And it is in the middle of this intertwinement of bodies and perceptions that Clarice finally attunes with the other victims and finally with Buffalo Bill's styles:

Staring into the lighted closet, Starling remembered Kimberly's plump back, the triangular patches of skin missing from her shoulders. [...]. **THEY ARE DARTS – HE TOOK THOSE TRIANGLES TO MAKE DARTS SO HE COULD LET OUT HER WAIST. MOTHER FUCKER CAN SEW. BUFFALO BILL'TRAINED TO SERIOUSLY SEW-HE'S NOT JUST PICKING OUT READY TO MADE.** (320; capital letters in the original)

Clarice's inspection of Frederica's room brilliantly demonstrates that Clarice's initiation, an initiation relying on reversibility and intercorporeality, is complete. Clarice is now a hunter, as much as Dr. Lecter or Bufallo Bill, able to distance herself from categorical thinking, and in this distance, to sense the very reversibility of sensations in order to catch the signs and style of her prey: "Starling put her head back, closed her eyes for one second. Problem solving is hunting; it is savage pleasure and we are born to it" (320).

Now that Clarice is in “touch” with her body as multiplicity, with the hunter in her, she will just follow the trails left by Buffalo Bill and face him. However, the chapter describing Clarice’s killing of the serial killer exemplifies the type of pre-reflexive, non-categorical and embedded knowledge circulating between her and Dr. Lecter, and she receives through attunement or reversibility during her initiation. When she arrives at Buffalo Bill aka Jame Gumb’s lair to inquire on the previous inhabitants of the house, she quickly realizes that she is facing the serial killer she had been hunting down when she notices the presence in house of the specific and rare moth, a Death’s-head hawkmoth, that the killer uses to mark his victim by shoving a pupa down their throat. However, the killer manages to disappear in the labyrinthine basement, where his last victim, Catherine Martin, still alive, shouts and curses from the depth of her pit (movie and novel). Understanding that Gumb will probably kill Catherine before being arrested, Clarice throws herself down the stairs in order to slay the beast. After chasing Gumb in a couple of rooms she arrives in a bathroom where, in a tub, lay the remnants of what appears to be a rotting body (novel):

The tub was almost filled with hard red-purple plaster. A hand and wrist stuck up from the plaster, the hand turned dark and shriveled, the fingernails painted pink. On the wrist was a dainty watch. Starling was seeing everything at once, the rope, the tub, the hand, the watch. (345)

This global vision immediately reminds Clarice’s very first encounter with Dr. Lecter’s gaze when “his eyes held Starling whole” (16), but also Clarice’s attention to the general aspects of her perceptions, their general organization and meaning. This is at that particular moment that Gumb shuts the lights off and leaves Clarice in pitch black darkness. Clarice, unable to rely on her sense of sight, has no other solution but to trust her

other senses and her body: “Stop, listen. In absolute black the hiss of steam pipes, trickle of water. Heavy in her nostrils the smell of the goat. Catherine keening” (346). The disappearance of the subject of perception is here very meaningful. Contrary to Descartes’ account of perception as subjected of an *I think*, the transcendence of the *I* completely dissolves itself in the immanence of bodily perceptions. Clarice becomes body, or more precisely she becomes “steam pipes,” “trickle of water,” and “smell of goat”. As opposed to this extension of the body, or in Merleau-Ponty’s vocabulary, the extension of her practical field, Gumb remains in position of external subject, a position of external observer symbolically marked by his wearing of infrared goggles: “Against the wall stood Mr. Gumb with his goggles on. There was no danger she’d bump into him – there was an equipment table between them.” His transcendental-like position of external observer is spatially stressed by his position behind a table. In the movie this external position is even stressed by greenish infrared images of what Gumb sees as if the spectator was Gumb himself. The narrative now unfolds from Gumb’s point of view, underlining his position of mastery:

It was fun to watch her trying to sneak along. She had her hip against the sinks now, creeping toward the screams with her gun stuck out. It would have been fun to hunt her for a long time - he’d never hunted one armed before. He would have thoroughly enjoyed it. No time for that. Pity. (347)

The contrast between the two sensitive stances is striking after Clarice shoots Gumb when alerted by the sound of Gumb cocking his Python: “What was that sound? Whistling? Like a teakettle, but interrupted. What was it? Like breathing. Is it me? No” (347). This moment of blurring of bodily borders is typical of an intense focus on sensations and of the deliquescence of the *I* revealing the underlying structure of the intertwinement of bodies.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeality, or what is sometimes called intertwinement or reversibility, sheds light on the very specific and original initiation that Clarice is going through guided by the ambiguous and sinister Dr. Lecter. It is less an initiation between subjects, than an initiation between bodies and their intertwinement in perception. The underlying intercorporeal structure of perception hinges on the disappearance of the transcendental subject who hides the specific work and knowledge of the body by folding it back on an "I think". From this point of view, Dr. Lecter's representation as animated by an excessive sensitive life is symbolized by the ingestion of the human flesh, it is a body literally full of flesh as opposed to Gumb's body whose obsession with collecting and sewing together an empty suit made of woman's skin reveals a body without flesh, a body reduced to its external appearance, a body without life desperately in need of sensation, especially motherly tactile sensation. It is important to recall here that for Merleau-Ponty, if all sensations reveal the same underlying structure, that is to say the fundamental intercorporeality and interconnection of sentient lives, and despite the inter-sensitive (intertwinement of the different sources of sensations in a general perception) and inter-modal (intertwinement of perception and expression into a sensory-motor system) communications, the sense of touch remains of a specific interest for him because of its structural and paradigmatic functions. The intertwined relation of the touching/touched and the ambiguous resulting sensations (where does the touching begin and where does the touched end?) is best illustrated in the sensations resulting when I touch my left hand with my right hand. If reflexively, I cannot simultaneously be the touching and the touched, the perception crosses over (*enjambe*) this gap in a general queer sensation of intertwinement. The difference that could even be written here as *dif-*

*férance*, only appears as a differed reflexivity, as the folding of an *I think* over bodily sensations, like Clarice in front of Frederica's mirror, whereas sensations are given as intertwinement, as Flesh.

This understanding of the paradigmatic function of touch will help us to highlight a last and important moment of the relation between Clarice and Dr. Lecter, the one and only moment when they touch each other, a touch that is nothing less than a caress. I will however pair this analysis with the cinematic translation of this moment, for the differences, unwillingly or not, illustrates the reversibility of the touch and also the contrast between embedded knowledge and categorical knowledge.

The movie scene, which is more a shot in fact, is such an iconic moment in the movie and in the novel because it conjugates the revelation of the origin of Clarice's unconscious conflict (a conflict that is, for Dr. Lecter the very root of her craving for protection of innocents and therefore for hunting criminals) and the lifting of the taboo of touch that have been imposed over the two protagonists since their very first encounter. This absolute taboo coming from the institutional power given to the lusty father-like figure, Dr. Chilton, the director of the asylum, is initially upheld to protect Clarice and stresses the inhumane nature of Dr. Lecter. But it also forbids the protagonist, from a psychoanalytical point of view, to have any kind of erotic relations as illustrated by the taboo of touch in the talking cure and initiated by Freud himself. Thus, if touch is underlined by an intercorporeal structure, in this case, it is also penetrated by conflicting drives, the ubiquity of Eros and Thanatos, and galvanized by the emulating power of the taboo.

This caress therefore has a dramatic function and a psychoanalytic function, and also what I would call an epistemic function. To analyze how these three functions merge

to make this shot a particularly powerful image in terms of affect and meaning, it is important first to give some elements of narrative background. Clarice, defying orders, visits Dr. Lecter for a last time. He is now held in a rather comfortable cage-like cell in a Mississippi courthouse (movie and novel). Clarice is looking for Dr. Lecter's guidance to finish the case. Faithful to the terms of their first encounter, the economy of information's retention still hold. In order to receive Dr. Lecter's help she has no other solution than sharing the deep trauma haunting her and prompting her desperate but heroic desire to silence the lambs. However, Dr. Chilton in the company of a couple of policemen, and jealous of the special bond between Clarice and the erudite cannibal, interrupts their exchange and asks Clarice to get out. In a hurry, Dr. Lecter hands her the case file which, according to him contains everything she needs to know. Clarice grabs the case file and Dr. Lecter takes this opportunity to transgress the taboo of touch (image 1)



*Figure 2.1 Clarice's and Dr. Lecter's caress*

Throughout the movie and the novel it is stressed that Dr. Lecter does not need to touch to kill, or more precisely, Dr. Lecter's lethal kill seems to be intimately bound to the manipulative and invasive power of his mind. This peculiar blending of mind and sensation is manifest when Dr. Lecter drives Miggs, his next cell inmate, to commit suicide as a punishment for throwing his semen at Clarice's face. This almost superhuman ability to possess other bodies is also well known by Clarice's boss, Chief Crawford, and is revealed in the very first chapter of the novel:

Now I want your full attention, Starling. Are you listening to me?

Yes sir

Be very careful with Hannibal Lecter. Dr. Chilton, the head of the mental hospital, will go over the physical procedure you use to deal with him.

Don't deviate from it. Do not deviate from it one iota for any reason. If Lecter talks to you at all, he'll just be trying to find out about you. It's the kind of curiosity that makes a snake look in a bird's nest. We both know you have to back-and-forth a little in interviews, but you tell him no specifics about yourself. You don't want any of your personal facts in his head. (6)

Clarice's confession in the Mississippi courthouse puts her at the total mercy of Dr. Lecter and in fact, prompts us to wonder why he never uses this knowledge to his advantage, to play with her and kill her. It has been argued that Clarice and Dr. Lecter share a common sexual attraction. Some aspects of the texts support this reading. For instance, during her first encounter with Dr. Chilton, he describes him as a potential sexual predator:

Crawford's very clever - isn't he? – using you on Lecter

How do you mean, Dr. Chilton?

A young woman to 'turn him on,' I believe you call it. I don't believe Lecter's seen a woman in several years – he may have gotten a glimpse of one of the cleaning people. We generally keep woman out of there. (11)

But it is especially during their last encounter that Dr. Lecter's humor reveals the romantic potential of the situation. After Clarice explains that she is here without order, just to see him, Dr. Lecter comments, not without irony: "People will say we are in love"

(225). However, these readings rely on a compulsive heterosexuality to try to forcefully instill a normalized sexuality (“people will say”) that simply does not fit Dr. Lecter’s type of peculiar sexual tastes. The sexual tension between Clarice and Dr. Lecter must be understood as a queer one, degenitalized, traversing the economy of anal retention, the sublimation of touch imposed by the taboo and the mirroring image of a craving for hunting. It is through these different non-oedipal dimensions that desire circulates and makes this caress much more than a confirmation of Clarice and Dr. Lecter’s romance.

As I have already argued, according to Merleau-Ponty a certain knowledge understood as reversibility circulates in the body and through bodies and is best understood through the sense of touch. I want to add that this shot, in addition to being the apex of the narrative and of the psychoanalytic tension of their relation, is also the climax of Clarice’s initiation in embodiment. Being in touch with one’s body, it also is being in touch with (an)others’. This reversibility of touch is visually shown in the shot-counter shot sequence of Clarice and Dr. Lecter’s faces, a reversibility in which the caress is inserted in order to underline their chiasmatic relation. Moreover, the high angle shot of Clarice’s face opposed to the low angle shot of Dr. Lecter’s face stresses the initiate/master relation. In addition to this epistemic tension, the police’s case file, representing everything that Dr. Lecter despises in psychology and from which he pushed Clarice away in order for her to rely on an intuitive embodied knowledge made of sensations and desires, appears in the background. The reversibility of touch, in the foreground, therefore becomes caress, a caress sealing her initiation over the revelation of *his* desire. Clarice is the only character to whom he exposes his humanity by transcending his monstrous appetite in showing a profound tenderness as their last conversation on the phone



at the end of the movie demonstrates: “I have no plans to call on you, Clarice, the world being more interesting with you in it” (366).

Interestingly enough the difference of representation of this touch in the novel underlines the same reversibility and the same deep and human acknowledgement of each other’s embodied and desiring humanity:

- Good-bye, Clarice. Will you let me know if ever the lambs stop screaming?
- Yes
- Pembry was taking her arm. It was go or fight him.
- Yes, she said. I’ll tell you
- Do you promise?
- Yes
- Then why not finish the arch? Take your case file with you, Clarice, I won’t need it anymore.” He held it at arm’s length through the bars, his forefinger along the spine. She reached across the barrier and took it. For an instant the tip of her forefinger touched Dr. Lecter’s. The touched crackled in his eyes.
- Thank you, Clarice
- Thank you, Dr. Lecter
- And this is how he remained in Starling’s mind. Caught in the instant when he did not mock. Standing in his white cell, arched like a dancer, his hands clasped in front of him and his head slightly to the side. (231)

In addition to the fact that the novel stresses even more the profound respect that the characters have for each other (“Will you let me know,” “Do you promise”), finishing with a dramatic and end-of-analysis-like “Thank you,” it is Clarice who touches Dr. Lecter in the novel version. The intense pleasure that Dr. Lecter receives from this touch, the crackling in his eyes, without being specified and participating in freezing him in his mystery, betrays however his desire and his ability to be moved, a visual caress.

This chapter and analysis of the initiation in embodiment that Clarice undergoes thanks to Dr. Lecter has allowed me to define the specific knowledge residing in sensa-

tions, and paradigmatically in touch, that Merleau-Ponty sometimes describe as Flesh. The Flesh is not defined by the inside “meat” of the body but on the contrary, is the specific power of the body to extend beyond its physical limits thanks to its reversibility and to sense and give meaning to other in an intercorporeality. It is hardly, as I have shown, a reflexive knowledge produced by the mastery of a Cartesian subject, but, on the contrary, is a knowledge given in or folded into consciousness in the structure of perception itself. This embedded knowledge is most of the time silent and invisible and appears only in the methodology of phenomenological reduction and in some extraordinary experiences, like Clarice’s “intertwined-bodies” experience in Frederica’s room.

The notion of Flesh allows me to define a pre-reflexive radical alterity situated in the embeddedness of perception, at the core of our sentient life. If at first sight reflexivity of the Flesh seems to be a relation governed by the Same, it is in fact a crossing-over (*enjambement*) of the fundamental gaps symbolized by the *barre* (slash) in a series of binary oppositions: transcendental/immanent, inside/outside, I/the world, I/my body, etc. These gaps makes the complete reversibility impossible at the ontological level (idealism and empiricism both fail to give an account of consciousness because of its constant crossing-over), and makes embedded consciousness as I live it, a queer event hiding its queerness, a fold between a transcendental leaf and an immanent one. Perception, as crossing-over, as Flesh, is therefore given to us in a fundamental ambiguity that habits tend to reduce but cannot completely muffle. This constant bleeding over one side or another necessary results in an unstable, ambiguous, and always open to interpretation, world of perception. It is an ambiguity that is the very matter of art which is the most

*betraying* companion in exposing its ambiguity while producing standards and traditional ways of looking, hearing, touching, in one word, of feeling.

This analysis also allowed me to broaden the gaps, already cracked open by Irigaray, in the Levinassian notion of caress. If, to develop a queer ethics of Eros, it was necessary to define a field of radical alterity found in the equivocality of perceptions, it is now urgent to define what queerness and Caress point to in this context. I have until now used the words “queer” and “queerness” in their most basic understanding in order to stress ambiguity, uncertainty, or vagueness and I have purposely left aside the question of desire attached to it. In the next chapter I want to address the question of queer desire and articulate it to my reading of Merleau-Ponty’s touch. The Caress will name the intertwinement of touch with desire, a Caress necessarily queered in contact with perception, a queer Caress sliding over the fault lines of a radical alterity.

### Chapter III: The Otherness of The Body

In the preceding chapter, I have argued that the body is always in relation with the other. From this point of view, the word “body” is even questionable and we have seen that Merleau-Ponty prefers the term “intercorporeality,” “reversibility,” and even “Flesh” to describe the foundational relation the body sustains with the world and the other. This pre-discursive relation of the body with its environment has a major consequence for the understanding of the subject. In Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment, the subject of modern philosophy is challenged since there is no transcendental ego to establish an absolute truth. Instead, the ego is always caught in its bodily nature and cannot escape from it. The transcendence of the subject is always bleeding out in immanence. As the sense of touch demonstrates, I am touching and touched, subject and object, without, however, the possibility of a perfect juxtaposition of these two modalities of being. Subjectivity circulates along a line defined by two opposite poles, and always oscillates between an apparent transcendence (when I pronounce the cogito) and quasi-immanence (in habits). In other words, it is within the relation of the subject with his body that a certain interruption of the subject must be thought. It is within the embodiment that a certain heterogeneity, a strangeness to itself, a certain difference, a certain queerness or in Merleau-Ponty’s vocabulary, a certain ambiguity emerges.

This queerness of embodiment is already understood through the concept of intercorporeality, in which bodies appear to always be situated and interconnected, and in

which the sedimentation of these relations form a certain style, a certain way to live and experience the body. Therefore, there is always an otherness lurking at the heart of my body, there is a fundamental alienation of the body, for the body is always in the world, which is to say that my body is always *from* another and *for* another. Even if I know that these sensations are mine, they are also marked by their external and disparate origin. I do not live in the impenetrable bubble of a transcendental Ego, but in the intertwining of bodies and objects emerging from the flesh of the world. We know now that in the body can be found an alterity because the body is always in relation with the other and the world. However two questions remain to be explored. First, we have seen that in order to offer a queer ethics of Eros in Levinas' sense, it is necessary that the caress be in relation with not only an alterity, but a radical alterity. It is only in the encounter with a radical alterity, with a certain ungraspability of existence that the subject can be disrupted, otherwise alterity is reduced to my being. According to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment, my being-a-body-in-the-world is always alienated and penetrated by otherness. However this reversibility is ambiguous and sometimes sounds like a reducing of alterity to my body:

It so happens that my gaze is circumvented by specific spectacles –that of other human bodies and, by extension, of animals. They thus become the ones that invest me precisely when I thought that I was the one who invested them, and I then see the contours in space of a figure that awakens and summons my own body's possibilities as if these gestures and behaviors were my own. I am caught/swallowed up (*happé*) by a second *myself* which is outside of me; this is how I perceive the other (cited in *Être et Chair* 106; Emphasis and translation mine)

In this account of the perception of alterity, the other is given in a blending of sameness and otherness. Despite perception being always a queer intertwining of alterity and identity, we have also seen that Merleau-Ponty leaves room for a radical alterity

since perception is also *enjambement*, or “crossing over,” the gaps drawn by transcendence and immanence, outside and inside, identity and alterity. It is therefore necessary to circumscribe this space of radical alterity, and the ways in which this space always escapes.

Second, in order to articulate Merleau-Ponty’s ontology and Levinas’ caress, the question of desire must be now reintroduced. Until now, I have used the word queer in its traditional meaning in order to draw an ontological argument, as a synonym of strangeness, as a category of the judgment underlying the ambiguity of a being, as a linguistic category having the queer property to save the ability of judging when, in fact, it threatens its ability to associate a subject to a predicate (“What is it? I don’t know. It is queer.”). This internal tension in the word queer, simultaneously exposing the failure of judgement and saving it in the same performative breath, is best demonstrated by its use in identity politics. “I am queer” is in fact a contradiction in itself since strangeness, ambiguity, and queerness can only be a becoming and not a category of being. This property of queerness is best understood in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of ambiguity:

It seems that, by definition, there could be no consciousness of ambiguity without ambiguity of consciousness. This is not a play on words. At the moment when you admit that consciousness of ambiguity is perfectly clear, then the ambiguity is there like this notebook with consciousness in front of it, the consciousness perfectly clear and the ambiguity perfectly ambiguous—then, there is no consciousness of ambiguity. You see the ambiguity as an omnipotent thought would see it. To you, it is no longer ambiguity (*Man and Adversity*, 210).

The ambiguity or queerness cannot be grasped and held in front of me. Queerness testifies that ambiguity appears in a moment of perceptive indeterminacy, like in Escher’s drawings (see 1) in which my body fails to draw coherent topological relations resulting in a fundamental ambiguity of perception. I can meditate on how this illusion is main-

tained by playing with the conventions of the representation of perspective, but this does not dispel the illusion. If I cannot help but be a body *in* the picture to perceive it, being there and walking along the impossible construction of bricks, I can however grasp the illusion by refusing to perceive the totality of the picture, and focus on its moment of disarticulation (especially in the “misrepresentation” of the pillars). It is only by focusing on the limited local effects that I can freeze the general queerness of the picture, have a clear idea of its ambiguity and stamp it as queer. Further, it is because the picture is caught in two becomings, a becoming-tower and a becoming-river that it is ambiguous. Taken into two contradictory movements, a movement of verticality and a movement of horizontality, I cannot make sense of the movement of water – is it a river or is it a waterfall? - literally suspended between two becomings. Language can only freeze queerness by reducing and denaturing its experience. Queerness is therefore about becoming, time, and perception. Queerness cannot *be*, it is the moment of perceptive tension, of possibility, between becomings. It is the surreptitious and stupefying experience in perception of the contradictory movements of Being.



*Figure 3.1 Waterfall. M.C. Escher, 1961*

It is from the perspective of an ontology of queerness or of a queer ontology that I want, in this chapter and the next one, to articulate the two different but related questions of alterity and queer desire. In order to do so, I will rely on Merleau-Ponty's relatively rare but illuminating and definitely queer ideas on desire, ambiguity and alterity that he exposes in his reinterpretation of Lacan's mirror stage. From Merleau-Ponty's reading of the mirror stage, I will offer, in this chapter and the next one, a broader definition of the mirror stage focusing on touching rather than seeing and allowing the overcoming of the ethnocentrism of Lacan's mirror stage.



### 3.1. Sex, Desire and Perception in Merleau-Ponty

From *Phenomenology of Perception* to his course at Le Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty demonstrated a real interest in the question of sexuality. However, since his theorization of sexuality is not grounded in the question of sexual difference, it has sometimes been argued that Merleau-Ponty's universalizing account of the libidinal body ends up being the "universal" body drawn from a masculine perspective. It has therefore been criticized as unfit for the development of a feminist theory of embodiment based on his account of perception. However, this critique seems to ignore that his unquestioning of sexual difference is coherent with his fundamental concepts and, notably, the idea of Flesh as a generalization of the body. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the body goes over its individuality and its "physical" limits in a generalization of its being as the reversibility demonstrates, at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's definition of Flesh. What is generalized is the coordinates of embodied-ness (the phenomenological relations that bodies have with time and space, for instance) that allows the perceiver to make sense of the world and of the other (be it masculine, feminine, animal, or thing). As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert emphasizes: "The generality of the body symmetrically refers to its ability to lend its own structure to the world and to other in the midst of this very process of 'embodiment' (*incorporation*): to have access to these others' generality by generalizing itself and by lending/granting them its own generality" (*Être et Chair*, 107). Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty and, based on Schilder's work, before the "minoritizing" question of sexual difference, it is the more universal question of the intertwining of perception and libido, the intertwining of the "esthesiological" body with the "libidinal" body that must be the focus of a phenomenology of sexuality.

Even if the notion of libidinal body will only appear in 1953, after Merleau-Ponty's reading of Schilder's *Image and Appearance, Phenomenology of Perception* already develops extensively the question of sexuality in a section entitled "The Body as Sexed Being" in the chapter "The Body." In this work, the space given to sexuality is not peripheral but is inserted at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology:

If we therefore seek to highlight the genesis of being in our eyes, we must consider that area of our own experience that visibly only has meaning and reality for us. We must therefore consider our affective milieu/environment. We must seek to see how desire or love make an object or a being begin to exist for us and we will therefore understand how objects and beings can exist in general. (PP, 839. My translation)

Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, sexuality is not a relatively independent dimension of existence but its very heart. Through the discussion of a clinical case, Merleau-Ponty accepts the Freudian account of the fluidity of libido and demonstrates that "an Eros or a Libido must animate an original world. They must give a sexual value or meaning to external stimuli and draw/map for each subject how they will use their objective body" (841; my translation). We can see here how sexuality is already integrated in the idea of reversibility. Libido or Desire, as a coordinate of the embodied life organizes my perceptions and the body is libidinally organized in return. In other words, sexuality is a fundamental dimension not only of my psychological life or my organic body but more radically, sexuality is embedded *in* the perception of the world thanks to the reversibility of the body. If Merleau-Ponty's account is not exempt of a certain heterocentrism, it is also exposes as an original understanding of desire by linking it to the structure of the perceiving body. After the discussion of the clinical case, Merleau-Ponty concludes:

Erotic perception is not a *cogitatio* that is oriented towards a *cogitatum*; what takes place in it, rather, is that, though it, a body targets another body. Erotic perception happens in the world and not in a consciousness. A spectacle takes on a sexual meaning for me not when I represent for myself,

even approximately, its possible relation to sexual organs or to states of pleasure, but, rather, when it exists for my body, for this potency that is always ready to tie together the stimuli emerging in an erotic situation and to adjust a sexual conduct to this situation. [...] Even when it comes to sexuality, which has long been considered as the type of bodily functions, we are not dealing with a peripheral automatism but with an intentionality that follows the general movement of existence and that inflects, bends, and curves with it. (842; my translation)

If Merleau-Ponty meets Freud on the impossibility of determining a strict border between the psychological and the biological (843) and on the fact that sexuality “is the general power that the psychological subject as to adhere to different environments, to define itself through different experiences, to acquire structures of behavior” (844), he also adds his own development and critiques.

First, going beyond Freud, Merleau-Ponty gives to sexuality an existential signification but insists, less against Freud than against Sartre, on the impossibility of reducing one dimension to the other. In this sense, “the sexual drama is ultimately not just the manifestation or symptom of an existential drama,” but on the contrary “there is an osmosis between sexuality and existence. That is to say that if existence disseminates into sexuality, then sexuality reciprocally disseminates into existence, in such a way that, when considering a specific decision or action, it is impossible to tease out the part played by sexual motivation and that played by other motivations.” It is therefore impossible to characterize an act as being either "sexual" or "non-sexual" (855; my translation). This position is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment. If the body is irreducible to an object, that is to say to its objective dimension, sexuality follows the same process. Sexuality is already given as meaningful, transcending its “biological” dimension. But here transcendence has a very specific meaning that Merleau-Ponty takes time to define precisely: “Transcendence is how we will call this movement through

which existence make its own and transforms a factual situation. Precisely because it is transcendence, existence never definitively transcends anything since, if it did so, the tension that defines existence would disappear” (856; my translation). Here it is possible to understand Merleau-Ponty’s critique of Descartes’ dualism. Consciousness as transcendence is never completely separated from the “situation de fait” of having a body, there is in fact a continuous tension between immanence and transcendence, what elsewhere he defines as a dialectic which is “the tension of one existence towards another existence that denies it and without which it could nevertheless not sustain itself” (854).

Therefore, sexuality is not just a domain of existence but penetrates it and is in osmosis with it. But more radically, for Merleau-Ponty sexuality names the very movement of the dialectical existence he describes:

Sexuality cannot be reduced to anything else than what it is, let alone (*en-core moins*) by connecting it to the ambiguity of bodies. This is because, as the body is an object is not ambiguous for thought; it only becomes ambiguous when we experience it, particularly in sexual experience and in the fact of sexuality. To approach sexuality as dialectics is not to bring it to a process of knowledge or to bring the history of a man to his consciousness. Dialectics is not a relation between contradictory and inseparable thoughts: it is, rather, the tension of an existence towards another existence that denies it but without which it could nevertheless not sustain itself. Metaphysics - the emergence of a 'beyond nature' - is not situated on the level of knowledge: it is everywhere and already in the development of sexuality. (854. My translation)

If the body is ambiguous it is “by the fact of sexuality,” and even more radically, if existence is ambiguous it is because of sexuality: “understood as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is extensive to life” (855). But how must this relation of ambiguity be understood? How does the body become ambiguous in contact with sexuality? Since, if we follow Freud, sexuality stems first and foremost from narcissism, how can Merleau-Ponty affirm that sexuality is the movement toward transcendence, that is to say, starts

with “openness to ‘otherness,’” a movement toward otherness? The section of *Phenomenology of Perception* does not address these questions and we will have to turn toward Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the mirror stage to continue this discussion on his phenomenology of sexuality.

### 3.2. Merleau-Ponty and The Mirror Stage

As Emmanuel de Saint Aubert underlines in his detailed account of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of Flesh in *Être et Chair. Du corps au desir: l’habilitation ontologique de la chair* (2013), by the time Merleau-Ponty encounters the theory of the mirror-stage in early 1950, he already has developed different notions supporting the reversibility at the heart of sensation: the body schema, the analogical body, the intercorporeality in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). If these notions commonly introduce a certain ambiguity between me and the other, Merleau-Ponty takes the notions of Ego and other as already constituted. What appears already with the notion of *empiètement* or crossing-over in his lectures at La Sorbonne (1950) is a new way of approaching the problem. This period is indeed crucial for Merleau-Ponty since, it is during this decade and until his death in 1961, that Merleau-Ponty will reformulate in the preparation of the lectures the question of the relation to the other (*autrui*). As the famous notes entitled “self-other, an insufficient formula” testifies and on which we will come back to in the next chapter, Merleau-Ponty challenges Husserl’s account of the other, an account on which Merleau-Ponty relied strongly in *Phenomenology of Perception*. For Merleau-Ponty, Husserl fails to

account for the apparition of the other since Husserl's transcendental Ego<sup>13</sup> is enclosed on itself. Therefore, no "otherness" can ever emerge from this isolated and transcendental subject. Instead, in this note, Merleau-Ponty evokes a "fundamental polymorphism that exempts me from having to constitute the other in the face of the *Ego*. The other is already there and from this other, the *Ego* is constituted" and projects "to describe the pre-egology, the "syncretism," the indivision or transitivity" (quoted in EC, 133). This note is paradigmatic of the new developments that Merleau-Ponty undertook since 1950, for here Merleau-Ponty shows specific interest not only in the *development* of the Ego, merging in his lectures psychoanalysis and developmental psychology, but also in the specific *alienation* of the ego in the other. Two notions that prompt Merleau-Ponty's interest in Lacan's mirror stage.

This alienation had already been noted by Merleau-Ponty in his notion of "empiement" or encroaching. This encroaching is in fact directly related to previous notions such as crossing-over or intercorporeality. Since there is always an element of otherness in my perception, there is always a risk that this alterity conquers part of my perceptual horizon. What can be named positively as com-passion (from latin, literally *to suffer with*) can also negatively become horror. Here, Merleau-Ponty is close to Sartre philosophy of horror, as the sudden appearance of a threatening other in the field of my consciousness. This encroachment is also well known by psychoanalysts and of horror writers, relying on uncontrolled biological or thought processes to tell tales of invasion (*Alien*) or posses-

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<sup>13</sup> Here the transcendental must be understood in its more traditional sense, that is to say as pure of the causal influences of experience.

sion (*The Exorcist*). The possibility of a negativity linked to intercorporeality will therefore prompt Merleau-Ponty to read Lacan's developments of the mirror stage.

But Merleau-Ponty will also use the mirror-stage to define more clearly his concept of ambiguity and how this notion is linked to his ontology. The notion of ambiguity appears already in *Phenomenology of Perception* along the notion of intercorporeality and, I argue, shares a common feature that will help us to situate a radical alterity in the body and, consequently in sexuality. From the notion of intercorporeality springs notions such as crossing-over (*enjambement*) and encroachment (*empietement*). These notions define the ambiguous status of the body, hovering over transcendence and immanence, and the potential threatening irruption of an otherness within the field of my perception. Taken together, Merleau-Ponty argues that our perceptions are never closed on themselves but always open to an otherness since perception bears the mark of this alterity of my body. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty tries to circumscribe this phenomenon by the notion of ambiguity, which is linked first to the temporality of the body and the belatedness of consciousness. In a sense, the notion of ambiguity is closed to Derrida's differance, in the sense that it underlines the impossibility of consciousness to close on itself, to superpose the Ego with the I. Therefore perceptions of objects are always surrounded by a halo of otherness, open to another angle of perception for instance, because of the body's intercorporeality. Ambiguity is therefore at first linked to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of time and of consciousness as Jack Reynolds underlines:

According to Merleau-Ponty, ambiguity prevails both in my perception of things, and in the knowledge I have of myself, primarily because of our temporal situation which he insists cannot but be ambiguous. [...]. Merleau-Ponty seems to be suggesting that the relationship that we have to ourselves is one that is always typified by *alterity*, on account of a temporal explosion towards the future that precludes us ever being self-

present. [The term "alterity" is basically synonymous with otherness and radical difference, but it also emphasizes change and transformation in a way that these terms might not.]” (*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

We can see here that a certain idea of radical alterity is slowly taking shape. Radical alterity or in Merleau-Ponty’s term, ambiguity, is the constant opening to otherness within perception. In a later discussion, Merleau-Ponty comes back to his notion of ambiguity. In this interview, there are three moments in which Merleau-Ponty defines more clearly his ambiguity with other notions that we have already encountered. First, Father Dubarle traces links between Merleau-Ponty’s idea of ambiguity to Aristotle’s actuality. This Aristotelian notion aims to explain the passage “from the body to the soul and from the soul into the body” (MA, 209). Merleau-Ponty agrees with this analogy since ambiguity is in fact linked to the crossing-over or the bleeding out of transcendence into immanence. Ambiguity therefore names the ungraspable thresholds, the ambiguous openness to otherness. Later, Merleau-Ponty tries to define ambiguity with a Freudian example:

In Freudianism there is a double relation between the higher and the lower. The higher, adult life, the higher forms of action, etc., are all connected with the past of the infant. Consequently, the higher is connected to the lower. But in another sense, the life of the child is treated entirely like *premature* adult life. The notion of prematuration, if common among psychoanalysts, changes the relation; here, we can no longer explain the lower by the higher. The alleged lower, namely the infant, is regarded as wanting immediately to be adult. This is the course of its drama. It is this circular relation that I call ambiguity. (MA, 210)

For Merleau-Ponty, this is precisely the figure of the circularity, that is to say the dynamic movement between different points of view, and tension toward states of being, that defines ambiguity. However, Merleau-Ponty, using psychoanalysis once more, argues that ambiguity cannot be mistaken for ambivalence. Ambivalence, like the good mother and the bad mother, is a “thought in which the same object, or the same being, is qualified in two irreconcilable ways.” Merleau-Ponty comments:



Melanie Klein shows that the ambiguity which can be found in adult thought, and which perhaps even characterizes it, is not at all ambivalence. It does not consist in having two alternative images of the same object, but in firmly and truly thinking that the *same* object is good and bad. When I speak of ambiguity, this does not mean a wavering thought which passes from white to black, affirming first the black and then the white. I want to speak of a thought that discerns different relations between things, the interior movement that makes them participate in their contraries (MA, 217)

These different examples that Merleau-Ponty gives, and despite their contradictory nature (is ambiguity linked to the body or to thought? Is it the co-existence of contradictory conceptions, or the movement unifying them?) seem taken altogether to pinpoint a direction that I already determined thanks to Escher's drawing. These examples underline not the co-existence of contradictory positions, but an internal *tension*, a movement toward otherness contained *within* perception. We can already see the connection with Merleau-Ponty of intercorporeality, crossing-over, and encroachment. In Merleau-Ponty's ontology, because the body is always in relation to another it is always open to this point of view. A certain otherness therefore appears in perception, but not in actuality, but as potentiality, as in Escher's painting in which, when first viewing the drawing, can give us the general meaning of the drawing and yet, something is off, a certain queerness or ambiguity demands more attention and disturbs our perceptive habits.

It is precisely this aspect, this ambiguity, this threshold, or what I want to define as radical alterity, that Merleau-Ponty gives an account thanks to a very specific reading of Lacan's mirror stage. But in order to fully understand Merleau-Ponty's reading, I have to give the intellectual context framing his reading. Shilder, as it has already been mentioned, is a major influence on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Interestingly enough, Shilder's developed analysis of the mirror which, for obvious chronological reasons, is independent of Wallon's discovery and Lacan's developments. At the core of Shilder's ac-

count of the body image is that it remains fundamentally lacking. As Saint-Aubert comments: “It is true that ‘I am my body,’ but this *being* is fundamentally incomplete, which induces a secret correlation between being one’s body and *being to the world, being to the other*” (EC, 187) Because the body is always to the world it cannot be thought of as separate, as an independent being, full of its being, but must be thought of as lacking, as always open to otherness. It is in this context that Shilder’s comments on our fascination for mirror must be understood:

Our own body is in no way better known to us than the bodies of others. We should not use the mirror so eagerly if it were otherwise. The interest we have in the mirror is the expression of the lability of our own postural model of the body, of the incompleteness of the immediate data, of the necessity of building up the image of our body in a continual constructive effort. (Quoted in EC, 273)

However, it is most importantly in Shilder’s example of the pipe that Merleau-Ponty will not only draw connections between his concept of intercorporeality and Lacan’s mirror, but will give interesting insights on the relationship between sight and touch:

A simple experience may emphasize again that the community between the body-image outside and the body exists already in the sphere of perception. I sit about ten feet away from a mirror holding a pipe or a pencil in my hand and look into the mirror. I press my fingers tightly against the pipe and have a clear-cut feeling of pressure in my fingers. When I look intently at the picture of my hand in the mirror I now feel clearly that the sensation of pressure is not only in my fingers in my own hand, but also in the hand which is twenty feet distant in the mirror. [...] This feeling is therefore not only in my actual hand but also in the hand of the mirror. One could say that the postural model of the body is also present in my picture in the mirror. Not only is it the optic picture but it carries with it tactile sensation. My postural model of the body is in a picture outside myself. But is not every other person like a picture of myself? (Quoted in EC, 188)

These considerations allow me to draw the relationships between identity, identification and radical alterity. The reversibility of sensations at the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality traces the borders of an other, but an other that does

not escape from the problem of identification. I “lend my body” to the other, and in a way, I reduce the other to my sensitive life. However, at the heart of the process on identification is, according to Shilder, a fundamental incompleteness of being. This theme is incorporated in Merleau-Ponty’s notes and final text of his course on Nature:

The bodily schema as embodiment. This is what the bodily schema is, in the end: a relation of being between my body and the world, the different aspects of my body, a relation of ejection-introjection, of embodiment. It can extend to things (clothing and bodily schema), it can eject a part of the body, it is therefore not made of specific parts. It is a being made up of lacunae (it is hollow within). (Quoted in EC, 189)

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty clearly insists on the intertwined relation of symmetry and identification (ejection and introjection) and the body-image as lacking. This body-image as lacking is a condition of possibility of the logic of symmetry. It is because my body is open to the other that I can lend my flesh to it and borrow its flesh in return. However, this mirroring relation, “The ghost of the mirror lingers outside of my flesh, and by the same token, all that is invisible in my body can invest the other bodies that I can see. Henceforth, my body can transfer perceived segment onto the bodies of others, just as my substance enters them; the man is mirror for man. (*L’Œil et l’esprit*, 1601. My translation), is only possible thanks a fundamental lack in the body-image, and this lack also circulates between bodies producing this element of indeterminacy and of this aura of generality. What I lend is an open structure (a flesh in Merleau-Ponty’s vocabulary) more than an image, an open structure deeply marked by my body as being-to-the-world.

This intertwinement of radical alterity to identity (or the logics of destruction to production) is a theme that will deeply mark modern philosophy and Merleau-Ponty certainly participates in this movement. Freud already mentioned that Thanatos never appears by itself but always in connection to some erotic drive. The same theme is present

in Deleuze where radical difference is inseparable to repetition, and obviously in Lacan where the Real appears within the Symbolic.

This incorporation of Shilder's mirror within the Merleau-Ponty's philosophy will influence and twist his reading of Lacan's mirror stage. Merleau-Ponty, as noted by Emile Jalley<sup>14</sup>, is probably the first philosopher to comment and integrate the mirror-stage in his work. He sees in the mirror stage another version of his notion of encroachment:

Lacan takes up and enriches the myth of Narcissus who is so taken by passion for his own image that he attempts to get closer to it by throwing himself in the water and dies. Freud, in particular, had seen the sexual component in narcissism, how the libido is oriented towards its own body. Lacan fully uses the legend and works its other components into understanding it: 1) the tendency towards death and towards self-annihilation; 2) the preference for the self as spectacle (in an examination or inventory of oneself); 3) the solitary component implied in narcissism: the narcissistic adult, seductor and despot, is so desirous to see and to be seen and he simultaneously refuses [to give] himself to other. The mirror thus also allows this subject to close in on itself and to establish a system of reciprocity that facilitates the intrusion of other. (Quoted in EC, 173. My translation)

Merleau-Ponty, influenced by Shilder's mirror, will be drawn to Lacan's mirror stage for its circularity and for the theme of negativity that he reads as encroachment. However, Merleau-Ponty insists on a point that completely subverts Lacan's mirror stage, especially his developments on the notion of misrecognition, and allows him to reintroduce the theme of radical alterity in a more positive way. When Merleau-Ponty reads Lacan's version of the mirror stage in 1949, he insists heavily on the depiction of the mirror as "symbolic matrix": "as Lacan claims, the specular image is the 'symbolic matrix,' towards which the 'I' rushes in a primordial way before becoming an object [by taking part] in the dialectics of identification with the other" (Quoted in EC, 175. My transla-

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<sup>14</sup> Freud, Wallon, Lacan. *L'enfant au miroir*. (p. 173 in *Être et chair*)

tion). By leaving aside the symbolic dimension and insisting on the maternal evocation of the matrix, Merleau-Ponty offers a radical twist in its reading. It is only in a fundamental indifferenciation between the I and the other, an indifferenciation sustained in this passage by the image of the mother's womb, that these two images (I and the Other) can appear. The I is not alienated from the image of the other, but alienated from a more radical alterity blurring the borders between the ego and the other. In other words, in Merleau-Ponty's reading of the mirror stage, the I and the other are much more ambiguously linked than in Lacan's version, and the specular image does not fully captivate and enclose the body-image. We will have the opportunity to discuss this aspect and its relation to tactility more deeply in the next chapter, for the moment I just want to emphasize that for Merleau-Ponty, the specular image loses its privileges and cannot pretend to fully captivate and enclose the ego. Moreover, a radical alterity survives this process, and radical Other that escapes the symbolic (the gaze), but that circulates between bodies as Flesh. The critique that Merleau-Ponty addresses to Descartes is illuminating here. In *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Merleau-Ponty aims at Descartes's critique of perception in his famous *Meditations*. In his second Meditation, Descartes concludes that knowledge comes ultimately from the faculty of judgment and not from the senses:

[...] when looking from a window and saying I see men who pass in the street, I really do not see them, but infer that what I see is men, just as I say that I see wax. And yet what do I see from the window but hats and coats which may cover automatic machines? Yet I judge these to be men. And similarly solely by the faculty of judgment which rests in my mind, I comprehend that which I believed I saw with my eyes. (*Meditations*, 24)

On this critique, Merleau-Ponty comments: "A cartesian doesn't see himself in the mirror: he sees a mannequin, an 'outside' about which he could be entirely justified for thinking that others see him the same way. But this outside, whether for him or for these others, is

a flesh” (OE, 1603. My translation). In Descarte’s philosophy, the recognition of the other is a faculty of judgment, an act of reasoning whereas for Merleau-Ponty the other is given in perception and bears the mark of ambiguity, the other is *de facto* uncanny. This allusion to Freud stresses Merleau-Ponty’s proximity to psychoanalysis in the sense that it does not appear at the end of a rational process, but only because the other is given through intercorporeality. But since the body-image is always lacking or, to stay away from Lacanian formulas, always open to transformation, the other cannot appear without a halo of ambiguity. The openness of my body-image prevents myself from *being*, but throws myself and the other into a becoming, in a tension of possible becomings.

This ethic relying on an original understanding of the body and perception has important consequences for desire which, as we already have seen, cannot be separated from perception. Desire and perception cannot be clearly separated in a phenomenological approach. A man enters a coffee shop and catches my eyes. He is tall, athletic, swarthy, rugged, and has broad shoulders. Not suddenly my world is reduced to the delightful and imaginary exercise of undressing him, he also exudes a halo of eroticism that is literally ex-stasis. My desire does not come from me to him. Desire is in him, in his curvy butt, in his generous bulge, in a soft and yet confident movement of his hand, in the curls of his hair, and in the rolls of his Italian accent. My desire is not a projection of my unconscious, but inhabits the body of the other. Desire is also in the hot tingly sensations I feel between my legs, it is in accelerated movements of my undressing eyes, in the almost imperceptible arching of my back, and in the soft biting of my thumb’s tip. My desire is simultaneously cause and effect. It is an ellipsis, a gap or an excess of potential meanings and actions circulating between he and I. It is *given* within perception and in-

separable from it. My desire has the structure of a caress, incapable of knowing if I touch or if I am touched and yet dependent on a space in-between, a gap, to pursue its movement. Desire is given in the intertwining nature of the Flesh.

Thus, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis the notion of promiscuity which is the desiring version of the notion of encroachment: "My" desire is only the rationalized, ego-bounded, version of an "I want", whereas Desire is promiscuity, the impersonal life animating the weaving of bodies. Desire in Flesh is "The Eros who has multiple pairs of arms and bundles of heads," it is "a pell-mell assemblage of bodies and spirits, promiscuity of faces, speeches, actions, with, between all of them, this cohesion that cannot be declined [...] this inextricable implication" (quoted in EC, 227. My translation) Following Merleau-Ponty's insight, Saint-Aubert describes the effect of "the body of promiscuity" as "dressing everything it touches with its queer fabric of familiarity and ignorance" (222. My translation). This promiscuity of bodies does not equate to a solipsism, a mere extension of an enclosed ego to the entire world, but on the contrary, if promiscuity leaves a "queer fabric of familiarity and ignorance" it is because an element of alterity and openness defines perception and desire.

A quick detour needs to be made, therefore, to articulate perception and desire and how both can be called queer. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty applies his concept of the diacritical nature of language and perception to define what the color "red" is. In this passage, Merleau-Ponty argues that what is called red, is a field of difference, and cannot be understood by itself but must always be contextualized:

The color is yet a variant in another dimension of variation, that of its relations with the surroundings: this red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it, with which it forms a constellation, or with other colors it dominates or that dominate it, that it attracts or that

attract it, that it repels or that repel it. In short, it is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive. It is a concretion of visibility, it is not an atom. (VI, 1757-58. My translation)

We can appreciate here the coherence of Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception as always in relation, and unreducible to a "single" perceiver. Not only to perceive is always in an ambiguous symbiosis with the world (not completely outside, nor inside), but it is deeply marked by its diacritical nature. Red exists thanks to its differences with other colors, and also with other reds and other materials: "Its precise form is bound up with a certain wooly, metallic, or porous configuration or texture, and the quale itself counts for very little compared with these participations" (1757. My translation). Therefore due to the intimate relations between desire and perception, we have to focus on the diacritical nature of desire, that is to say, that, as for Deleuze, by reducing desires to an oedipal structure, one is forced to admit that the potential for difference and change is muted. Desire is a multiplicity of sensations, a constellation of sensations that only appear thanks to the dark spaces enhancing their shining.

Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, the mirror stage becomes the psychological example of the diacritic nature of perception and desire. Far from offering a stable image of which I can identify, the mirror, as Lacan himself stresses, is different (the left and right is reversed in the mirror). My identification is indexed on difference that brings its elements of queerness into desire and perception, elements of familiarity and ignorance. Encroachment or promiscuity are notions trying to make sense of this feeling of ambiguity and a potential threat that this element of difference introduces. As Merleau-Ponty's ontology underscores, the diacritic nature of being, that is to say a being always taken in a field of difference, a being that must therefore be defined as becoming, one can argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers the possibility to link body, perception, and de-



sire in a unique theoretical gesture while stressing their fundamental indexation to queerness as the haunting and disturbing presence at heart within our sentient and desiring lives. According to Merleau-Ponty, my being to the world is therefore always promiscuous in the sense that it is the accumulation of “pell-mell assemblage of bodies and spirits”, past and present sensations, both living outside and inside of me, each with their own colors and variations, forming the ever-changing glittery and intensive nature of my perceptive life.

In the following development I would like to come back to this notion of promiscuity as “pell-mell assemblage” to allow us to understand how the symbol of the hands on *The Hands of Orlacs* functions. I want to argue that the hands cannot be reduce to a unique set of images, on the contrary, the symbol of the end is overdetermined by different desires, perceptions and objects rendering the symbol of the hands fundamentally queer.

### **3.3. Intertwinement of Desires in *The Hands of Orlac***

We have also seen the concept of the diacritic, inherited from Saussure, is a fundamental key concept to understand his philosophy of perception and desire. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy questions the limits of the body and its “fullness”. Because of an always changing body schema, because of its fundamental openness to contextual elements (spatial, historical, etc.), a certain ambiguity is constitutive of my perceptions. To cite Michel Foucault: “We do not live in a neutral and white, we do not live, we do not love in the rectangle of a sheet of paper” (Les hétérotopies. My translation). As opposed to the geometric space, my space is open to contextual elements that make it ambiguous. But more

fundamentally, and as Foucault will notice too, that space is shaped by desire. When I am in love, the world acquires a beauty never experienced before. The world sings love along with me. However, we have also seen, thanks to the notion of encroachment and promiscuity that the body bears, a certain negativity that can be threatening. To an enclosed subject, the alterity at the heart of the body and desire can threaten to literally undo her world, her perception, and her desire. Because the meaning of my desire is always context dependent, it can be contaminated by other objects, other meanings. Horror films are well acquainted with this contamination of desire, and a lot of the techniques employed in these films work with this encroachment, that is to say a threatening apparition of ambiguity because desire is contaminated by an unusual context. For instance, one can read *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) as a desire for maternity going astray by the contamination of the desires of others. Because of the fundamental openness of my desire, the meaning of my desire is always susceptible to change. But more fundamentally, if we follow Merleau-Ponty, it is possible to affirm that to perceive is already to desire. Because my world is fueled by desire, watching a zombie eating a corpse is already being too close to a foreign desire. I can refuse to recognize this desire as mine, but this desire already makes sense to my body, it is already being situated *vis a vis* this other's ingestive activity and making sense of it, it is already too close to a foreign desire, and being threatened by this proximity, by the promiscuity of bodies. What the homophobe experiences when watching a same-sex couple make love is certainly disgust only if this sexual activity already makes sense for him, only if this desire haunts its perceptions and enters in the always open constellation of his desires. Because I cannot *not* be in relation with other bodies, the desire of the other is already part of my desiring possibilities. "Eros" as Merleau-

Ponty puts it, is made of “multiple pairs of arms and bundles of heads.” Eros is the promiscuity of bodies, perceptions and desires.

I would like therefore to explore this promiscuity in relation to the body, perception, and desires thanks to an analysis of the desiring hands in the horror movie *The Hands of Orlac* (1924). Clearly, the notion of encroachment is useful to understand the horror of the movie. Moreover, the movie allows to clearly see a certain radical alterity at play. Not only is Orlac possessed by a desire that is not his, but the whole structure of desires, the whole constellation of desires changes because of the emergence of a foreign element.

In 1924, Robert Wiene (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920) released *The Hands of Orlac*, a silent Austrian movie adapted from the French novel by Maurice Renard and featuring Conrad Veidt as Paul Orlac. Veidt had already distinguished himself for his performance as Caligari’s somnambulist and embodied the German Expressionist horror acting style. As with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, released two years after the First World War and which can be read as a post-war critique of authoritarianism, *The Hands of Orlac* also finds its theme in the European post-war cultural context. The post First World War society, due to the conjugated effects of medical progresses and newly developed weapons aiming at injuring bodies more than killing them, is haunted by the visions of disfigured and dismembered soldiers. This cultural context durably influenced the body horror genre, a genre spreading from Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, to James Wan’s *Saw* (2004), through Clive Barker’s *Hellraiser* (1987) and which, as Kelly Hurley describes it, is “a hybrid genre that recombines the narrative [...] conventions of the science fiction, horror and suspense [fiction and] film in order to stage a spectacle of the human body defamil-

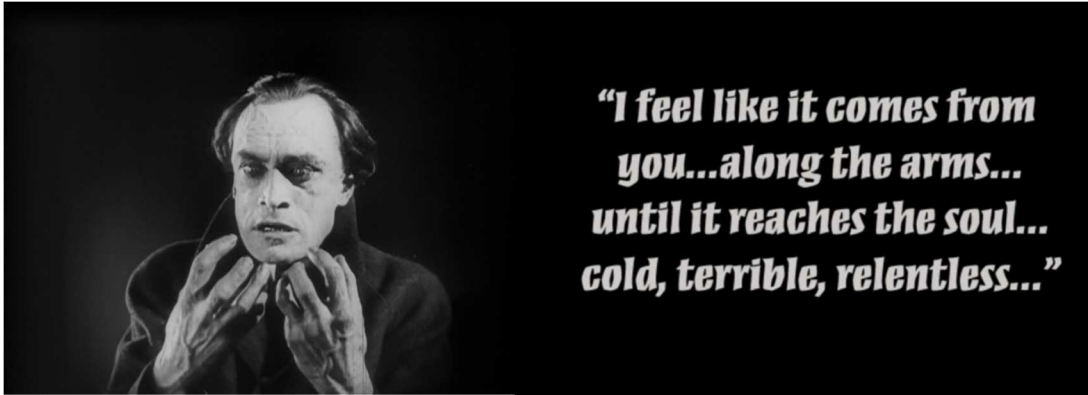
iarized, rendered other” (1995, 203). *The Man Who Laughs* (1926), featuring a circus performer whose face is permanently disfigured by a monstrous grin, or *The Hands of Orlac*, are among these movies in which the otherness of the body is rendered palpable thanks to a representation of a dismembered body and of the sometimes horrifying results of the developments of prosthetics or the lack thereof.

However, *The Hands of Orlac* stands out by the introduction of another theme. Not only does the body appear as other by underlying its materiality, as a desubjectified object that can be broken and fixed but more horrifying in this movie the body is depicted as having a will of its own, as a distinct subject capable of overpowering the feeble defenses of the ego. This movie, shot in Vienna, uses a certain Freudian imagery to figuratively shape the theme of alterity, an imaginary from which springs a certain eroticism. In this movie, Paul Orlac is a famous pianist who, following a train wreck, has his hands severed. However, the doctors attempt a hand transplant, hands which will be later revealed as belonging to the serial killer, Vasseur, executed the same day of Orlac’s operation. Following this revelation, Orlac is convinced that his hands are hungry for blood and a wrongdoer pretending to be Vasseur takes advantage of Orlac’s obsession to con him into believing that Orlac killed his own father and attempts to blackmail Orlac. The movie concludes with a reaffirmation of the power of the mind over the body after the conman’s deceptions are revealed. Despite this ideological reaffirmation of the power of the mind over the body, it is interesting that the movie plays with the reversal of this opposition in order to provoke a sense of horror and dread in the spectator, and in a way, the movie remains ambiguous in its ideological affirmation. If Paul Orlac was tricked, do we have to understand that Paul’s troubled relation with his hands is just the effect of a mo-

mentary psychotic episode? If so, how do we make sense of this psychosis and what desire shapes its dynamic?

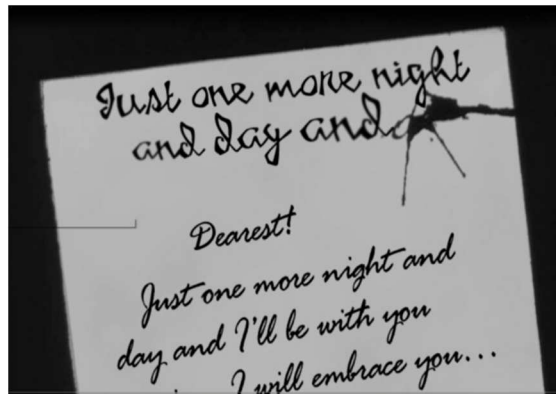
I want to argue in this reading that the imagery of the hand transplantation and Orlac's relation to his hands are in fact shaped by a multiplicity of desires that suddenly appear in the *context* of this transplantation. This multiplicity of desire is distributed along a line defined by three opposite images, an erotic caress, metonymy for sexuality, a tinkling hand, reminder of Orlac's libidinal investment in music and in the piano, and finally a pair of killing hands, metonymy for the alterity of desire. The expression "alterity of desire" is taken very seriously in this movie since the alterity of desire is literally the desire of an other. What I want to emphasize in this reading are the ways in which this introduction of a foreign desire, is literally incorporated to Orlac's body, but more fundamentally to other desires, changing the whole structure of desires and changing therefore Orlac's world.

The slow redefinition of Orlac's desires is metonymically expressed by the changing relation that Orlac sustains with his hands. It is visually expressed by three sets of images, each of them in relation to different desires. The first one I would like to examine is the hands as metonymy for murderous desire. This theme is the more obvious and the more identifiable visually. Veidt's performance remarkably renders the sense of dispossession he experiences following the transplantation in the following shots.



*Figure 3.2 Orlac's haptic death drive*

Throughout the movie, many scenes stress the fact that the newly transplanted hands have a life of their own and a sense of identity. In a touching scene in which Orlac tries to replicate the love letter he wrote with his original hands, he is instantly horrified when he realizes that his handwriting, a bodily expression of himself, is in fact that of the killer, Vasseur. (4)



*Figure 3.3 Different handwritings from the same hand*

The hands are therefore the site of alterity since it is haunted by a murderous desire. This murderous desire is underscored by its association with Vasseur's dagger, that Orlac initially finds stabbed into its door. This weapon enhances the symbolical association of hands with murderous desire in the movie. In a scene where Orlac seems to be

sleepwalking and lead by his hands, he suddenly grasps the dagger and starts stabbing an imaginary body in front of his petrified wife.



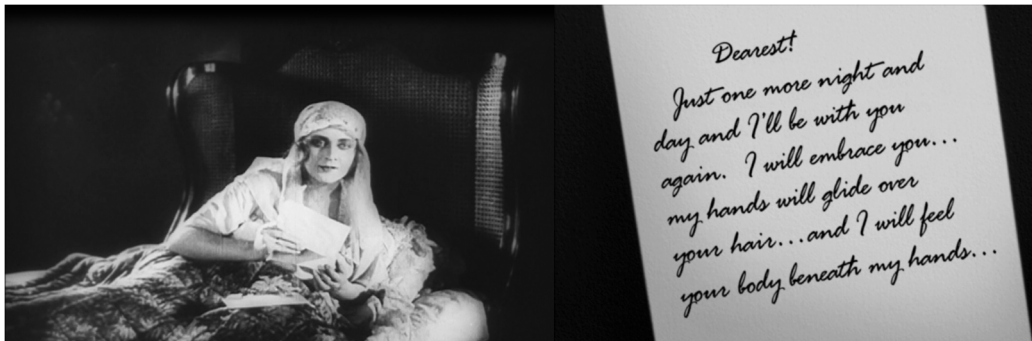
*Figure 3.4 Yvonne Orlac witnesses her husband criminal drive*

The dagger becomes the symbol of an obscure desire reinforced by its marking. If the spectators know that the dagger belongs to Vasseur, this association is however strange since the only letter found on the dagger is the letter “X”. This “X” which, when signed with it, accounts for an identity while being at the same time the symbol of its “lack”, stresses the anonymity of desire. Vasseur’s murderous desire is potentially everybody’s desire.

The theme of the murderous hands can therefore be read as a “pre-post-modern” critique of identity since it challenges not only the limits of the body and personal desires but also questions the power of the mind over the body. The theme of the murderous hands allows us to challenge the assumption that the subject controls his body. When Orlac confesses his anxieties to the surgeon who performed the surgery, an intertitle informs the spectator of the doctor’s answer: “The hands don’t rule the person... the head and the heart lead the body... and command the hands...” If eventually the end of the movie will reaffirm the Cartesian split between the body and the soul and the primacy of

the soul over the body, the horror in *The Hands of Orlac* stems from a doubt on the modern postulate.

If the hands are a metonymy for murderous desires, they are also a metonymy for erotic desires. This sexualization of the hands appears at the very beginning of the movie. Yvonne Orlac (Alexandra Sorina), lying down on a couch, is lasciviously reading a letter from her husband, waiting for his caresses.



*Figure 3.5 The caress as erotic object*

From the beginning of the movie, Orlac's hands acquire an erotic dimension expressed by the image of a caress, "my hands will glide over your hair... and I will feel your body beneath my hands..." However, this caress will soon enter into contact with more obscure desires that will soon contaminate each other's. The irruption of an alien desire will taint the positive image of the caress with a more negative aspect. This negative transformation of desire appears when Orlac's hands are amputated. The erotic dimension is overdetermined by a violent threat of castration. If the amputation of Orlac's hands are associated with the image of castration and male impotency, it also stresses the impossibility to "feel" this other. As soon as Orlac discovers his hands' origin, the violence of castration turns into a murderous desire, but a murderous desire tainted by the proximity of erotic desire. The caress becomes a painful caress. This encroachment of an



alien desire over Orlac's erotic life is best illustrated in the mysterious scene featuring Orlac and his maid, Regine (Carmen Cartellieri). Vasseur's plan is to kill Orlac's father and to set up the crime scene in such way that Orlac will believe he is the killer. Once Orlac is convinced of his involvement in his father's death, Vasseur wants to blackmail Orlac to extort his inheritance. For his plan to succeed, Vasseur needs an accomplice that he will find in Regine, Orlac's maid. She is also blackmailed by Vasseur and tries to resist his commands. In one particular scene, Vasseur meets Regine and asks her to convince Orlac to visit his father. In order to do so, Regine has to "Seduce his hands," an injunction that remains mysterious until the next scene. Orlac, sitting on a couch, is caught in a reverie. Regine approaches him slowly, crawling on the floor and starts kissing his right hand. Slowly, Orlac's hands are seduced and they begin to caress Regine's hair. In using the same symbolism of the love letter and close-ups on Regine's face in obvious erotic extasis (8), the scene suggests an adulterous relation between Orlac and his maid, stressing the metonymical link unifying associating Orlac's hands with erotic desires.

However, Orlac's sexual desire is tainted by a darker presence, a presence suggested quickly by Regine's reaction. If her face initially expressed pleasure, quickly her face expresses pain and horror.



Figure 3.6 *The ambiguity of the caress*

The following intertitle explicitly intertwines erotic desire with murderous desire: “Don’t touch me... Your hands hurt... like the hands of a killer.” Following Merleau-Ponty’s account of desire as always in proximity or in relation with other desires, one can see here how *The Hands of Orlac* renders that encroachment of an alien desire. These two desires, an erotic one and a murderous one, influence each other, borrowing shades and hues from each other. The repetition of the motif of the caress is identifiable and nonetheless, appears with a difference since the context of its meaning has changed by the irruption of another desire. Following the discovery of the criminal origins of the hands, both symbols, the caress and the stabbing hand, influence each other and cannot be read without the other. The following example will continue to demonstrate that desires appear in an open structure, always in relation with a multiplicity of desires and that, not only the expression of desire cannot be read without a reference to its relation with other desires, but it cannot be repeated *per se* due to its ever changing environment.

The third line of interpretation will link erotic desire and murderous desire with a set of images expressing Orlac’s obsession with the piano. Following the introductory scene of Yvonne reading her husband’s love letter, the face of the famous pianist Paul Orlac appears on the page of a newspaper announcing his last concert (10).



*Figure 3.7 Orlac, a famous pianist*

Orlac's relation to the piano is eroticized from the very beginning of the movie. While the spectator is still contemplating the image of Orlac's hands caressing Yvonne's, an image of Orlac's hands adroitly and graciously tickling the keys of the piano is presented (11). The caress and the piano mutually influence each other to open a new set of images and meanings. This association of the piano with an erotic desire is later illustrated by Orlac's hands languorously caressing the piano and kissing it.



*Figure 3.8 The piano as object of the caress*

Since the caress as metonymy for sexual desire is threatened by Orlac's amputation and can be read as a castration anxiety, this aspect will be mirrored in Orlac's relation to the piano. The impossibility of playing the piano after the transplantation is de-

pictured as a loss of individuality, as a threat to enjoy life. As his wife stresses after the train wreck “his hands are his life. They are more than his life,” and this mysterious formulation (what can be *more* precious than life?), leaves a space pointing toward a space of negativity (What is more than life if not *jouissance* itself?). Therefore, if the relation with the piano is sexualized it is not the only influence that this relation receives. In fact, a set of images stresses the relation of the piano with murderous desire. The movie exploits the imaginary surrounding the piano to turn the piano into a symbol of murderous desire.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the piano became the object of a veritable fetishization. Because the piano was at first essentially a feminine occupation allowing class distinction, the piano, object of pleasure, soon was tainted by the hours of painful dedication that his mastery demanded. New methods of teaching emphasizing repetition (Carl Czerny’s for instance), the normalization of body position, and the invention of controlling devices forcing the student to always develop a better agility (the metronome in 1815) turned piano into such an object of discipline that in some nineteenth century methods student’s practice time loomed so large and burdensome that that the few shortened examples of real music were represented as mere “Rests form Study”, “Recreations”, or “Amusements.” This transformation is also reflected at the institutional level with the creation of *Conservatoire de musique* (1800 in Paris, 1817 in Vienna) which produced to distinguish musicians mainly on the basis of their technical skills. The piano therefore became a sadomasochist object as in *The Hands of Orlac*, but closer to us, in movies such as *The Piano* (1993), *The Piano Teacher* (2001), or *The Page Turner* (2006). Read as a sadomasochist relation, the mastery over the piano stresses the othering

of the body. Not only the body has to be controlled as an object, desubjectifying the relation to one's body, but also demands to let the body speak. To a certain extent, playing the piano demands an acquisition of habits, which, when executed, appear to have a life of their own. As the execution of a learned sequence of movements can be perturbed if one starts reflecting on the movements performed, the piano demands the othering of the body and forces the pianist to let the body speak. Therefore, as a pianist and virtuoso, Paul Orlac is haunted by a death drive that is clearly represented in the movie. When Paul Orlac looks for a place to hide the knife belonging to Vasseur and with which he supposedly killed his father, it is the case of his piano that he will find a symbolically proper hideout.



*Figure 3.9 Symbolic association between Vasseur's knife and the piano*

The piano as symbol for a death drive is also present in the movie when Orlac, convinced that his hands have a will of their own, plays on a gramophone a record of Chopin's Nocturno, performed by himself. In front of the gramophone, Orlac's hands start softly sliding on an imaginary keyboard when suddenly the fingers bend like claws and start lacerating an imaginary enemy.



*Figure 3.10 Orlac's claw-like fingers*

This line of interpretation is also supported by an erotization of the keyboard. At the very beginning of the movie, after evoking the image of hands gliding across hair, the director shows Orlac's face on the newspaper and just after, Orlac's hands sensually gliding over the keyboard. The hands are not only the space of an encounter with alterity ("I will feel your body beneath my hands"), but this space is also a contested space inhabited by the desire of the other.

We have seen that the symbolism of the hands in *The Hands of Orlac* are a metonymy for Orlac's desire. However, the metonymy is overdetermined and highly ambiguous since this symbol moves along three lines of interpretation: An erotic one with the hands as caress, a murderous one with the image of the stabbing hands, and finally a musical one expressed by the pianist's hands. I argue that the hands as metonymy of desire illustrate what Merleau-Ponty defines as the diacritic dimension of perception and desire, that is to say that desire and perception always appear in a specific context determining their meaning. As the color red does not exist in and of itself, but only as a multiplicity of red expressed within a field of radical difference, desire only appears in relation to other desires. In that sense, if the hands of Orlac are a metonymy for his desire, this desire cannot be reduced to a line of interpretation. Because of the proximity of other desires and

desires of others, desire cannot be reduced to a stable structure and must be read instead as a becoming, as inhabited, as in Escher's drawing, by different tendencies and tensions.

The illusion of a stable desire emerges when a stable subject is affirmed, but what Merleau-Ponty stresses is that due to the intercorporeal nature of perception and desire, not only the attribution of desire by the subject is dubious, but the expression and meaning of desire is relative to the context of its expression and always open to changes in context. For Merleau-Ponty, desire has an ambiguous mode of expression. It is simultaneously personal and impersonal, internal and external, since I can identify in me the expression of my desire but it also participates in the constitution of perceptions.

In this chapter, I started with two questions in mind. First, having demonstrated that presence of otherness within my embodied life (chapter I), I also stressed the fact that Merleau-Ponty's account of this otherness remained ambiguous. In some formulations, ("I lend my body to the world") it sounds as if the world is in fact reduced to my point of view and it seemed that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy would not acknowledge the presence of a radical difference, a fundamental dimension necessary to offer a queer philosophy of Eros. Second, I wanted to link the essential queerness of perception with queer desire. By demonstrating the intertwining of perception and desire, I wanted to offer a definition of queerness that could account for both dimensions of life.

Following Merleau-Ponty's insight on the mirror stage and his reading as a "symbolic matrix" within which simultaneously appear the other and the I, in one unique perceptive and desiring gesture, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty stressed the importance of the notion of the diacritic to understand the formation of the Ego and its relation to per-

ception and desire. Merleau-Ponty's interest in the Mirror stage is that it demonstrates that perception, desire, the other and the I, have a common origin, stem from a common matrix that has a certain conceptual relation with his notion of Flesh. The I and the other appear only after a slow process of differentiation within an ambiguous field of perceptions and desires. Merleau-Ponty refuses to give the I a primacy or an anteriority in this process. On the contrary, the mirror stage underlines the intertwining of the I with the other and must be read as an illustration of the diacritic nature of perception and desire.

If notions such as intertwining and intercorporeality underline this intertwining of the I with the other, then the notion of Flesh insists on the radical difference underlying this process of differentiation. In that sense my desire and perception are inhabited by a double otherness. Not only do my perceptions and desires only acquire meaning in a unique relation with other objects and bodies (my perceptive and desiring life is always situated and contextualized), but it also bears the mark of its deeper origin, a Flesh or a matrix guaranteeing its dynamic nature, its tension, its fluidity, making any desires and perceptions originally ambiguous, radically queer, fundamentally in relation to other perceptions and desires.

In the next chapter, I will offer a critique of the mirror stage and question Merleau-Ponty's assumptions regarding the sense of touch and sight. I will argue that focusing on another account of the formation of the Ego (Dolto, Anzieu), will allow a better account of Merleau-Ponty's "symbolic matrix" and will define touch as the sense offering an original experience of radical difference.



## Chapter IV: The Haunted Mirror and the Evil Doll: For an Haptic Critique of The Mirror Stage

*“The Mirror will always be haunted by what is not found within it”* Sabine Melchior-Bonnet

In this chapter I will focus on two particular literary and cinematographic tropes of the horror and fantasy genres, the haunted mirror and the evil doll. I argue that these tropes taken together testify to a shortcoming in Lacan’s account of the mirror stage, a shortcoming mainly due to his relative disinterest in the haptic dimension foregrounding identification.

### 4.1. A short history of the mirror

The mirror stage is the most famous and commonly referred to concept of Lacan, especially in the field of Film Studies, to the point where its mere mention most often raises indifference rather than excitement and intellectual interest. This appropriation, and the slow blunting of the psychoanalytic concept by literary and film studies hides not only the complex history of the concept but also the revolutionary ways in which the concept allows to think about the subject and its fundamental negativity.

In fact the use of the powerful image of the mirror in order to offer a theory of the subject is not proper to Lacan. The motif of the double whether it is in water with the myth of Narcissus, or in the *Ka* of Ancient Egypt, had already been used to account for a certain spiritual or psychological nature of the subject. However this use of the double intensifies with modernity. The *Doppelgänger*, a term coined by Jean Paul Richter in his novel *Siebenkäs* (1796), arose as a motif and theme within German romantic literature and became a canonical figure of gothic literature. Authors such as E.T.A Hoffmann, Poe, Maupassant, and Wilde have drawn on the figure of the *Doppelgänger* and its uncanny power to tell something about modern subjectivity. However, due to the introduction of new material and cheaper techniques, the nineteenth century allowed every household to own a mirror, and the uncanny power of the reflecting device started to slowly colonize the popular imagination. From the noble hands of the evil queen of Grimm's *Snow White* (1812) to the wall of the petit bourgeois room of the mild-mannered and repressed Dr. Jekyll in Stephenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886), throughout the nineteenth century up to our own time, the mirror undertook a double movement of democratization and metaphorization of the dual nature of the human psyche as the very popular 19<sup>th</sup> century *psyché* demonstrates.

However, the mirror does not only account for this duality within our self but is also a literary device questioning the traditional association between light and truth. For Plato the true, the good, and the beautiful are properties of the transcendental, and since sight allows the experience of beauty, it is the sense placed at the top of its hierarchy of senses. It is true, as the myth of the cave demonstrates, that the sense of sight can be deceiving but it is however sight that will progressively lead us away from the world of

shadows to the world of light. In this way, if Plato in *The Republic* places reflection at the lowest level of imitation since it lacks the tangible reality that even the painting has, he concedes that the immaterial nature of the image points, analogically, at the immaterial nature of the soul. The mirror therefore symbolizes the initial dialectical movement toward transcendence, a symbolic reflection that the philosopher initiates and emulates to lead the soul away from the shadow-like reality of the world and closer to the ablaze firmament of Ideas.

This ambiguous relation to the mirror will continue throughout the Middle Ages where it will be perceived as a reflection of God, or an instrument of the Devil. The Neo-Platonists will draw on the theme of reflection to develop a whole metaphysics of light and reflection establishing the relations between the mirror, the self, and God. For Saint-Augustine, if the human spirit does not let itself be alienated in the illusory reflections of this world (*Soliloquy* II, 6), it is capable of being a vessel of the light of God and to reflect His splendor (*De Trinitate* XV, 20, 39). This reflection of God's beauty also blurs the relation between outside and inside. God and the creature made in His image maintain, more than a relation of intimacy, a relation of extimacy in which, like the Möbius strip, outside and inside are continuous and cannot be distinguished. Thus Saint-Thierry asks: "How could the soul perceive its own beauty and not be overcome by the splendor of the one who is reflected from within?" (*Homily II, Song of Songs*). This question already mirrors Jacques-Alain Miller's reflective commentary of Lacan's extimacy, a concept that he himself compares analogically to the medieval practice of the *lectio*: "The most interior – this is how the dictionary defines "intimate" (l'intime) – has, in the analytic experience, a quality of exteriority. This is why Lacan invented the term extimate" (76). During

early modernity the mirror changes meaning and the relation to the Other is mediated through the “I”/eye of the artist. Albrecht Dürer’s *Self-Portrait* (1500) is iconic of this modern gesture of internalization of the gaze and of the irruption of an “I”.



*Figure 4.1 Self-Portrait. Albrecht Dürer, 1500.*

Whereas in the Middle Ages the mirror was acting as a mediator between the world and God, between the visible and the invisible, here Dürer depicted in Christ-like features - facing the viewer and touching the fur of his coat in a gesture reminding the iconography of blessing - interpellates the eyes of the spectator thanks to a well-known portrait mechanism allowing the eyes of the portrait to follow the viewer and to create the illusion of exchanging gazes. This game of gazes in reflection is reinforced in Dürer’s painting by the artist’s monogram painted at the eye-level “I, Albrecht Dürer Nuremberg, portrayed myself in everlasting colors aged twenty-eight years”. Sabine Melchior Bonnet, in her comments over the portrait, pointed out:

Christ, mediator between finite and infinite, gives over his human face to the painter: a fusion of the creature and his model that would be sacrilegious if it did not express wonder in the act of faith. In such a portrait, resemblance is not expressed in general or symbolic terms, but through a

sensory form and singular traits; it discovers the “I” and enters into a new experience of subjectivity. (120)

The divinity in man is not expressed thanks to the symbol of the mirror but directly, through the experience of the mirroring and interpellating gaze of the other. This optical shift reverberates a more modern desire to escape from the world as *analogon* of the divine, a medieval world where the knowledge of the divine must be found in His myriad reflections within Nature, and to search for a more intimate relation to God, instantiated in the intimate and personal *experience* of the exchanged gazes between the Creator and its creature. The humanist man is the Christ-like man, bringing to the forefront the figure of the Christ as intermediate and leveling and conflating the relation between humanity and divinity. The self-portrait is the mirror in which the self, the other, and the divine open the space of an infinite *mise-en-abime*. It is in this esthetic and humanist philosophy of *mise-en-abime* that one must understand the early modern feature of integrating in paintings a convex mirror in which the “I” of the artist is mirrored, a deforming shape testifying to the confection of mirrors thanks to the technique of blown glass mastered especially by Murano’s very secretive and coveted glass masters.

Through the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> the mirror takes a new signification, becoming strongly associated with social life. For instance, when the social philosopher Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Count of Saint-Simon, comments on the life in Versailles, a court filled with voyeurs observing each other’s respect of etiquette, he cannot help but notice the social control that mirrors enhance and reverberate: “As we were walking in his small hallway, I saw in the mirror at the end of the passage that he was laughing while lowering his eyes, like a man enjoying the conversation he was overhearing” (Cabanis, 57). In the newly achieved *gallerie des glaces*, constructed to demonstrate to the world that Col-

bert's initiative to challenge Murano's monopoly on mirror production was finally bearing fruit thanks to the development of the glass casting techniques, "there is scarcely a place to hide" (Scudéry, 602). This pervasive mirroring gaze reflects the new sense of civility embodied by the ethics of transparency of the *Honnête Homme* that Francois de La Rochefoucault limpidly defines in the following terms: "To be a true gentleman [*honnête homme*] is to want to be always exposed to the view of the proper people."

The mirror becomes therefore the space within which, on one hand a self-discovery is possible by the reflection of the self on itself, an imaginary window of introspection inherited from the early moderns, and on the other hand, the space where social control over the body is exercised. "It was in the mirror" insists the historian of mirrors, Sabine Melchor-Bonnet "that the *honnête homme*, or gentleman, learned how to position his feet and balance his body, how to smile without effrontery or gaze with modesty" (144). It is at this very hinge, articulating the simultaneous and contrary injunctions of the ethical and the social, that the modern subject unfolds. In fact, if throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century this ethics of transparency is construed by an aristocratic imaginary in which only the aristocracy was able to master the social injunctions over body and its etiquette, with the influence of the philosophies of Enlightenment the ethics of transparency becomes the ethical space within which an egalitarian ideology is developed. It is in the transparency of the social contract unifying each citizen as bearer of the light of reasons that a new utopia of social justice and equality begins to reverberate. For instance, in Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian's *L'Enfant et le Miroir* in which a child is discovering the reflecting properties of the mirror, reverberating the good when the good is sent and the evil when evil is sent:

Why don't you make this long face  
Before the naughty one who causes your vexation?  
Yes, look now, you smile, he smiles  
You hold your arms out to him and he does the same  
You're no longer angry and neither is he  
Here you see the emblem of society  
Good and evil are returned back to us. (cited in Melchior Bonnet 154)

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> the mirror becomes not only a symbol of mastery over the body but a symbol of social life, of retributive justice and of the Law:

The mirror that lay at the heart of court life, allowing the valiant knight to learn the gestures of civility, promoted the ideal of the *honnête homme*, or gentleman, refining his image. The mirror first an instrument of social hierarchy and aristocratic ideal; then, as it became more common place, it served as a symbol of the equality among men. Its function was "moralized," as duty and examples of virtue replaced decorum. Everyone became capable of reaching true *honnêteté*. Widespread use of mirrors and the reversibility of their reflections announced the advent of a bourgeois and democratic world. (Melchior-Bonnet 154)

#### 4.2. Dolto's Critique of the Mirror Stage

When Lacan presents for the first time his theory of the mirror stage on August 3, 1936 at the Congress of Marienbad, he is not only influenced by the discoveries of the experiments of Henri Wallon and the commentaries of Alexandre Kojève on Hegel, but he also draws on a long history of the imaginary of the mirror. Consciously or not, themes shaping the hermeneutic power of the mirror stage - the mastery over the body, the relation to an other securing the authenticity of the image, the internalization of the gaze, the ambiguous relation between outside/inside and the dangerous illusions of the mirror- are less objective properties of the mirror than products of a history of the imaginary of the mirror.

Lacan himself was ambiguous on the hermeneutics status of the mirror stage. Must it be understood as a stage actually happening in reality or a metaphor aiming to account for a more ungraspable formation of the subject? The now canonical “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in the Psychoanalytic Experience,” is not without ambiguity itself, and one is left with one’s own interpretation on whether the mirror stage must be understood as an actual relation to the image of the mirror or a metaphor whose hermeneutic power only draws on the history of the symbols shaping it. The very authoritative *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* exposes these ambiguities:

According to J. Lacan, phase of the constitution of the human being that takes place between the first six and eighteen months of life; the child, still in a state of helplessness and lacking motor control, anticipates imaginarily the fear and the mastery of her bodily self. This imaginary unification operates by identifying with the similar image as the complete form; it is *illustrated by and actualized in* the concrete experience of the child perceiving her own image in a mirror. The mirror stage constitutes the mold and the outline of what will be the Self. (258. Translation and emphasis mine)

The epistemological status of the mirror stage is hung between on the one hand, an illustration, an image, used primarily to render metaphorically the operations structuring the human psyche and its relation to the Symbolic and the Imaginary and, on the other, a “stage,” with its evocation of a developmental approach giving to the mirror stage the status of a descriptive relation of the child with the actual mirror. This ambiguity appears in the best Lacanian commentators and already shows other possible commentaries. For instance in his book exclusively dedicated to Lacan’s mirror stage, *Le Lasso Speculaire* (1997), Guy Le Gaufey’s suggests that “the concept can be summed up in two sentences: at an age that the psychologists specialists of childhood will define with more precision, the very young child realizes, thanks to the mirror or to the contemplation of an



alter ego, the existence of a bodily self that was lacking until then” (37; Translation mine). In this summary of the mirror stage, Guy Le Gaufrey introduces two elements that are not present in Lacan’s account of the mirror stage in its princeps version of 1949: the presence of another and a certain indeterminacy regarding the age when the mirror “stage” is supposed to appear. But also, the relation to the mirror is, in his account, an unnecessary element. There is the same hesitation in Gerard Guilleraud’s *Le Miroir et la psyché* (2003): “It consists essentially of considering that what is realized by the mirror stage, grasped in the effective confrontation of the child in front of the mirror—but which could be realized as well in the game of confrontation between the child and a similar other—is for the little human, the acquisition of a feeling of unity (of her ego) by means of the perception of her reflected image” (78). If Guilleraud and Le Gaufey introduce the other as potentially fulfilling the function of a mirror for the infant, it is not only because as early as in the *Seminaire I* (1975) Lacan will introduce this dimension, but also because in its previous genetic account of the maturation of the psyche exposed in *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual* (1938), the intrusion complex already shows signs of this splitting. In this early account of the affective development, Lacan insists that the human psyche is structured in its early stages by three complexes: the weaning complex, the intrusion complex, and the oedipal complex. The very developments of what Lacan names the intrusion complex are organized on the one hand, by the encounter of a “fellow human,” triggering the child’s aggressiveness and jealousy, and the mirror stage, which, in this early version, Lacan states that the image of the mirror “is a good *symbol* of this reality: of its affective value, illusory like the image, and of its structure in that it reflects the human form.” (67). Needless to say, considering the dif-

ferent developments that Lacan gave to the mirror stage throughout his life, the specific epistemological status to give to the mirror stage remains unclear. Sometimes it appears as if the relation to the mirror is fundamental to the structuration of the psyche, others it seems that the mirror stage is a mere metaphor accounting for different processes (constitution of the ego and repression of fantasies and anxieties linked to fragmented representation of the body). I will not dwell on this question, since it is enough to remember that mirrors were, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, objects of luxury and that the image on which sometimes Lacan draws, the image of the mother holding a baby in front of the mirror, is an image that only makes sense in a contemporary setting.

If therefore, the mirror stage must be understood as a metaphor accounting for “identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*” (Écrits 2) then it is possible to wonder if other theories could better render the dynamic formation of the subject, and especially, if the visual dimension is the most important dimension to account for the constitution of the ego.

If Lacan did certainly influence other analysts and philosophers with his “mirror stage,” they also, adapted it to their own theoretical interests and have formulated different critiques of Lacan’s mirror stage. One of these main critiques is Lacan’s unquestioned relation to the primacy of the visual. If the events that took place in Marienbad are well documented, it is less known that a few months before, Lacan presented a version of his future mirror stage to the Société Psychanalytique de Paris on June 16<sup>th</sup>. There, in the function of rapporteur for the Société, stands the young Françoise Mariette (she is then 28

and Lacan 35), who will be later known as the much mediatized Françoise Dolto. This is Dolto's first encounter with Lacan, an encounter at the origin of an indefectible intellectual friendship and that will persist during most of Lacan's life (they will eventually part ways a few months before Lacan's death at 80), to the point where the historian of psychoanalysis iconizes their friendship as "the figure of the parental couple for generations of French psychoanalysts" (*Dictionnaire de la psychanalyse*, 341). It is also an encounter not only with the man but with his theory, a theory about which she immediately understands the clinical interest. In her personal notes, she comments: "Very attractive theories. Lacan a bit too easily enthralled by the magic of words" (Cited in Guillerault 36).

Despite Dolto's interest in Lacan's mirror stage, her affiliation with La Société Psychanalytique de Paris in 1939 and her rigorous attendance to Lacan's séminaires, in her theoretical writing she did not engage comprehensively with the mirror stage before the publication of her masterpiece *L'image inconsciente du corps* in 1984. One of the main reasons of her relative distance with Lacanian theory is that when Françoise Dolto meets Lacan she has already been fully trained as a psychoanalyst and, as a Freudian of strict obedience, she finds in Freud's account of the subject's formation the theoretical tools she needs for her clinical practice and its theorization.

However, when she integrates the mirror stage in her writings, she remains very critical about the notion, especially regarding the over determination of the specular in Lacan's version. For Dolto, who sticks to the 1949 version of the mirror stage, it is not a stage in itself, it is not a necessary relation that the infant has to experience in order to pursue the dialectical structuration of the psyche. On the contrary, for Dolto, the relation to the mirror is a potential threat to that structuration. The baby in front of the mirror does

not face a real other, but a mere image and her communicative attempts with this specular other are interrupted by the coldness of the mirror. For this reason, Dolto sees in the mirror a crisis in communication with the other, a potential threat leading to psychosis, a traumatic event that she supports with sensational clinical evidence. In Dolto's account of the relation to the mirror, what remains crucial is the relation with the "real" other, the mediation of an adult giving sense to this image, an aspect that is absent from Lacan's initial account of the mirror stage and that will later be included as soon as the *Seminaire I* in 1952. The role played by Dolto in this theoretical addition is speculative, but what can be affirmed is that by 1952 Dolto had already written extensively about the importance of the dyadic relation with the mother and the ways in which this relation structures the psyche of the child. In fact if Dolto detracts so vehemently from Lacan's fascination for the specular it is because he seems to remain oblivious to the fact that the infant's image of the body is already structured by other sensory dimensions (mainly tactile and olfactive), a structure that Dolto coined as an unconscious image of the body. Olfaction, audition, respiration, cardiac rhythms, the different modalities related to holding, to strolling, and the internal visceral sensations of repletion, tension, bowel movements have already been constituted as spaces of a communication with the parents and, Dolto affirms, already constitute, before the mirror stage, a language, a symbolic relation between I and the other. This relation to the mother as constitutive of the I before the mirror stage is best illustrated by Guillerault, Dolto's main commentator, who defined it as "le stade du *mèroir*", a play on words based on the homophony of the French words *mère* (mother) and *miroir* (mirror). However, Dolto does not deny the importance of the visual and in fact she insists that the specular image will eventually repress the multi-sensorial image

of the body. Instead she challenges the primacy that Lacan gives to this specular image regarding the constitution of the I, and argues that the specular image does not alienate the totality of the infant's narcissism. In fact as Guillerault also notices, one has to wonder how, in Lacan's formulation of 1949, the infant can recognize himself in the mirror, if a more immanent constitution of the I has not already been in play.

### **4.3. Reversibility and Negativity in Psychoanalysis**

This brief incursion in Dolto's main issues with the mirror stage leads to a problem that echoes Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility. The mirror stage, as a theoretical gesture accounting for the constitution of the I, cannot successfully explain how this recognition (or mis-recognition) is possible without a non-specular "image" of the I. In Lacan's mirror stage, the enfant eventually happens to recognize himself, and a failure to do so leads to psychosis. On the contrary for Dolto, the "I" identifies itself on a series of sensitive experiences and communications that are eventually repressed by the specular image. Importantly, the specular image does not captivate the totality of narcissism, meaning that the sense of I is not bound only to an image, but other sensations participate and remain fundamental to "bound" that image to my body. This account of the relation of the I and the body, allows to account for a phenomenon that the mirror stage cannot account for, namely the reversibility of the body. Merleau-Ponty and Dolto meet on this specific question. A preceding constitutive sensitive experience has to happen before the mirror stage in order to recognize myself in the mirror. A certain sensory experience, which will be the imaginary matrix of every sensory experiences, has to blur the lines between the body and its external objects in order for the subject to be able to extend, to

lend, its body to the world. I want to suggest with Didier Anzieu that it is precisely the sense of touch and the skin that offer such a sensitive and imaginary matrix, a matrix that paradoxically offers a sense of continuity with the world while affirming its fundamental alienation from it.

We have already seen in the preceding chapter the ways in which Merleau-Ponty questioned the relation between touch and sight in his account of Metzger's experience with the tobacco pipe in the mirror. If I look at myself smoking the pipe and I tightly hold the bowl, I experience a queer sensation: I can sense the "other" in the mirror holding the bowl. Not only Merleau-Ponty uses this experience in order to demonstrate that my tactile sensations easily extent over the limits of my body, but he also engages in a reflection about the relations between sight and touch. In the papers used for the course at the College de France on March 31, 1960, he notes:

seizing [*captation*] of the tactile body by the visual image: Schilder: I feel in the mirror the contact of my pipe in my hand. Relation between the imaginary and sight: thanks to sight and its tactile equivalences inauguration of an inside and an outside and of their exchanges, of a relation of being to what remains however forever outside: the spaciality of the body is incrustation in the space of the world. (cited in *Être et Chair*, 189)

If the sense of touch is the first sense on which the limits of the body are drawn, the sense of sight "incorporates" tactility. Looking at the other in the mirror, sight palpates, touches, and *extends* this haptic dimension to the other. In this tentacular philosophy of perception, seeing the other is already touching it. But more importantly, this blurring between the two senses that Merleau-Ponty names intersensoriality in *Phenomenology of Perception*, also blurs the relation between inside and outside. If the other is outside of my body, my perception of his body "phagocytes" or integrates this exteriority to the body schema while fleshing out this perception in projecting mine into in a perpetual ad-

justing circle. From this point of view, the body of the other is never merely an image but is also part of me, I can *touch* its corporeality.

If we keep in mind the intertwining of perception and desire in Merleau-Ponty, we have here a real theoretical account of the way in which perception and desire appear not only as simultaneously interior and exterior but also appear as fundamentally queer, that is to say as fundamentally unbound from the ego, from my identity. As perceptions are a product, a relation, between my body and the world, my desire is always simultaneously inside and outside, made of identity and alterity, and always circulating and changing within each perceptive loop or chiasm intertwining my body and the world.

This philosophical account allows to escape from Lacan's occularcentrism. If I recognize myself in the mirror it is because perception is not just the constitution of an image but already an extension of my body. I do not just see myself in the mirror, I live in the specular space of the mirror and can feel this other in the mirror. This phenomenon underlines Dolto's observation that the specular image, the ego, does not captivate the totality of narcissism, but that something remains outside and yet invested. This tactile extension of my body to the other is precisely an example of this narcissism unbound to the specular logic of the Ego and guarantees that the world does not vanish in the immateriality of a game of mirrors but keeps a certain materiality, a certain tangibility. Therefore, another psychoanalytical theory is needed in order to account not only for the ambiguous constitution of the other and of desire but also for the radical difference haunting and disrupting my relation with the other and with desire. This theoretical account needs to acknowledge the central role of touch in this process and it is with Anzieu's notions of the skin-ego that such a theory can be found.

Using a wide array of developmental, clinical, and experimental data like the Harlow experiment, the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu suggests that the role of tactility and skin in the early psycho-affective development has been underestimated and should be re-evaluated through his concept of the “attachment drive” and the “Skin-Ego.” Therefore, he offers a re-reading of the main theorists of psychoanalysis, namely Freud, Winnicott, and Klein. He criticizes Klein for her absence of theorization on the limit between internal space and external: “the surface of the body is absent from the theory of Melanie Klein, absence even more surprising that one of the main elements of this theory, the opposition of between introjection and projection presuppose the constitution of a limit differentiating the inside and the outside.” (*The Skin-Ego*, 36). For Anzieu, each psychic activity is shored up by a biological function. The Skin-Ego finds its biological support from the diverse function of the skin. Therefore it is the ambiguous barrier separating the inside and the outside, but it is also a surface of contact. Reminding us that for Freud the oral stage is not only the experience of the buccopharyngeal apparatus and the pleasure of suction, Anzieu stresses more fundamental experiences surrounding the moment of feeding. The way the baby is held and handled (Winnicott’s holding and handling), the heat, the smell, the movements of the mother’s body, the soft words and hummings. The experience of the breast depends on the experience of the skin as grasping surface (either directly by the skin or by her “other skin,” her clothes) and extends to the feeling of security produced by this membrane care: “The infant acquires the perception of the skin as surface through the experience of contact of his body with the body of the mother and in the context of a securing relation of attachment with her” (SE, 37).



For Anzieu, the skin-ego refers to a specific representation that the child uses in its early phases of its development to represent itself from its experience of the surface of the body and which organizes its experience. His conclusions are perfectly aligned with Freud's early writings. In his text *The Ego and the Id* (1923) Freud affirms that: "the ego is first and foremost a body-ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but it is itself the projection of a surface," and the translator insists with an authorized note: "i.e., the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides, as we have seen above, representing the superficies of the mental apparatus" (*The Freud Reader*, 703). Therefore, the infant invests psychologically his skin producing specific fantasies and representations attached to the Ego-skin and bearing the mark of the relation to the mother and the primacy of the imaginary. One of these early psychic representations is the fantasy of a communal skin shared by the baby and the mother. Opposing Lacan's idea of the dismembered body, Anzieu supposes the existence of "the construction of an envelope of well-being, narcissistically cathected, which supports the illusion, necessary for the formation of a Skin Ego, that a being attached to the other side of this envelope will react immediately and in a complementary, symmetrical fashion to its signal. This is the reassuring illusion of having an omniscient narcissistic double at one's permanent disposal" (SE, 44). This communal skin characteristic of the primary narcissism will be torn down by the slow entrance in the secondary narcissism producing the first objectal relationships along with the echoing first masochistic fantasies relating to the torn and injured skin.

Since Merleau-Ponty died prematurely at the age of 52 in 1961, he never had the chance to be familiar with Anzieu's developmental theory first evoked and developed in 1974. It is, however, easy to speculate that this theory would have certainly caught his interest. Anzieu's developmental theory allowed not only to give a tactile account of the early constitution of the Ego and of the other, but it also stressed the fundamental importance of the skin at the heart of the skin-ego, simultaneously being a barrier and a surface of contact, while offering an account of the negativity haunting this relation with the other thanks to the fantasy of the torn skin. More precisely, for Anzieu, the ego and the other are constituted simultaneously through the irruption of a difference fantasized as the torn skin. In other words there is no constitution of one term of the relation (the ego or the other) and only after the constitution of the other term, but a slow differentiation that always remains incomplete because of the original reversibility of the sense of touch. This simultaneous constitution of the dyad ego/other is reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty's *Flesh* in which perception is an ambiguous magma of sensations from which the ego and the world appear simultaneously after a process of differentiation and a threat of encroachment. As to touch is to be touched, to have an ego-skin is to be in a constant reversible relation with the other, it is to be not only haunted by the other as other, but also by a more radical difference, an alienation from this other, as the fantasy of the torn skin illustrates.

With these theoretical elements in mind, I want to argue that specific representations, the haunted mirror and the evil doll, reflect the shortcoming of Lacan's mirror stage and emphasize the importance of tactility in relation with the other. I will particularly insist on the ways in which tactility is haunted by a specific negativity, a negativity best

represented in the horror genre. This reading will also allow for the development of the relation between tactility and (queer) desire.

#### 4.4. The Haunted Mirror and the Evil Doll

As we have seen in our short history of the mirror, if theological and literary traditions have used the image of the mirror to evoke the mirroring relation between God and Its creature, it also has been associated with the practice of witchcraft. Sometimes perceived as a threshold separating our world from demonic parallel universes, the mirror is the space of reflection of our intimate fears, a space of intimacy and identity paradoxically haunted by the threat that this reflection might show something different, something monstrous and evil. The haunted mirror, along with other “Monsters”, such as the *doppelgänger*, is a space of fantasy particularly interesting to study the uncanny and the negativity of the double. The gothic imagination first made great use of this threatening aspect of reflection thanks to stories of possessed mirrors and haunted portraits (*Snow White*, 1812; *The Oval Portrait*, 1850) and has been passed on until today. In the more recent retelling of stories of spooky mirrors, one can mention Jean Cocteau’s *Orpheus* (1950), Bernard Rose’s *Candyman* (1992), Alexandre Aja’s *Mirrors* (2008), Mike Flanagan’s *Oculus* (2014) or Graham Masterton’s novel *Mirror* (1988). In terms of literary analysis, stories of mirrors seem to call for Lacan’s mirror stage since it allows the exposure of the visual logic underlying the constitution of identity and the negativity associated with this constitution. For Jacques Lacan, if the baby is at first fascinated by its reflection in the mirror since it offers an image of the body as whole and soothes the fantasies of dismemberment that partial drives always feed, the encounter with the mirror also trig-

gers aggressive and depressive logic. Due to the fact that the baby does not have full control of his body and is dependent upon his caregivers, this perfect image is also a taunting one, an image of an ideal and unrealistic self whose requirements will never be totally met. The relation with the mirror is therefore a space of ambivalence, positively sustaining the sense of identity while being a space of oppression within which circulate threats of regression, dismemberment, and death. One can easily understand how Lacan's account of negativity in the mirror stage is useful to literary and film criticism especially when applied to horror movies. The movie *Mirrors* perfectly illustrates how the mirror stage offers psychoanalytical interpretative coordinates. In this movie, Ben Carson (Kiefer Sutherland), a suspended policeman struggling with alcohol, pharmacodependency, and a breathless matrimonial relationship, finds a job as night patrolman in an abandoned luxury department store devastated by a fire five years prior. After unusual phenomena begin to happen within the mirrors of the department store and visions a few mutilated bodies, Ben Carson's life and his family's is threatened by the "things" living in the mirrors which demand to find "Esseker". After investigation, he discovers that the department store was previously a psychiatric hospital whose director Dr. Kane attempted to develop a treatment of schizophrenia based on the use of mirrors. The idea behind the treatment is that since schizophrenic patients have multiple personalities (at least in the pop culture version for schizophrenia), and they should be forced to confront their image in the mirror to unify their shattered sense of identity (1).



*Figure 4.2 The therapy room in the store basement*

Unfortunately, Anna Esseker, a patient at the hospital, was a very special patient since she was not a schizophrenic patient but was instead a victim of demonic possessions. When during the treatment she was forced to confront her image in the mirror, the demons got caught in the reflection of the mirrors and contaminated the mirrors of the entire building with an evil power demanding to reenter Esseker's body. The movie, saturated with reflections, mirrors and editing techniques prompting schizoid perceptions offers, an extraordinary opportunity to discuss Lacan's mirror stage. It is easily arguable that Ben Carson's the reflection of the mirror as ideal-I conflicts with its low self-image (drug addiction, matrimonial failure, etc.) and triggers a regressive and psychotic episode where the fantasies of dismembered body and castration (demons) resurface and is displaced on a feminized "lacking" body, Anna Esseker's. In fact the movie is very self-conscious of the use of this pop culture version of the mirror stage. When Ben Carson meets the psychiatrist in charge of the arsonist of the department store, another victim of the mirrors, he gives him some theoretical basis to read the events as a psychological event rather than a supernatural one:

You know Mr. Carson, when one starts to perceive one's own reflection as a complete separate being, one is suddenly confronted to two entirely sep-

arate egos, two entirely separate worlds that can surface at any given moment. A feeling of self-hatred, usually triggered by a psychological shock, can split the personality in two, hence creating two or more personalities with distinct memories and distinct behavior pattern within the same individual. The patient then has the false perception of the existence of two distinct worlds: the real world and the world inside the mirror.

This is a pretty long exposé for a genre that usually shows its concepts rather than explaining them; it is such an artificial and pop culturesque introduction to psychology 101 that Aja felt compelled to film this monologue while Ben Carson and the psychiatrist are walking through a psychiatric hospital's corridors to keep the rhythm of the movie going. In an interview, Aja explains that he found inspiration in different psychological theories and, even if he does not mention precisely which theory he read, it is highly probable, as a French director, that he encountered, at one point or another, Lacan's the mirror stage (and probably Dolto's account of a patient's case whose psychosis, according to her, had been triggered after she had been left alone in a room full of mirrored furniture).<sup>15</sup>

However, applying Lacan's mirror stage to this movie forces the reader to ignore very important elements that point at another understanding of the mirror stage leaving space to tactility. If we follow Merleau-Ponty, Dolto, and Anzieu, the constitution of the ego is indeed bound to reversibility, but a reversibility in which a matrix must be found in tactility rather than visibility. In other words, if there is a mirror stage, this mirror stage is a reorganization of a previous affective and relational structure in which the sense of touch and the skin organ plays a fundamental role. With this reframing in mind, one can "touch" at the movie with new "hands." First of all, it is necessary to underline the fact

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x26m66v\\_mirrors-interview-alexandre-aja\\_shortfilms](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x26m66v_mirrors-interview-alexandre-aja_shortfilms) (In French)

that the mirrors are not the only visual “spooky” elements of the movie. In fact, before the mirrors are identified as being the origin of the evil, the movie creates a dreadful environment by offering shots of the inhabitants of the store, half burnt, melted and deformed mannequins introducing an uncanny corporeality in the movie. These mannequins evoke also the suffering that the customers endured when they got caught in the fire, unable to escape. These evocations in fact become real for Ben Carson himself. In one scene, Ben Carson’s body reflected in the mirror catches fire suddenly. Even if his real body remains “intact,” Ben Carson feels the pain of his burning flesh. When he tells the story to his sister, he clearly distinguishes between a mere identification to an image and an intercorporeality: “I swear to you, I could feel my flesh burning. I couldn’t breathe. It was like my lungs were full of smoke. It was like a nightmare, but I was awake. I know I was awake.” This presence of a haptic reversibility is reinforced by images of hand prints on the mirrors left by its “inhabitants”



*Figure 4.3 A hand from the other side of the mirror*

This material, physical presence evoked through tactility will reach its apex when Anna Esseker comes back to her treatment room. Special effects allow for the creation of

the impression that the demons push against the surface of the mirror turning it into a thin membrane, a skin.



*Figure 4.4 The surface of the mirror as skin*

Paralleling the burnt mannequin with the demon trying to reach Anna Esseker, this image stresses the already mentioned association between the mannequins and corporeality but also reinforces the fact that the image in the mirror is not a mere image but already a body in the mirror, a skin deep corporeality.

In fact, this association of the mirror with tactility is far from being an exception and example of such a haunting presence of tactility within mirrors can be multiplied. Another story of demonic possessions, *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005) exploits the same belief that demons can be caught in a mirror, and uses the same special effects reducing the surface of the mirror to a skin-like membrane. Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950) evoked the relation between tactility and mirror by the dark gloves that Orpheus has to wear in order to go through the mirror and reach another world. In *The Abyss* (James Cameron, 1989) peaceful aliens whose technology is based on the manipulation of water, another mirroring surface, try to contact a team of scientist by creating a worm-like recording and imitating device. When faced with this "device," the aliens try to communi-



cate by creating water-made 3D images of the scientists. Their first impulse is to confirm the existence of this image thanks to touch. In *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), Donnie faces an other in the mirror, an humanoid with evil-rabbit-like features. When he tries to reach it, the surface of the mirror not only becomes skin, but since the camera is placed behind the mirror facing Donnie, the screen of the spectator turns also into skin. This image challenges Christian Metz reading of cinema through the theory of the mirror stage and offers a first image from which a tactile understanding of cinema could be developed. Finally, and maybe most importantly, Narcissus himself, according to the legend, didn't die because he was fascinated by his reflection on the water but because he tried to grasp it.



*Figure 4.5 Demon escaping from the surface of the mirror in Constantine (2005)*



*Figure 4.6 Mirror and touch in Orpheus (1950)*



*Figure 4.7 Mirroring touch in Abyss (1989)*



*Figure 4.8 From the other side of the skin-mirror*

I argue that these representations of a visual double express something that does not belong to the visual *per se*, something invisible that nevertheless fleshes out my relation to the double. Whether it is called body schema by Merleau-Ponty, the unconscious image of the body by Françoise Dolto, or the ego-skin by Didier Anzieu, all these theories converge to affirm that the other is not *merely* a specular other but is intimately bound to a more profound haptic and tactile realm. These theories obviously call for a reformulation of the Lacanian Imaginary explaining how tactility is a crucial dimension to explain the formation of the Ego and the other. These perspectives somewhat challenge the idea that the relation to the other (and the relation of the I to the ego) is mainly an illusory one. When these theories affirm that the other is constituted in relation to haptic sensations and tactility, they affirm that (1) the body is not constituted first by an image, in the lacanian sense, but that the body prior to the mirror stage has already its own stable organization, (2) that the body's "visual" image is propped up by a diversity of sensations in which the haptic and tactile sensations are essential, (3) The other is not merely an image but is also made of tactile and haptic sensations to which I am sensitive thanks to the intersensory relation between sight and touch, thanks to a kind of tactile touch, (4) that the Imaginary consolidates my relation with an other with whom I am fantasmatically in "contact," remnants of a fantasmatic communal skin, (5) that not only this haptic and tactile dimension literally flesh out the other, giving him/her an "organicity," a "corporality" I can relate to, but that organicity extends to other animate and inanimate beings.

It is this specific last point I want now to develop. That my perception of the other implies a haptic and tactile dimension which is immediately given to me can be easily

demonstrated. The witnessing of the pain or pleasure of the other triggers an immediate personal bodily reaction, and the horror genre is becoming more and more skilled at providing this kind of experience, especially in the emergence of what is now called “torture porn.” In torture porn and other gory images, the repulsion does not come only from the fact that these images are visually disgusting, but more precisely they are disgusting because the pain threatens to be vicariously inflected to me. I can understand this pain because I have a body. The pain of the other encroaches on my own body. One of the more gory scenes from *Mirrors*, depicts Ben Carson’s little sister dislocating her lower jaw with her own hands, slowly tearing the skin and flesh of her cheeks and throat until she dies bleeding out. This scene is not only disgusting visually, because I identify with her, but because of my perception my body is in continuity with hers. We share a common “organicity,” a common Flesh. If Lacan’s mirror stage stresses specular identification, tactility emphasizes bodily extension without which identification remains organically empty. What is represented as a threat in these Evil mirrors, is less a taunting ideal-I than the threat of an encroachment of the body of the other over mine.

This revision of the mirror stage and an affirmation of an earlier constitution of the ego thanks to tactile and haptic sensations (touch, holding, caress, every day cares, exploratory games, etc...) and the haptic reversibility that the mirror that is the other, Reframing the mirror stage in terms of tactile and haptic sensations, allow us to make new connections between image and corporality, and to integrate in this larger theoretical frame work figures that remained in the margins of psychoanalytical theory. This is the case with the multiple narrative integrating constructed around the figure of the evil doll

or the evil puppet. The figure obviously questions the limits between subject and object, between animate and inanimate.

If Freud's "The Uncanny" (1919) offers a general theory of the double, it is however only loosely connected to a theory of subjectivity. On the other hand, Lacan's mirror stage offers such a theory of subjectivity based on the role of the specular in the constitution of the ego but remains fundamentally ocularcentrist and ignores the role that other senses, especially touch and skin, play in the constitution of the Ego and its exteriority. The figure of the evil doll questions such assumptions and demands a wider theory of the Imaginary integrating elements that Lacan left aside. *Annabelle* (2014), the *Puppet Master* (1989), *Child's Play* (1988), *Dead Silence* (2007), *Devil Doll* (1964), just to name a few, tell the story of evil dolls coming to life following a curse, an hypnosis or a possession of some sort (ghost, spirit, the mind of a serial killer, demon, etc.) It seems that these figures, even if they are clearly doubles, resist any rigorous application of Lacanian's mirror stage. In other words, the mirror stage does not allow for an explanation as to how these dolls come to life. It does a pretty good job at explaining their aggressive nature (ideal-I), but if we start wondering how these creatures come fantasmatically to life we are left with no real answer because the other is *merely* an image. On the contrary, a haptic critique of the mirror stage allows us to give flesh to these creatures and to expose the unconscious material supporting such animation of the inanimate. As it has been seen with Didier Anzieu, the world of the baby is mainly a tactile one since the sense of sight and hearing is pretty immature at birth. The contact with the skin of his/her caregiver, the holding, the caresses, the feeling of repletion constitute the sensory world of the baby (along with the sense of smell) and prompt him/her to fantasies a common skin linking

the baby to its caregivers and *their substitutes*. In other words, the fantasy of communal skin does not discriminate between animate and inanimate. As Winnicott has famously studied, these transitional objects (piece of cloth, teddy bear, dolls), help the baby to slowly accept the absence of the caregiver by acting as substitutes for the parents. In Didier Anzieu terms, the transitional object soothes the traumatic fantasize of the torn skin (absence of the caregivers for instance). This illusory substitution is, however, slowly overcome and the torn skin, prompting a masochist position, is redirected toward the substitute, in other words, an evil doll. The matrix of tactile reversibility allow then to make sense of the figure of the evil doll more efficiently than with Lacan's mirror stage since it introduces the possibility to "extend" a haptic and tactile organicity rather than simply rely on the identification with an image. The movie *The Boy* (William Brent Bell, 2016) offers an interesting image to conclude our discussion of the haunted mirror and the evil doll. In this movie, Greta (Lauren Cohan) accepts a job as nanny in order to escape an abusive relationship. When she arrives at the manor of her employers, Mr. and Mrs. Heelshire, an elderly couple, she discovers with stupefaction that the boy is in fact a doll, a substitute helping the couple to cope with their deceased child, Brahms. Before leaving, the Heelshires give a very precise schedule of activities and care that has to be respected to the letter in order for Brahms to remain calm. However, as soon as the parents of the perfect replica leave, Greta literally puts the creepy doll to its place, on a chair with a blanket on it. Unsurprisingly, considering that the spectator already know the base line evil doll narratives, Brahms does not tolerate the nanny's cavalier attitude and will soon tame her. Convinced that the threatening doll is alive and fearing for her life, Greta surreptitiously makes plans with Malcom (Rupert Evans), the grocery delivery man,

to escape the needy doll. The night before their escape, Greta's abusive ex-boyfriend Cole (Ben Robson), arrives at the manor and asks her to come back. Greta pretends that she has to stay to take care of the doll, and in front of this surrealistic refusal, Cole seizes the china doll and smashes it on a wall, breaking it into smithereens. The wall of the house starts trembling in protestation, prompting the spectators to recognize that they are facing a case of possessed evil doll. However the trembling and racket cease and Cole hears something seemingly coming from behind a mirror of the room. This is where the movie introduces its twist.



*Figure 4.9 Cole hear sounds behind the mirror*

The mirror explodes, propelling Cole's body to the floor and knocking him down. Slowly a human size Brahms wearing a china doll mask emerges from the hole in the wall left by the explosion (9) and outlined by the remaining frame of the mirror.



*Figure 4.10 The doll boy hidden behind the walls coming out of a mirror*

This very specific image is important to me since it conflates different points I have been trying to make. The image in the mirror is never a simple image, it is inhabited by a presence, a double, reflecting a body-schema whose matrix must be found in the reversibility of touch. Without this matrix, the image remains completely exterior to me, unidentifiable as an other me. If I can identify with the image in the mirror, it is because I can first rely on the operation of reversibility that I have experienced through the sense of touch and that something of this organic experience (tactility, pressure, movement) is extended to the image. To use Merleau-Ponty's vocabulary, it is the intercorporality experienced first through tactility that gives meaning to sight and other senses by "lending" my body-schema to the world. This reversibility never circulates uniquely in one direction. On the contrary, because of the tactile matrix (as touching/touched) supporting our perceptions, the "other" comes back in a loop, threatening the consistency of my body image by adding alien features. If the doll is such a good theme for horror movies, it is because it is perfectly situated in this uncanny valley between the same and the different, reminding me that my body is an object which sooner or later will be as inert and cold as



its own. The relation to the other is always taken in a loop in which the same comes back with an uncanny difference threatening to colonize my body.

## Chapter V: The Promise of a Caress

*Nature gives us the caress in order to hide her ruse from us, and to compel us to perpetuate the generations, in spite of ourselves – Maupassant, Caresses*

Maupassant's *Caresses* is a very short text composed of two letters found, according to Maupassant, on a Sunday after the mass, "in a small portfolio of Russian leather, under a *prie-Dieu* of the Church of the Madeleine" (209). Considering the content of these two letters - in the first, a woman's refusal to have sex with her lover, and in the second, the rather long and habile response of the lover to her - the setting of these exchanges, a Church, and its time, the Sunday mass, contributes to wrap these carnal negotiations in an aura of holy prohibition and titillating blasphemy. But this is not here the queerest aspect of this correspondence. In his answer, Henri the lover, never directly speaks about sex but uses a metonymic figure, the caress. For Henri, the caress is a fated snare created by Nature in order to "perpetuate generations," a compulsory trap to which life forms have to fall into. But to this rather essentialist and naturalizing definition of sex, Henri the strategist, suggests an oblique and ingenious answer to Nature's decree:

Well, then, let us filch the caress from her, let us make it our own, refine it, change it, idealize it, if you will. Let us, in turn, deceive Nature the deceiver.

Let us do more than she intended, more than she could teach us or dare to teach us. Let the caress be like some precious material that has come raw out of the earth, and let us work and perfect it, without regard to the original design, the veiled will of that which you call God. And, as it is

Thought that throws the gleam of poetry over everything, so let us poetize it, Madame, even to its terrible brutalities, its more impure combinations, its most monstrous inventions. (212)

In *Caresses*, embracing excessively, religiously, scrupulously, ardently and feverishly Nature's diktat, leads to the plain subversion of Her deceiving and brutal trickery. As the metonymic figure of the caress announces, sex becomes caress, poetic deviation, voluptuous and freakish art form, fleshly space of carnal expression and extravagant experimentations.

One has to however point out that this is probably easier for Henri to defend his position since his sexual creativities are not suspended over the treacherous sword of an unwanted child, a common and understandable fear for a woman of this time. However, it is indeed a keen consciousness of his lover's fear that opens the space of the caress. Contrary to Levinas' caress in which the field of otherness opens in the differential and temporal space of the mirroring relation of the Father with the Child, in Henri's understanding of the caress, it is precisely the refusal of a progeny, of a filial future as Other, that promises to open the body to a virtual field of incalculable caresses. What is particularly interesting in this version of the caress is that Henri never denies the existence of Nature, of an actual ground on which the caress grows. He never denies that a drive orients bodies and throws them in the circle of compulsions and repetitions, but on the contrary, it is precisely because this drive is not bound to a particular object that the caress, the trick of Nature, must exist. The caress stems from the body to spread toward a field of potential pleasures. The caress is the promise of a world of infinite pleasures rather than its actual realization. The caress is the tension toward a rediscovered field of sensations. Relying on psychoanalysis theory, I would like to illustrate the longing for the caress in the movie *May* (2002) and in the canonical *Moby-Dick* (1851). This close-reading will allow me to

expose the fantasmatic structure of the caress and to define it as a protest against visibility (*May*) or the Phallus (*Moby-Dick*), as always reaching for a radical alterity.

### 5.1. “All I want is you to see me”: *May* and the foreclosure of the Caress

The horror genre is a particularly difficult genre to renew. Not so much because there is only a limited number of ways to kill people – in fact the slasher movies of the 80’s have been particularly creative in this matter – but because true horror, the nightmare-maker, the I-feel-dirty-watching-this, the creeping-under-your-skin kind of horror revolves around a very limited set of unconscious fantasies. The proximity between, on the one hand, the horror genre, and on the other, and specific sets of representations buried deep under the surface of consciousness, is so close that scholars such as Robert Snell (2012), Ghislaine McDayter (2001) or Joel Faflak (2007) have argued that dark romanticism prompted the emergence of psychoanalysis by recasting the *Unheimlich* within the psyche. Whereas the Enlightenment had been busy in shedding the light of Reason and Logic on the monsters and dark practices of the world in order to dissipate them and affirm the power of its Lights, dark romanticism, on the contrary reintroduced the shadows not in the world, but within Reason itself. The themes of doubt, madness and illusion, that Descartes famously discarded to extract the gleaming gem of the *cogito*, came therefore in the foreground as texts such as *The Horla* (1887), *The Raven* (1845) or *The Sandman* (1816) demonstrate. Challenging the idea that Reason was the distinctive feature of human nature, dark romanticism in particular and romanticism more generally, opted to stress human’s emotional life, fear and horror included. It is therefore worth noticing that one of the early and rare texts of Freud on the relationship

between literature and psychoanalysis, *The Uncanny* (1919), is a text about horror in which he argues that the *Unheimlich*, the uncanny, stems from a re-presentation of the unconscious. From this point of view and considering the relatively poor, yet intense, psychic life of the child, the horror genre is always a limited genre, squeezing to the last drop of blood a few disturbing representations that the psychoanalytic practice and theory have already mapped, organized and colonized.

Except that sometimes a horror writer or movie director comes up with a creation that reminds psychoanalysts that their honed listening skills and floating attention is not always unerring or without selective bias. This is the case with Lucky McKee's *May* which not only challenges in a very compelling way, the primacy of the visual in the Lacanian account of the constitution of the body image, but which also leaves hints about the fundamental importance of the sense of touch in the constitution of psyche, and more particularly on the very specific type of touch that the caress demands. As I will show, the movie in fact offers, even if unwillingly, a nonetheless merciless critique of the mirror stage, while developing the complex relations that the main character *May* maintains with the sense of touch and its caresses.

Despite the relatively simple plot of *May*, the story of an out-of-touch young lady that goes on a killing spree on Halloween night, *May* also weaves together many visual motives and themes that gives the movie a complex symbolic network. *May* (Angela Bettis) is an out-of-touch young woman who spends her childhood as an outcast because of a lazy eye and an eye patch that her mother made her wear in order to hide her "imperfection." In order to break *May*'s loneliness, her mother offers her the very first doll that she crafted, named Suzie. Sadly, due to the doll's extreme fragility, it must be kept in a

glass box, preventing May from touching it and playing with it. This is in a nutshell the basic symbolic matrix on which the movie expands and develop its visual language. The movie credits opens on a piece of patch worked fabric while the clicking of a sewing machine is heard and irregular lines of sewing points underline the name of the director and production company. The title of the movie appears and the sewing points draw a square or a box around it while a blood stain slowly appears.



*Figure 5.1 May's opening image*

This credits already introduce two motives. The first, is the patch work motive that is in relation with May's main hobby, sewing. Throughout the movie May will always appear in patchwork dresses that she makes herself and that symbolizes her attempt to patch the holes and imperfections that she refuses to accept in her and in others. This refusal is obviously in relation with May's mother inability to cope with her daughter's slight handicap and who forces her to hide it with an eye patch; the origin of May's out-cast status among her peer. The second motif is offered by the three main colors on this image. The colors are associated with the dominant colors of the movie, especially to-

ward the end (for the red and white). Yellow is the color of the wall of May's dining room, particularly visible in a later scene of the movie and a color symbolizing May's walled up world; a signification underlined in this image by the square around her name. Traversing this wall, are strips of red and white colors, colors of May's doll, and the only real friend and "other" in her world. This game of colors gives a double meaning to the lines of sewing points that can be interpreted as May's wall or Suzie's glass box. This two colors from which the name May stands out also announces the complete identification of May to the doll. The drop of blood obviously marks the movie as belonging to the horror genre but also anticipates the next image.

After a relatively long black screen, a loud scream of pain is heard. May's reflection in a mirror appears, her fist covered with blood and hiding her left eye while she, probably out of pain, tries to grab and hold to something.



Figure 5.2 *Tactility vs. vision*

This image already gives to the viewer the basic theme of the movie. A line in the middle of the screen<sup>16</sup> organizes the composition of the image in two vertical halves. On the right, the reflection of May's face on a piece of mirror that seems broken or partial, protecting her left eye with her fist. On the left side, we can see May's hand trying to grab something. Between these two dimensions, sight and touch, a dividing line underlining May's sensitive splitting; a dividing line that will be use later in the movie to symbolize May's schizoid personality.



*Figure 5.3 The mirror as a symbol of splitting personality*

The movie's symbolic network spreads from this very simple matrix of opposition (sight/touch), and the following sequences begin to weave the two themes, these threads if you will, into the implacable symbolic logic of the movie. In fact, the rest of the movie is the visual and narrative explanation of what lead May to this self-inflicted enucleation.

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<sup>16</sup> It seems at first that this line might have been drawn by a drop of blood. In fact, later in the movie, we discover that May's mirror is a mirror with three panels. What we see on the screen in the hinging line of the right panel with the central one.



The next set of sequences, only interrupted by sequences of doll body parts falling from the top of the screen, give viewers insight about May's childhood. We understand, thanks to these sequences, May's mother's obsession with having a perfect daughter, and with perfection in general, leading her to force May to wear an eyepatch that brands her as an outcast for her peers. But most importantly we are introduced to a central character, Suzie, May's "only friend." Offered as a birthday present from a mother (it was also May's mother's best friend), Suzie is held in a glass box because of her extreme fragility. When the present is revealed the camera slowly closes in on Suzie's face and on May's reflection in the glass, as a symbol of their mirroring relation. However, when May reaches for the box, her mother immediately prevents her from touching it and the camera zooms out, thus marking the tactile distance between May and the doll. We therefore have on the one hand, an interesting visual proximity between May and the doll, represented by May's face reflected almost perfectly on the doll's face, and on the other, a tactile distance with the doll illustrated by the zoom in/zoom out and framing May's relation to touch in terms of attraction/prohibition.



*Figure 5.4 Suzie as mirror*

It is interesting here to stop to offer an interpretation of May's world structure in Lacanian terms. There is a strong imaginary association between May and the doll as the reflection in the glass demonstrates; an association that is also related to May's identification with her mother (the doll used to belong to her mother), or more precisely with her mother's obsession with perfection. In that configuration, the doll becomes what Lacan singled out as ideal-I. The big blue eyes contrasting with May's eyepatch is here to remind the spectator that Suzi is the ideal version of May in the eyes of her mother. In Lacan's version of the mirror stage, the gaze of the mother holding the child in front of the mirror, not only supports that imaginary identification but also offers the opportunity to the child to understand that the reflection is also a symbol, an *I* in the mirror. This symbolic function of the mother's gaze allows the child to enter into the network of symbolic associations in order to escape the binary, threatening and taunting universe of the imaginary. Thanks to the symbolic associations that the *I* allows, the infant will be able to enter into chains of association, enriching its sense of self, and be able to identify with the other without being threatened by it. However, in Lucky McKee's version of the mirror stage, we can already sense that something does not quite fit the Lacanian account of the constitution of the subject. If in the lacanian version the process is solely dependent on the sense of sight, it is in May the sense of touch whose function is to constitute the symbolic dimension. If we think that the infant reaches for her image in the mirror, we can understand what the symbolic function of the sense of touch is. Shattering the visual illusion of another in the mirror, the sense of touch dissipates the sense of spatial continuity and reduces the three-dimensional perception of the mirror to a mere two-dimensional reflecting surface. The sense of touch reveals the mirror's visual trick and participates in

the precipitation of the image to the status of a symbol. May's prohibition to touch the doll is at the origin of her inability to reduce the image to the status of symbol. May is stuck in a taunting imaginary relationship with her doll/mother without being able to escape from it. May's tragedy is to continue to consciously look for a solution to her inability to relate to the other *within* the visual field, while being unconsciously in search of a touch, a caress. This is precisely to that theme that the viewer is introduced in the next scene.

May, now an adult, talks to her doll while sewing. She tells her that she saw someone while walking in the street.



*Figure 5.5 The bars as symbol of tactile distance*



*Figure 5.6 May's loneliness*



*Figure 5.7 Adam's hands typified as caressing hands*

The viewers cannot see immediately what she actually sees, but instead they can hear the conversation that May has with her doll: “You know how when you meet someone... and you think you like them, but then the more you talk to them, you see parts you don’t like.” To illustrate her telling, we can see a sequence where May sits on a bench with a young man. The man seems to be interested in her but when she takes off her glasses, allowing her eyes to cross, the man moves away revealing a word on the bench

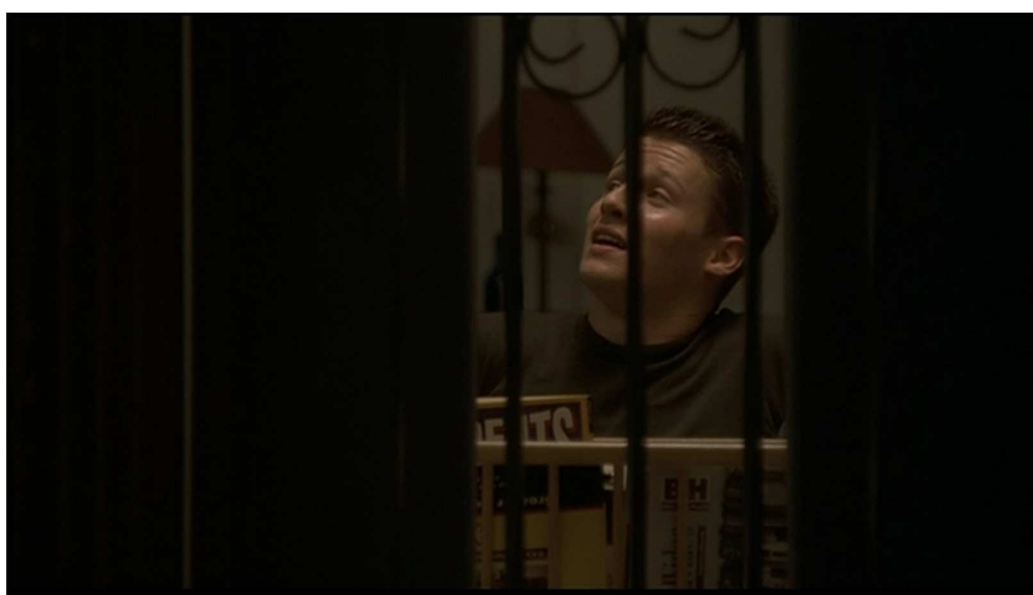
that his head was hiding: “friends.” This shot stresses May’s loneliness and her desperate search for a friend, a failed pursuit that she blames on her lazy eye, on her imperfection. “But” she continues “the boy I saw today is different. I like every part of him.” The viewers are finally introduced to what she saw, a young man squatting in front of a car, and caressing the damaged metal of the front door. “Especially his hands. They are beautiful” she adds. “Don’t be mad” replying to an unheard objection from the doll “You’ve been my friend my whole life and you see me, you always have, but... I need a real friend.” This sequence continues to unfold its set of opposition between sight and touch. First, the first time May encounters Adam (Jeremy Sisto) she sees him through the grill of a garage, a visual motif that will be used throughout the movie to symbolize physical distance. In a later scene, May convinces Adam to have a date with her at her apartment. Added to the composition that separates and opposes their two bodies, the barred table reinforces their physical distance<sup>17</sup>. This motif will reappear later when May eavesdrops on a conversation between Adam and a friend of his about her and in which he says that he finally “escaped that lunatic.”

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<sup>17</sup> Also notice the color of the May’s wall reminding the yellow of the opening credit.



*Figure 5.8 May's barred table*



*Figure 5.9 May eavesdrops through the bars of Adam's window*

It is especially in one of the scenes following her first meeting with Adam that this motif reveals its meaning within the visual grammar of the movie. After spending some time stalking Adam, she follows him into a coffee shop in which he falls asleep while reading a book with a hand in the air. His position is interesting here since the book he falls asleep on displays an image of a gaze that seems to look at him.



*Figure 5.10 Adam object of a crossed-gaze*

This image not only reflects May's stalking gaze but also heightens the sense of Adam's vulnerability, caught in an inescapable visual dimension from which he remains unconscious.



*Figure 5.11 The bars and Adam's hand*

The composition of the next image reminds us of the very first image of the movie. On the right, May's intense gaze, on the left, Adam's hand framed in such a way that

it is separated from his body, and in the middle, a pillar which with the other pillars on the image forms a grill. These elements underline once again May's disconnection with the sense of touch and simultaneously her deep yearning for a caress. She actually takes the opportunity that Adam is sleeping to insert her face in Adam's hand in a simulacrum of a caress.



*Figure 5.12 First contact with Adam's visually severed hand*

This is where the image of Adam caressing the car is of a crucial importance for it contrasts with what she actually says to her Suzie. “You see me, you always have... but I need a real friend” says May before extending her hand lightly on the glass of the box, expressing her desire to touch the doll, to feel her reality. What exactly does “seeing” means for May? What does she actually mean by “real friend”? For what does May's fascination for Adam's hands stand for? We can certainly suggest that “sight” is in *May* a trope of recognition of her individuality, a common trope used for instance in *Avatar* (2009) with its famous “I see you” used by the inhabitants of Pandora to greet each other. But the movie does not give enough elements at that stage to answer all these questions. Instead, the movie develops one of May's other obsessions, an obsession for body parts.



The movie already prompted this element by focusing on May's lazy eye, Adam's hands and different images of doll body parts. For May, the only other that she actually knows is her doll, and others' bodies acquire the property of the doll, that is to say, that they are made of relatively separable and, as we will see later in the movie, permutable body parts. The movie stresses this aspect in multiples scenes and formal compositions, notably by the use of door frames. For instance, in her stalking activities May observes Adam during his smoking break at his job.



*Figure 5.13 The doors frame highlighting Adam's whole body*

After the camera slides down the business sign announcing “auto body center,” a business selling car body parts, Adam's whole body appears in the black frame of the door, standing out by the whiteness of the wall and stressing the unity of his body. However, immediately after we have consecutive shots on his hands and expressing May's fascination for them. This will also be the start of May's fetishization of cigarettes on the same brand that she will smoke and caress thinking about Adam's hands. This contrasts between the frame of the door to stress the unity of the body and May's obsession with

body parts is used many times throughout the movie. May, has an affair with her lesbian work partner Polly (Anna Faris). May is fascinated by her neck and it is that body part that sustains May's sexual attraction to her. Despite the fact that Polly claims to have feelings for May, May soon discovers that she has had an affair when she unexpectedly runs to Polly's house after Adam rejected her. Polly's body appears in the frame of her entrance door, once again the unity of the body is stressed by the frame of the door, but immediately after, May takes a peek at what is behind Polly's body, and she sees a pair of legs playing in the air and framed by the frame of the bedroom door.



*Figure 5.14 The door frame highlighting Ambrosia's legs I*

Later in the movie, May's fascination for Ambrosia's legs (Nichole Hiltz), Polly's newly found sassy girlfriend, is stressed again by the frame of a door that is simultaneously used to underline the unity of the body while undermining it with shots of body parts.



*Figure 5.15 The door frame highlighting Ambrosia's legs II*



*Figure 5.16 The door frame as visual symbol of May's obsession with body parts*

In this scene, Ambrosia's legs appears to be cut by the frame of the door, while the camera slides up when she opens the panel in order to give a view of her whole body. May's sexuality is therefore made of body parts (Polly's neck, Ambrosia's legs, Adam's hands) and does not know the boundaries of sexual difference since May's desire is drawn mainly by a yearning for a caress, hence, the deep obsession with Adam's hands.

Before meeting Adam on the first date, May realizes that she does not know how to kiss and asks Suzie to give her advice. This leads May to fantasize, under Suzie's supervision, about Adam's caress using her dolls as a prop. The red of the boxing gloves underlines May's obsession for that specific body part in Adam, and when she will be rejected by Adam, this is precisely that body part that she ominously will cut from the doll and then caress her cheek with the severed plastic hand.

If Adam's rejection and Polly's betrayal certainly contribute to the crumbling of May's world, the event that is at the origin of the shattering of May's fragile grip on reality is the correcting lens that she receives from her eye doctor. Until then May was living in her world where her awkwardness and inability to be in touch with others was blamed on her imperfection, her lazy eye. One could say that her lazy eye was in fact the (sole) symbol on which reality and the others were indexed. But when she receives the correcting lens and despite a brief moment of euphoria, May has to face the fact that she is not able to understand the others. Her world starts to crack after her failed, and pretty aggressive, attempt to kiss Adam. "Who taught you how to kiss?" says Adam, "Suzie" answers May with an air of revenge.



*Figure 5.17 May acting the caress with dolls*



*Figure 5.18 May severing the doll's hand*

When May comes back to her house, she hits the top of the box out of rage against Suzie, slightly cracks the front glass and cuts her hand. From now on not only May will be taunted by noises of crackling glass, but sounds of crackling glass will be associated with images of torn flesh. This is for instance the case after the scene where Adam suddenly becomes aware of May's problematic relationship with reality and tries to escape

her. After a dinner at her house, Adam shows May a short horror movie that he has been working on. In this movie, a young couple goes for a picnic in the park, sits down in the grass and starts to consume their love, literally, tearing out bits of each other flesh. May finds the movie “sweet” and seems to be undisturbed by its images. In the following scene, we can see Adam and May on her bed. Adam is undressing her and May seems to be unable to enter into a meaningful tactile contact with his body, unable to provide a caress.



*Figure 5.19 May's tactile awkwardness*

This is when she bites his lips and he starts to bleed. Excited by the sight of blood, She covers her face with Adam’s blood. In front of Adam’s reaction of disgust and his urgent needs to leave the house, she counters “But it’s just like in your movie.” Once again she blames Suzie for this ultimate failure, sends the box in her closet and slams the door violently cracking a bit more the front glass. Immediately after and still associated with the sound of the cracking glass, we see the skin cut opened of what will be identified later as a cat. The sounds of the cracking glass bridges these two images, and signifies not only May’s psychological collapse but also underlines the ambiguous status that May

gives to other's body, who are rendered doll-like while the doll is given organic properties.



*Figure 5.20 May's hunger for blood*



*Figure 5.21 Suzie's jealousy*



*Figure 5.22 Cutting glass/cutting flesh*

The final event that will push May into beginning a killing spree, despite Adam's rejection and Polly's betrayal, is a failed attempt to rely upon a group of blind children. In search of a way to be in touch with someone, May discovers a group of blind children, and she is immediately drawn to them because of their tactile life (she is in fact particularly interested in a young girl, Petey, who is shown caressing the bark of a tree or sculpting an ashtray made of clay). May asks if she can volunteer at the school for blind children and everything works well at first. She even connects with Petey who offers her the clay ashtray with her name "May" impressed onto it. However, in order to share a bit more of her life, May brings Suzie to school. The children, frustrated by the impossibility to touch the doll that May describes, pull the box out of May's hands which shatters as soon as it lands on the floor, freeing Suzie and giving her to the tearing hands of the blind kids. The blind children, bleeding because of the glass on the floor, put an end to May's attempt to connect with the other when they destroy completely Suzie, the last and maybe only solid relation to the other in May's world.



After a few days of strong depression - during which we discover that she kept the body of the cat she killed in an outburst of anger, petting her and spreading deodorant on her body to keep the smell under control- May's obsession intensifies: she sits on a bench, images of body parts of people walking by are displayed on the screen: "So many pretty parts and no pretty holes." This is a revealing sentence that exposes May's enclosure in a world where others are reduced not only to body parts but in which there is no lack. May is caught up in the imaginary, in a world where symbols do not stick and therefore cannot create a lack. In the Lacanian tripartite theory of the psyche, the signifier introduces a lack in the world. Because the signifier stands for something that is not there, or stands for the thing without being the thing itself, the Symbolic dimension introduces a lack in the psychic world of the subject while allowing to escape from the pervasive presence of the imaginary. For Lacan, that is precisely the role of the Phallus, a symbol that mediates the relation with the m(other) and allows to understand and have a grip on her desire. However, in the mirror stage, the symbolic dimension appears with the infant recognizing herself in the mirror. This irruption of a formal space of an *I* before language, is not properly speaking a symbolic element, but the mirror stage prompts the emergence of language by introducing the infant to the symbolic *function* of the image. The image of her body in the mirror, stands for her actual body, and consequently, because it only *stands for* her body, it also fails to capture her experience of her embodied life. For Lacan, the wholeness of the body reflected in the mirror clashes with a less organized experience of the body that the infant experiments, but acts nonetheless as a symbol that helps the infant to escape from fantasies of dismemberment and oral engulfing associated with her imaginary relation to her mother. This tension between a lacking body and an idealized

and unified body, determines the infant relation to the other and to love (or to the demand of love). In love, one asks the other to confirm them and supports that idealized image of the body and self, but according to Lacan this is a dead-end demand since it does not acknowledge the lack of the subject, the hole that constitutes the body and the self. This is where Dolto's critique of the mirror stage fully resonates. Dolto always defended that the infant narcissism is not completely absorbed by the image in the mirror. There is always an outside, a waste, a hole outside the visual realm of the mirror stage. This hole is not the Lacanian Real either since it is made of the very concrete and accessible sensations that form the ground of my actual relation to my body. This hole is for Dolto, necessarily outside the visual, since the lived body is made of different sensations that participate in the construction of the self without being bound to the unifying image of the body in the mirror. In fact, to go further, it is precisely what remains outside the visual that constitutes the image as symbol. Without the sense of touch, or haptic dimension giving a sense of where the infant *actually* is in relation to the image in the mirror, the infant would be actually in the mirror, completely subjugated to the image of her body and to the logic of the visual. The relation with the mirror is an ambiguous one, not only because of the ambivalent attraction/repulsion logic that Lacan identifies as being at the core of the inherent violence toward the other, but ambiguous because it is never complete, because it does not encompass the totality of the sentient life.

This is precisely where *May* is a very relevant movie for a critique of the all-encompassing visual dimension of the mirror stage. *May* can be seen as a monster produced by a perfect embodiment of the mirror stage, with a total identification to the image of the mirror or the image of the doll/mother. Because of this early prohibition of

touch, there are absolutely no holes in May's world, no space where she or the other escape from the alienating dimension of the visual. From this point of view, one can understand that the destruction of Suzie by the blind children in their hunger to touch her, results in the collapse of May's world, since her fragile personality was entirely captured by this total identification to the image of the doll. She is literally out of touch with herself and the other, an empty shell that is typical of the narcissistic personality disorders.

Considering the impossibility to rely on other type of sensitive relations with others, especially tactile (as her impossibility to touch Adam's body demonstrates), and having lost the only stable point in her world, that is to say, Suzie's image, May is fatally pushed to reconstruct a doll, but this time made of flesh.

Her first killing (Besides Polly's cat) can be seen as relatively unplanned. In the same sequence where May seems in a state of deep depression in front of this absence of holes, she meets Blank (James Duval), whose name evokes simultaneously the "hole" that May is looking for but also the virgin state from which the doll will be built. She invites Blank to her house, and pretending that it is too hot he takes off his shirt. May is immediately drawn by the beauty of his torso (and on the tattoo on his right shoulder, the face of Dr. Frankenstein's monster, prophesizing his imminent fate and a nice cameo acknowledging Lucky McKee's debt to Mary Shelley). Looking for ice cubes in May's freezer, he discovers the dead cat that she kept there in order to caress it from time to time (another instance of May's failed attempt to connect with others through tactility). Disgusted and shocked by his discovery, he calls May a "fucking freak," an insult that triggers in May a violent rage. She grabs her large sewing scissors and stabs Blank first in his hand and then in his head. The rather improbable position that Blank adopts must be

seen as a voluntary symbol given by the director to signify an important change in May's attitude



*Figure 5.23 The hands object of May's death drive*

These scissors transpiercing Blank's hand before the fatal blow underline May's rejection of tactility (and to relate with others on this mode) when she decides to recreate a doll. "I need more parts," she confidently tells herself while she is working on Blank's dead body. This discovered sense of confidence contrasts sharply with her shy awkwardness that she displayed previously. By renouncing tactility as a means to rely on the other, a mode of relation that has been so cruelly absent from her life, she is able to reconstruct a sense of self but completely out of touch with reality and with others. Others from this point are just seen as the body parts of her future "best friend." She takes the opportunity of the upcoming Halloween night to plan the collecting of the body parts. She buys a large cooler, sews a dress similar to Suzie's and whitens her face with makeup. Her resemblance to Suzie is total and stresses her complete identification with the doll.



*Figure 5.24 May's embodiment of Suzie*

In this shot, the similitude with Suzie is striking with the frame of the elevator door reproducing Suzie's box and May's voiceover repeats her mother's motto "If you can't find a friend, make one." We can also notice her patch worked dress, evoking her attempt to cover the "hole" of her lived-body with "visible" pieces of fabric, a denial of tactility and of the haptic dimension of the lived body underlined by the sign "no smoking" over her head, ostentatiously displayed in the previous shot and standing for her withdrawal from the fantasmatic association between Adam's hand and smoking.

The identification, or even more strongly, the complete channeling and embodiment of Suzie, is stressed throughout May's killing spree, as in the scene where she kills Ambrosia to collect her stunning legs.



*Figure 5.25 the red and white motif in Polly's room*

The two dominant colors of the scene are red and white, Suzie's colors. The couch and its alternating stripes of red and white set the tone of the image. This alternation of colors is visually prolonged on the right by Ambrosia's mini-skirt. At the bottom of the screen, one can see Polly's dead body with her legs covered with blood displayed in sharp contrast with the white of her carpet. The large cooler, red with a white top also participate to give the feeling to the viewer that the world is now perceive from the point of view of the doll that May completely channels. When May finally kills Ambrosia with a scalpel in her head, Ambrosia drops the pack of milk she was drinking and the blood mixes with it, repeating the motif of colors.



*Figure 5.26 The red and white motif with milk and blood*

May's last attempt to connect with the sense of touch is illustrated in the scene in which she kills Adam. She unexpectedly arrives at Adam's house where he is playing cards and getting drunk with one of his girlfriends. She confidently sits at the table and commands: "Touch me. Touch my face." Adam's girlfriend sits on his laps and taunts May by asking Adam to touch her. Realizing that Adam is out of her grip, she stabs the girlfriend (from which she picks the ears) and Adam. A shot of May handling a surgical saw over Adam's wrist leaves no doubt on the type of mutilation she is performing on his body.

With all the pieces of her doll of flesh, May comes back to her house and starts sewing the pieces together. She uses the letter printed on the ashtray to compose the name AMY, the anagram of May, but also a first name sounding like the French *ami*, friend. This chilling finale also reveals important symbolic dimension and the meaning of the very first image of the movie. "You have all the parts" May says over her newly found friend "Words can't describe. But I don't have to talk to you, do I? I can just feel... And

you'll feel it right here too." May, one hand on her chest, the other one on the doll, seems to suddenly realize that it has no heartbeat. She presses her head to the doll's chest and gasps "Right. You can't see me." This stresses once more the total obliteration of haptic life and its understanding in terms of sight. Whereas this is precisely the haptic and tactile dimension that gives the most accurate perception of life (heat, heart beats, texture of organic life, etc.), for May, life is about sight. To be seen is to be alive. Life and communication with the other is locked up in the visual dimension. If the doll cannot see her, then it's not alive.



*Figure 5.27 May's fleshy doll*

Visibly panicking, May starts crying. She is in a state of internal disarray and sadness until she seems resolute to a personal sacrifice to solve the problem of the doll's blindness. Sat in front of her mirror, she grabs her sewing scissors and enucleates her own right eye. This image closes the movie on itself in relation to the very first image of the movie, but the last sequence offers a very interesting twist in relation to this opposition between to see and to caress. She walks to the doll, crying in pain and distress, and places her eye on the doll.





*Figure 5.28 May's sacrifice*

“See me!” she shouts to the doll “All I want is... see me.” May slowly falls on the side of the doll, either because she is passing out or dying. The eye falls from the head of the doll, and the hand of the doll slowly rises up, reaches May and starts caressing her face. It is on this sense of peace and on this long awaited caress that the movie closes.



*Figure 5.29 The final caress*

So what does the movie say about the caress? How does it tie into our previous critiques and developments? In chapter III, I suggested that if for Merleau-Ponty embodied life could be defined by reversibility, that is to say that the world around me is spatially organized not only in relation to my body but that the world itself is imbued with organic atmosphere. Because my relation to the world is a relation made of different projects, different intentions that only make sense for an embodied being, the world is constituted in relation to specific bodily projects. The pen on the table is not solely a thin and long piece of wood, something of a signification is given to it as soon as it is perceived (can be seized, can be used to write). Habits and desires shape my perception. Therefore, embodied subjects do not live in a pure geometrical space but in a space already saturated of organic, bodily, carnal significations.

However I do not live in a world of psychic projections and of fantasies. My body is in relations with the world around it, it is in return, situated. Perception is therefore defined by its ambiguity that, I have argued, is initiated by the relation to touch. The caressing/caressed of the hands offers a matrix from which the world springs. I am unable to clearly distinguish which hand is caressed and which hand is caressing. Instead, an ambiguous perception is *given*, with a certain aura of impersonality, a perception that is never fixed but oscillates between subjective/objective positions without being able to establish this sensation on a stable position. Sensation is not a specific position in the caressing/caressed experience; it is the ambiguous, ever changing and ever open duration of this experience. See for instance what Merleau-Ponty suggests of the relationship between sight and touch in the Visible and the Invisible: “The look we said envelops palpates, espouses visible things, so sight has the same ambiguous nature as touch.” Touch

indeed, but the experience is not just the hands touching each other, it is actually a caress. It is a movement that expresses itself in time, an experience that makes sense only in its duration. The caress *is* not (or it is touch), the caress is defined in its relation with time. There is a fundamental queerness in the caress, and in perception if the caress is taken as matrix of perception, that is best captured by the category of becoming than with the category of being. Perception, like the caress, is always open to an infinity of virtual projects.

Here are two examples. The first one is borrowed from Foucault *Les Heterotopies*. In this text, Foucault strives to define spaces that are not elsewhere such as utopias, but that are here but radically different, heterotopias. He argues that children are particularly talented at creating these radically different spaces. The bed of the parents for example, turned into a pirate ship. In this example, the bed is neither a bed nor properly speaking a pirate ship. But because the bed is naturally a space of travel, a space where people dream and travel to fantastic territories, the lived space of the bed is perceived and becomes a pirate ship. There is not the objective bed on one side and the fantasies of the children on the other, but a continuously open game of contesting practices, playing with the objective determinants of the bed (its shape, its admitted uses, etc.) and a collective desire for adventure. Perception as caress opens a space of ambiguity, of contestation, of appropriation, of negotiation that is only limited by the habit and desire to perceive my bed as a space of rest after a long day of intense activities of my dull adult life. This is in this context that one must read Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the color red:

Claudel has a phrase that a certain blue of the sea is so blue that only blood would be more red. The color is yet another variant in another dimension of variation, that of its relations with the surroundings: this red is what it is only by connecting up from its place with other reds about it,

with which it forms a constellation, or with other colors it dominates or that dominate it, that it attracts or that attracts it, that it repels or that repel it. In short, it is a certain node in the woof of the simultaneous and the successive. It is a concretion of visibility, it is not an atom. The red dress a fortiori holds with all its fibers onto the fabric of the visible, and thereby onto a fabric of invisible being. A punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms. And its red literally is not the same as it appears in one constellation or in the other, as the pure essence of the Revolution of 1917 precipitates in it, or that of the eternal feminine, or that of the public prosecutor, or that of the gypsies dressed like hussars who reigned twenty-five years ago over an inn on the Champs-Élysées. A certain red is also a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds. If we took all these participations into account, we would recognize that a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard, indivisible being, offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, 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 visible ones, 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.” (Le Visible et l’invisible, 1757- 58; my translation.)

The caressing structure of perception opens red not solely to tactile dimension, as the red of my plastic cup is not the red of the wool carpet, but opens itself to a field of difference, “an ephemeral modulation of this world.” There is no color red in itself. Even if I imagine the color red, this color appears in my mind with a vague background in contrast to which a certain redness appears. The color red appears in a spatial and historical context that splits open perception and signification, “a sort of straits *between* interior horizons and exterior horizons ever gaping open.” The caressing structure of perception prevents me from assigning any stable objective or subjective meaning to the objects perceived. It is a mixture of positions that presents itself as given, as impersonal because of

its objective side, but as always meaningful because of its subjective side. It does not mean that perception is a free practice, on the contrary it is simultaneously constrained by spatial and historical context and gaping open; open to new projects, significations and practices. This is a field of difference that is always in state of becoming. Because the caress unfolds in time, it is open to new configurations; a new star can always be added to its “constellations”.

From this point of view the search for a caress acquires a metaphysical meaning in *May*. As I have suggested, May is stuck in a world with no gap, no holes. She is the image in the mirror, with no gap, no in-between space, with no ambiguity; a complete fusion with the image. The caress she seems unable to give or to receive and for which she tragically yearns, would demand that she inhabits an ambiguous body made of holes, made of parts that are unseen, untouchable, unfelt, and that she continuously tries to patch with pieces of fabric. Because she is whole, there is no space for the ambiguity of the other, no space for what makes the other radically other. The heart beats that we most of the time cannot feel, a hole in our embodied life, and that are yet the fragile strings that hold me on life, is a foreclosed dimension for the visual world of May (“You cannot see me” and also the meaning of “You cannot *feel* me”). That fragility of life that is mostly invisible is denied in May’s visual reductionism full of “pretty body parts but no pretty holes”. This final caress happening after the lethal sacrifice of her vision replaces herself within the fragility of her body – interestingly enough she does not enucleate her lazy eye, but the functional one - and severs herself from this image of perfection. This is finally when she is literally in touch with her body, that the caress arises and that she opens herself to the ambiguity of the caress.

Because the caressing structure of perception is always open, gaping, it is also expression. To perceive is to organize “reality” in relation with desires and habits. We, maybe, look at the same movie; we do not perceive it the same way and yet it is given with this specific meaning. Hence the endless debate of frustrated experts arguing over what the movie is or does. I may well *know* that there is an element of subjectivity but it is given as being *in* the movie, as an impersonal dimension. Even if we create its meaning according to our past experiences, our education, our desires these significations present themselves as embedded within the movie. If we finally agree on the meaning of a movie it is thanks to our shared knowledge, culture and experiences. The caress as perception and expression takes advantage of the element of indeterminacy and ambiguity within perception. The caress, as a practice of expression, is a search for and a promise of new meanings, new sensations, and new pleasures.

## **5.2. The Skin and the Phallus in the Melville’s *Moby-Dick***

My hand caresses the body of my lover. I usually let my hand softly wander on his back or his chest blindly confident in the pleasure that this caress gives. I don’t even really think about it; an automatic oiling in the always rusting machinery of lovers’ life. But sometimes the caress becomes inquiry, a search for a new pleasure in the otherness and uncharted territory that my lover’s body is. As Levinas already insisted, the caress is a search, an impetus toward a radical alterity. However, contrary to Levinas who situated radical difference in the Feminine and in Fecundity, or contrary to Irigaray who situated radical difference in sex difference, I have recast the relation of the caress with alterity in the body, and more precisely, in the tactile matrix of embodied life. Opposing the sys-

tematic understanding of the subject formation in terms of visibility, I suggested in chapter II and III that Merleau-Ponty's touching/touched, Anzieu's skin-Ego and Dolto's critique of the mirror stage pointed to another account of the subject's development. For Anzieu, the fantasy of the torn skin and the experience of the limits of her body, introduce the child to a certain image of the body and elements of symbolization. The trauma in Anzieu's account of the subject is the tactile separation with the mother, the realization that they are not connected by a common skin. Dolto's critique of the mirror stage, not only acknowledge Anzieu's account of an earlier constitution of the subject, that is to say an earlier intertwining of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real, but also stresses that the mirror stage does not drain the totality of the child's narcissism. In other words, the visual is an important mode of relation with oneself and others, other modes of relations are possible, modes that have their own history. This is of a crucial importance since for Lacan this visual relation to my body prompts a certain ambivalence and aggressivity towards me and the other. The image reflected in the mirror is simultaneously a conforming image of wholeness and unity while being a taunting image to which I will never totally live up to. By reframing the development of the subject in terms of tactility and skin, the relation to the other is also displaced. The problem is not to live up to a certain ideal of the *I*, but a search and nostalgia for a common sensitive life and a tactile narcissism. This is precisely this longing for the other, an other defined mainly by its tactility and embodied nature, that the caress is defined. I would like however to touch to a last aspect of the caress in this section. The caress is not solely longing and nostalgia, it is play and expression. The split between my body and the other's that the fantasy of the torn skin introduces, also introduces a space of indeterminacy between me and the other,

in the very same way that impossibility to reconcile the immanent and the transcendent in Merleau-Ponty supports a perception that is always open to new potentialities and new point of views. If to reach toward radical alterity through the caress is always doomed to failure since attaining the other, being in its skin, would only reduce it to the same, it is however in this tension and longing *for* otherness that a certain indeterminacy and a certain queerness is introduced. Comparing Edelman and Muñoz definition of queerness, I defined queerness in the Introduction “*as always in tension for being tasked with the contradictory mission of figuring a radical alterity.*” Because *Jouissance* is refused, the caress is creativity enveloping the other, a creativity that is endlessly spiraling around the axial promise of a caress. It is precisely this sensitive creativity, and more precisely of tactile creativity, that I would like to illustrate thanks to a reading of *Moby-Dick*, and particularly, of “The Counterpane,” “The Blanket” and of “A Squeeze of the Hand.”

In “Strange Sensations: Sex and Aesthetics in the ‘Counterpane,’” Christopher Looby already offered an in depth reading of sensitivity in *Moby-Dick*’s chapter “The Counterpane.” Drawing on Michel Foucault’s argument that sexuality is a specific cultural construct that does not necessarily capture accurately the ways in which pleasure, sensation and identity are experienced in other historical contexts, Looby takes “The Counterpane” as an example in which sensations and a vague sense of eroticism are not experienced as sex. Looby’s second influence is Stephen Shapiro’s essay “Sexuality: An Early American History” in which he offers a distinction between “the early modern regime of elicited acts” for which “homosexual acts might have been considered obscene, unlawful, or sinful [...] but were not believed to characterize the individual that engage in them as a certain type of person (the homosexual)” and “a later historical situation in which such



acts were widely thought to proceed from a person's durable inner disposition, his intrinsic homosexuality" (Looby, 67). Adjusting Shapiro's overarching chronology to the American context, and pointing at the queer ambiguity of Melville's texts, Looby argues that they bespeak a period of transition between the two periods that Shapiro singles out. Looby coins the term of "reflexive sensual tendency" to define this period in which sensations and affective preferences start to be linked to a person's natural dispositions without being necessarily defined as sexual. "Until then," Looby argues:

there was no sexuality in the United States; there were bodies, those bodies had pleasures, and those pleasures could be fairly described as erotic, or sensual – or aesthetics. [...]. My premise, as I have outlined above, is that well into the nineteenth century in the United States, people did not habitually think in terms of sexual identity, but in terms of sensual tendency or sensual practices, a category of experience that included genital practices and other behaviors we might retrospectively regard as sexual, but that also would have included eating, drinking, smoking, gazing at landscapes, reading novels, going to the theater, and a hosts of other pursuits (70).

For Looby, Melville's "The Counterpane," is Melville conscious "protest against sexuality," a protest that must be understood as a resistance against the emerging regime of sexuality. Melville's protest is not only an attempt to resist the material and cultural re-organization of gender relations (re-organization of work especially of the whaling trades, raise of the ethos of the self-made man, etc.), but also offers a utopian model of gender relations that erases the tensions within same-sex relations that can be observed during that period. Considering Looby's contextualization of the text, it is therefore necessary to offer a critique of *Moby-Dick* that stays away from the critical category stemming from the modern regime of sexuality. In other words, Looby's affective and sensitive turn is also a protest against psychoanalytic critiques of Melville's texts and this is where Christopher Looby and David Greven depart from each other. In *Gender Protest and Same-Sex*

*Desire in Antebellum American Literature* (2014), Greven also identifies a gender protest in Melville but in quite different terms than Looby's. Whereas for Looby this protest is made on the background of a utopian representation of same-sex relations, for Greven, who uses psychoanalytic theory to develop his critique, Looby's nostalgic and utopian point of view erases the fundamental disturbance of sexuality:

Some critics continue to present an idealizing view of the possibilities of same-gender friendship in the pre-taxonomical period without addressing the considerable tensions and often violent discord within literary representations of such relations, to say nothing of the larger cultural pressures placed on individuals from the ethos of capitalistic competitiveness that informed the United States long before and well into the Reconstruction era. (20)

Considering the two different approaches, on the one hand Looby's aesthetic model and on the other, Greven's psychoanalytic model, it is not surprising that Greven's critique of Looby's essay focuses mainly on his eviction of sexuality and its disturbances. For Greven, the main problem with Looby's critique of psychoanalysis is that it relies on a conservative narrative surrounding the emergence and effects of psychoanalysis and according to which "psychoanalysis emerges as a strictly teleological narrative that puts its subjects on one undeviating path to normalization, whereas "resensualization" is not a narrative of sexual maturation but, instead, a sustained immersion in myriad and uncategorizable pleasures" (33). If Greven does not deny that such conservative points of view within psychoanalysis exist, he stresses the fact that psychoanalysis is also a powerful set of theories stating that sexuality is also what prevents from the total subjection to the cultural order. Greven's take on psychoanalysis underlines the disturbing, conflictual and "denaturalizing" account of sexuality in order to develop a queer theory of psychoanalysis, if not a psychoanalysis of queer theory.

If I fully support Greven's intellectual position in relation to psychoanalysis, I however want to stress that Looby's does not solely critique psychoanalysis but also relies on phenomenology to develop his point of view; an aspect of his essay that Greven leaves aside. This is a particularly interesting dimension of Looby's essay since Looby's turn toward phenomenology potentially leaves space for the type of disturbances that Greven finds in psychoanalysis. In fact, I would argue, it is possible that a few trends in psychoanalysis and phenomenology meet on the question of touch. However this is not necessarily the direction that Looby takes. Relying on Drew Leder's "The Absent Body," Looby exposes the function of the counterpane thanks to the notion of "the recessive body," that is to say that the body only appears partially to consciousness, but more interestingly thanks to the sense of touch:

Touch has a special phenomenological structure (or a number of special features) with respect to this habitual bodily absence or recession, since touch operates by means of direct contact and, thus, brings the otherness of the thing touched unmistakably to mind. We forget about our hand doing the touching, so concentrated is our perception on the thing touched. But when someone else touches (as Queequeg does to Ishmael), especially applying pressure, it powerfully draws us into an awareness of our own embodiment – it forces our body out of the realm of "unthematized substratum," and reminds us vividly that we are, indeed, (touchable) embodied creatures. This quickening sensation, this experience (as Whitman had it) of being touched into existence, tellingly, is transmitted to Ishmael (as Melville arranges it) by an aesthetic object, the counterpane. (78)

This analysis of touch is already very familiar to us. However, I follow here Greven who, without mentioning Looby's turn to phenomenology, argues that this focus on sensation might ignore the more disturbing and negative aspect of sexuality. There is, in Looby's analysis of touch, an escape from the messiness of sexuality and an idealization of the power of touch. Even if I am obviously sympathetic to Looby's project, I have to admit that Looby has a hard time articulating this utopic analysis of touch and the more

traumatic experience of this touch. Just after Ishmael is touched by Queequeg skin/counterpane, Ishmael remembers a traumatic childhood experience. In fact Looby ignores the problem by focusing on the reassuring presence of Queequeg's arm and decides to resist "oedipalizing the story, given that this unsettling memory, which Ishmael says has come back to him many times and has never been resolved, is triggered here by his indistinctly un-Oedipal experience in bed with Queequeg" (79). Looby escapes from the negativity of the experience by first reducing psychoanalysis to Freud's Oedipus complex. This is a rather surprising reduction of psychoanalysis that seems to ignore its rich and valorized theorization of the pre-oedipal psychic life. Second, Looby mentions that the memory has appeared in other contexts and therefore is probably unrelated to the specific tactile event. I would argue on the contrary that it is precisely because this is a recurring memory, that it demands interpretation. This return of the memory bespeaks of a death drive attached to this traumatic experience and the tactile content of this memory makes it hard for Looby to argue that there is no connection with the sensations felt with Queequeg. In fact, Looby's resistance to psychoanalysis pushes him into more complex theoretical conundrums when he reads the passage as "a sensory reparation." If I find the reading interesting and attractive, I do not see clearly how such reparation is possible without relying on the dynamic approach that psychoanalysis offers and I do not see how phenomenology allows him not to engage more deeply with this negativity that haunts touch. First, the recessivity of the body is a place of negativity, or at the very least of ambiguity. Second, it seems artificial to separate phenomenology from psychoanalysis; sensation from desire. As Merleau-Ponty, drawing on Freud, if sexuality is everywhere then it is also indiscernible from perception. Both "aspects" are intertwined and there is no

desire without perception and no perception animated by a desire. Whereas Looby takes this opportunity of this intertwining to redeem sexuality from its negativity, I want to argue on the contrary that this intertwining offers the opportunity to estrange perception, the body, and our perceptive life. Third, as we will see, psychoanalytic theories relying on the sense of touch and the organ of skin (Anzieu) allow us to make sense of this passage without necessarily falling back on the banalities of the Oedipus complex.

However, there is a particularly inspiring critical gesture in Looby's phenomenological approach. Looby stresses the performative effects of this approach:

If it is true, as I have also argued, that Melville is interested in the sort of aesthetic/erotic pedagogy that literature might pursue, if he believes that literature can resensualize readers by inducing in them phantom sensations not unlike those experienced by Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, this might alert us to the possible presence throughout the nineteenth century American literature of similar attempts to re-embody readers, induce vicarious sensations of the sort that we are invited to imagine in reading Ishmael awakening to Queequeg embrace. (82)

While I cannot subscribe to Looby's argument that it is a specific feature of nineteenth century American literature (Isn't the novel the genre *par excellence* that vicariously induces bodily sensations and emotions?), I am also interested in Melville's obsession with tactile sensations in *Moby-Dick* and more particularly, in the ways in which Melville expresses a longing for human connection through the sense of touch. I would like therefore to offer a reading of "The Counterpane" and of "A Squeeze of the Hand," based on Anzieu's ego-skin and of the fantasy of the torn skin that exposes the unconscious dynamic sustaining this desire for touch and the premise of a caress.

Following Anzieu's theory of the skin-ego, I argue that the double fantasies of the communal skin and of the torn skin linger in Melville's *Moby-Dick*. More precisely, I argue that in the novel's idealization of male-to-male relations and its fascination with the

skinning of the whales, that both expresses an archaic psychological fantasy related to the skin-ego. Focusing on the chapters “The Counterpane” and “A Squeeze of the Hand,” I want to stress how Anzieu’s conceptual framework allows highlighting the unconscious logic at work in these chapters and maybe in the whole novel. “The Counterpane” as well as “A squeeze of the Hand” and their erotic tension, to say the least, are inescapable chapters for the reader interested in the *Moby-Dick*’s homosocial/erotic/sexual content (Greven, 2014; Looby, 2011; Penry, 1999). Without radically differing from these readings, I want to show, however, that Melville’s homoerotism/sexuality far from being penetrative (orally or anally) is expressed through the sense of touch and distributed on the surface of the body, of the skin, reactualising the specific fantasy of a communal skin, object of erotic, sexual and social experiences.

The iconic image of “The Counterpane” is well known. Ishmael for the first time shares a bed with the cannibal Queequeg and despite the fact that they both slept in “a prodigious bed, almost big enough indeed for any four harpooners to sleep abreast” (32), Ishmael wakes up with Queequeg’s arm thrown over him “in the most loving and affectionate manner” (36) as husband and wife. However, this does not seem to disturb Ishmael whose gaze is attracted by a curious effect of surfaces. The surface of the counterpane “full of odd little part-colored squares and triangles” seems to emerge as the natural continuity of Queequeg’s skin which “looked for all the world like a strip of that same patchwork quilt.” The illusion is so perfect that the vision here is useless and Ishmael has to rely on another sense, more tactile, his sense of weight, to undo the spell: “Indeed, partly lying on it as the arm did when I first awoke, I could hardly tell it from the quilt, they so blended their hues together: and it was only by the sense of weight and pressure

that I could tell that Queequeg was hugging me.” (37). Ishmael is literally wrapped in Queequeg’s skin. In psychoanalytic terms, this image of symbiosis emerges from the abyss of an unconscious past deeply buried in the pre-oedipal world of the mother, presumably Ishmael’s unconscious but perhaps that of the tactile texture of the text as a whole. It is also an image that, not surprisingly, does not fail to invoke Freud’s theory of the uncanny, which describe the reappearance of the familiar (*Heimlich*) in an unfamiliar form (*unheimlich*). Ishmael certainly seems to experience a feeling of the (*unheimlich*) intertwined with tactile sensations: “My sensations were strange” (37).

It is probably important here to underline that Ishmael/Melville uses the word “sensation”, and not “idea” or “feeling.” He uses the word “sensation” as the word having the less interiority, the less depth, situating the event he is describing at the level of the surface, or even more at the level of the interface between his body and the world. What is certainly even more interesting is that the memory this tender embrace with Queequeg liberates is related to a traumatic experience. Younger, the child Ishmael tried to “crawl up the chimney” and got caught by his stepmother who “somehow or other, was all the time whipping me, or sending me to bed supperless” (37). Despite the difference between these two events, a homoerotic hug from a noble savage, and different corporeal punishments from his stepmother, Ishmael insists “I well remember a somewhat similar circumstance.” In other words, it is as if a piece of discourse was lacking or had been repressed in order for the reader to make sense of the similarity between the two events. Following Anzieu’s theory of the communal skin and the following masochistic fantasy of the torn skin, I argue that Ishmael’s memory is the product of the work of a condensation, which undone, nods at these two unconscious fantasies that haunt our relation to tactility. First

of all, Ishmael opens the description of this memory making clear that he “never could entirely settle” if “it was a reality or a dream.” This uncertainty, perfect terrain for the intrusion of unconscious productions, is followed by the description of a bad action, “I had been *cutting* up some caper” (37. Emphasis mine). I will come back on the importance of the idea of “cutting” or slashing, but what must be stressed immediately is the importance of corporeal punishments associated with this memory. Obviously this memory shares a striking similitude with Freud’s *A Child is Being Beaten* (1919), where the oedipal sexual desire for the parent is turned into a fantasy of corporeal punishment, but this chastisement also refers to the skin, that is to say, the skin being injured by the whip or the skin whose pleasure associated with repletion and the breast had been suppressed by the privation of supper. In other words, the memory is a condensation whose heart is the “bitter sigh” he produces when he is punished and “gets between the sheets”. The soft sensation that Queequeg gives to Ishmael with his “loving and affectionate manner” and supported by the fantasy of a communal skin is associated with the immediate destruction of this communal skin and the corporeal punishment. The cut external membrane of the caper resonates with the injuries produced by the whip on the skin. The agent of this destruction, “my stepmother” who becomes a few words later “my mother”, is the figure of the bad mother produced by a masochistic position as described by Anzieu when the child slowly abandons his fantasy of a communal skin. This nostalgia for a communal skin and its associated anxiety of a torn skin is probably one of the main unconscious dimensions of the novel. This ambivalent attitude toward the sense of touch, simultaneously revealing a longing for touch and a fear of touch, is throughout the novel expressed in the description of an almost a perfect all-male society navigating on the sea



while skinning whales. This ambivalence is admirably translated in Melville's own unconscious vocabulary in "The Gilder": "these are the times of a dreamy quietude, when beholding the tranquil beauty and brilliance of the ocean's skin, one forgets the tiger heart that pants beneath it; and would not willing remember, that this velvet paw but conceals a remorseless fang" (372). The image of the "tranquil beauty and brilliance of the ocean's skin" torn by the tiger's "fang" expresses and condenses at the same time one of the unconscious fantasies at work in *Moby-Dick* and offer the best summary of the unconscious tactile universe of whole novel.

This binary and oppositional unconscious logic residing in the Melville text has been already noticed. For instance, Robert Martin argues in his *Hero, Captain, and Stranger* (1986) that:

There are, then, two kinds of phallicism present throughout the novel: a phallicism that is largely invested of its sexual energy and redirected toward political end, the phallicism of Ahab and the phallicism of a perfunctory heterosexuality; and a polysemous phallicism that is not directed outward but that retains a full sense of its own pleurability, while it is at the same time capable of extending itself into social action in terms of sharing. (92)

Ahab described by Melville as "supreme lord and dictator" (107) embodies a "colonizing, Indian Killing, nature-conquering" (Martin, 92) phallicism through which can be read "the capitalistic search for wealth and the patriarchal search for power" (85). Opposed to this, a "polysemous phallicism" is embodied in the figure of Queequeg, "representative of all primitive and colonized culture" (74), who stands for the resistance against "a civilization gone mad, of a culture that has lost all touch with nature" (72). Interestingly enough Martin links this specific "polysemous phallicism" to the figure of Narcissus. He however argues that this figure has not the cultural negative charge usually attached to it in *Moby-Dick*. On the contrary "Melville's novel posits Narcissus as the

representative of a contemplative force that can counteract the active force of industry and commerce epitomized in the whale hunt. Narcissus stands for a love that will not be harnessed to utility, that seeks instead a pleasure unto itself” (73). For Martin this narcissism does not lead to isolation, but is articulated to a “democratic poetics”(68), to a male-to-male social bounding thanks to its homoerotic dimension: “The connection between the figure of Narcissus and the concept of homosexuality is obvious; it is based not so much on the superficial identity of sex between the lover and the beloved as on the social implications that is self-sufficient. The gap between self and other is overcome by a love in which other is revealed to be but the mirror of the self” (74).

Keeping in mind Martin’s set of oppositions, it is interesting to notice that Tara Perry also invokes the figure of Narcissus in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* to ground her own set of oppositions between a sentimental masculinity and a romantic masculinity. Perry first reminds us that Narcissus in love with his own reflection, falls in the water and dies by drowning because he attempted to *grasp* his own image. Drawing on this idea of a visual narcissism opposed to the tactile tangibility of otherness, Perry distinguishes between a Romantic masculinity embodied by Pierre and Ahab and defined by excessive and narcissistic self-scrutiny and suicidal defiance to Nature, to a sensitive masculinity defined by a “tactile sentimentality” as the source of an erotic community.

Even if the two scholars do not give the same value to narcissism, they nonetheless agree that the myth of Narcissus is a key feature for the interpretation of *Moby-Dick*. I want to show that this disagreement of the function of narcissism (community building for Martin, suicidal withdrawal for Perry) is understandable when considering the fantasies of communal skin and skin ego. However, I would oppose both authors in their un-

derstanding of the myth of Narcissus as a myth about visibility; a reduction that psychoanalysis is guilty of. The myth of Narcissus on the contrary expresses the tension between the visual and the tactile as Melville himself reminds us in the very first chapter of *Moby-Dick*: “And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (20). As already seen, the anxiety linked to the passage from the communal skin to the skin ego is central to *Moby-Dick*, but Melville’s text also keeps the trace of the anxieties linked to the next psycho affective development stage, the mirror stage. This passage in fact demands a revision of the mirror stage integrating the sense of touch. It is important to underline here that if Pierre, Ishmael and Ahab have different personalities, they nonetheless are all linked to the idea of loneliness and abandonment, symbolic translation of the loss of the communal skin. Ahab is an orphan whose mother died in his infancy, Ishmael is related to this figure of exclusion and abandonment through the story of the biblical Ishmael, and Pierre whose father died when he was young, decides to burn the picture of his father and declares himself “disinherited” of the past. As Penry underlines, the metaphor of the little soul-toddler introduced in the middle of the book, applies to these three important Melvillian characters, and it is not by chance that this image of the toddler resonates so strongly to Melville. I argue that these three characters embody different ways of dealing with the loss of the communal skin and the bitter illusions of the specular image.

### 5.3. “A Squeeze of The Hand” and “The Blanket”

“A Squeeze of the Hand” has often been commented on for its homoerotic content but the archaic fantasy sustaining Melville’s erotico-politics has been ignored due to the lack of conceptualization of the skin as a major organ in the formation of the ego. The unconscious fantasy of the text obviously bears the mark of a genital dimension (“the sperm” or the masturbating overtone), but one can read clearly like watermarks images relating the primordial fantasy of a communal skin. “Squeeze! Squeeze! Squeeze!” (322) is the paradigmatic injunction of these passages obsessed with the relation to tactile pleasure. The pleasure comes from the hand and its relation to the “sperm of kindness” which is also curiously “milk” (323). This pleasure refers to the archaic enjoyment linked to breast feeding. The baby grasps the skin, breast or cloth, of his female guardian, and absorbs the “fluid”, the “liquid”, the “milk” “looking up into” his mother’s “eyes sentimentally”. There is without a doubt in this passage the shadow of the breast as Freud conceptualized it, but as Anzieu underline the breast as a fantasy is linked to the communal skin through the sensation of repletion that already offers a sense of unity of the body before the mirror stage. It is important to notice what the “sperm” or “milk” stands for. “I washed my hands and my heart of it... while bathing in that bath” (322) refers here to the primary care of the bath and the pleasures associated with the handling of the baby, but what must be stressed is that the sperm does not refer to any “phallic” symbol domination but on the contrary it refers to “sentimentality”, to the pleasure associated with “an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling”. The “sperm” and the “milk” are just the material manifestations of this love and generosity. What was enclosed is liberated. What is grasping becomes caressing thanks to the oily sperm. The limits of individual

bodies are torn apart to liberate their juice and make a bath of it: “I bathed my hands among those soft, gentle globules of infiltrated tissues, woven almost within the hour; as they richly broke to my fingers, and discharged all their opulence like fully ripe grape wines” (322). “Mistaking their hands for the gentle globules” Ishmael has no clear limit between him and the other. The hand delicately touches the surface and the liquid of generosity pours on a communal skin-mouth: “nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness”. In psychoanalytical terms this passage illustrates a certain regression to a stage dominated by the fantasy of a communal skin. The erotic whose origin is firmly enrooted in the tactile sensations and the fantasy of a communal skin is also translated into the terms of politics. This moment of rapture and felicity lead to a politico-philosophical epiphany: “I perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country; now that I perceived all this I have perceived all this, I am ready to squeeze case eternally”. Leaving the world of abstraction or of visual seduction, Ishmael/Melville joins the materiality and the graspable dimension of life. This graspability of life echoes Ishmael’s attraction to universality. By squeezing hands with the cannibal, the uneducated, the stranger and the heretic he envisions a brotherhood of shared hands and skin where “social acerbities”, “malice”, “ill humour or envy” are erased.

However this utopian politics of the caress is short-lived. Immediately after this utopian moment of shared same-sex intimacy, in the very same chapter, Melville goes back to the description of the different parts that are cut out of the whales, their use, the

different methods applied. Melville mentions for instance the “plum-pudding” a “term bestowed upon certain fragmentary parts of the whale’s flesh, here and there adhering to the blanket of blubber, and often participating to a considerable degree in its unctuousness” (323). The blanket is the name given to the skin of the whale which is obviously connotatively linked to the counterpane. But Melville also devotes a whole chapter to the description of the skin in “The Blanket” in which he emphatically states: “In life, the visible surface of the Sperm Whale is not the least among the many marvels it presents.” If we keep in mind the different network of symbolic association between Narcissus/life/grasping/ocean, whale/blanket/life, ocean/skin/tiger/fang and Queequeg/counterpane/skin/cutting/tattoo, one can sense that these signifiers gravitate around the density of a very specific and original fantasy that escapes from the logic of the oedipal and phallic structure. In fact, this sexual fantasy linked to what must be called a “skin stage” seems to support a protest against the tantalizing power of the Phallus. In the chapter following “The Counterpane,” “The Cassock,” Melville describes what is made of the skin of the whale’s penis:

Look at the sailor, called the mincer, who now comes along, and assisted by two allies, heavily backs the *grandissimus*, as the mariners call it, and with bowed shoulders, staggers off with it as if the he were a grenadier carrier a dead comrade from the field. Extending it upon the forecastle deck, he now proceeds cylindrically to remove its dark *pelt*, as an African hunter pelt the boa. This done he turns the *pelt inside out*, like a pantaloons leg; gives it a good stretching, so as almost to double its diameter; and at last hangs it, well spread, in the rigging, to dry. Ere long, it is taken down; when removing some three feet of it, towards the pointed extremity, and then *cutting* two slits for arm-holes at the other hand, he lengthwise slips himself bodily into it. The mincer now stands before you invested in the full canonicals of his calling. Immemorial to all his order, this investiture alone will adequately protect him, while employed in the peculiar function of his office. (325, emphasis mine)

The ironic tone of this description participates in this desacralization of the Phallus. Initially, according to Lacan, the castration complex is organized around three notions: The Real lack, the Imaginary, the Imaginary castration and the Symbolic Phallus. These three notions organize the positions of the subject toward desire. Initially the infant is the mother's phallus, and her desires are understood in this imaginary symbiosis. However, the mother does not always respond to the call of the infant resulting in a perception of the mother as lacking, or a bad mother. If the lack is Real it is because it underlines the necessary impossibility of a symbiotic relation to the Other. The Phallus is therefore slowly displaced when the infant goes through the castration phase. The mother's desire, her phallus, is not the infant anymore, but must be found outside this dyadic relation (traditionally within the Father. The infant therefore undergoes an Imaginary, fantasmatic castration while the Phallus is used as a mediator to make sense of the Other's desire. The Phallus more than a signifier is a function that circulates along unconscious signifying chains and that can be attached to different signifiers, whether it is the penis, the uniform, the State, or a piece of leather. The Phallic signifier is therefore the object of desire (alienated to the Other) that the subject longs for and that holds the unfulfillable promise to fill the lack of his being. One can understand the fascination that the phallic signifier has on subjects since it is the Holy Grail of a fulfilled and empowered life sustaining the fantasy of a return to an unstained narcissism and a symbiotic relation to the mother at the condition to pay the price of the subjection to the Other's desire.

It would be easy to argue that the skin has a phallic function in this passage in "The Blanket". But the ironic tone that Melville uses and the desacralization that the skinning of the Phallus (the mincer is called in a pun, "archbishoprick") orients the inter-

pretation in another direction. I argue on the contrary that the sadistic dimension of the fantasy of the torn skin allows Melville to adopt a position of protest against the fascination for the Phallus. The dead Phallus is turned “inside out” and worn as a trophy which is not a trophy of power but an object of ridicule. The mincer slipping “himself bodily into it” symbolically reduces the phallus to skin; a skin which is not a phallic symbol but resistance to the kind of relationality that the phallus embodies.

The skin in *Moby-Dick* as the caress in *May*, accounts for a desire for new modalities of relation with the other and best embodied in the figure of the caress. Whether it is a protest directed against phallic relationality or against the illusion of the mirror, the caress is a desire for the other and the genital colonization that the phallus imposes on the body. Caressing the skin of my lover is to go beyond the genital logic of the Phallus, it is to go beyond the sexual difference, to unlock the queer potential of my body and to promise to my lover’s body a whole new world of tactile sensations. However, the caress is not a bodily utopia. The caress must remain a promise, a longing, a desire for something new, for a radical alterity. The phenomenological structure of touch (Merleau-Ponty’s impossibility of a perfect recovering of the touched over the touching), or the fantasmatic structure of our relation to touch and skin (Anzieu’s torn skin) prevents the caress from the mermaids’ song of a caressing society promising unity and the disappearance of lack and negativity. The caress must remain a promise, last it becomes a genital fantasy of unity and natural harmony. The caress is simultaneously a return to the past and an opening to the future, a nostalgia and a hope, but a nostalgia that escapes the fantasy of the reproduction of the same and a hope that acknowledges that the lack will never be fulfilled.



## Conclusion

Writing about a radical alterity that cannot be grasped because of its elusive characteristics demands a writing that is caress. The caress experiments, explores, searches for new sensations and new ideas, it is a *ligne de fuite* drawn on the body of the lover or on the white space of a paper sheet. In this sense caress expresses queerness. However, this phrasing is unsatisfactory, language imposes a logical anteriority to one of the terms whereas they should be thought in their simultaneity. The caress and queerness emerge simultaneously. The caress expresses queerness inasmuch as queerness depends on the caress. Merleau-Ponty's notion of expression states that when a writer, a singer, or a philosopher expresses ideas or emotions, these ideas or emotions do not pre-exist their expression. I do not express a Nature but a world. The discourse or the picture is not a simulacrum of a purer idea or an harmonious pre-existing order. The idea is only emerges in its expression; in the search for its expression. But more importantly, since there is no world of Ideas or no previous text to express, the expression remains always open, spiraling up around the axial desire to express oneself. Expression can only be a caress, a search for a form, a *jouissance* that will never come, since my voice will never be able to be the simulacrum of the immanence of the world. The world does not exist outside of me, as I do not exist outside of the world. Me and the world are sharing a common Flesh: the Flesh of the world. Any ontological project is therefore dubious. Can I define what is the world without stating my position in this world? Can I really talk about my desire without

stating what world(s) has been forced on me? The caress as a mode of expression hovers over the gap left open by the queer nature of the Flesh, of the intertwining of the world with my body.

Needless to say, that in many ways this dissertation caressed an idea more than anything else and failed to seize it. It has an experimental dimension that remains at the heart of my dissertation project due to the very nature of its object. The main strategical move of this dissertation was to open the queer canon to other influences. I was particularly drawn by the potential queer content of Levinas' Caress and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception and intertwining. Each chapter, in its own way attempted to seize the queerness of their philosophy, and each chapter failed in its own way. But, in a realm of caresses, failing is to succeed. This phrasing is not an easy way out to silence the critiques. On the contrary, I do think that the main failure of this dissertation is to have failed to recognize and embrace sooner the caressing nature of this project. In other words, it is from within the writing process the object of my dissertation revealed itself. In the future I will caress more Levinas and Merleau-Ponty to give more space the queer potential of their philosophy instead of holding tightly on the monumental architecture of their thinking.

Another critique also needs to be addressed. This project aimed at being a "queer" project, whatever it exactly entails. However, retrospectively, the question of (queer) desire has often been overshadowed by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception. The first reason for this eclipsing of the question of desire is fascination for Merleau-Ponty's voluntary non distinction between desire and perception, and the externalization and specialization of desire that it encompasses, prevented me to see this problem arising through

the writing process. Instead, I focused on exposing the ambiguous nature of perception, which logically implied the ambiguous and queer nature of desire. Even if I insisted on this intertwining of desire and perception in the Chapter II, I fear that I often took this implication for granted while it might be less obvious and more counter-intuitive for the reader. The second reason is rooted in the premise of this dissertation. As I have explained in the introduction, I distinguish clearly the word “queer” which has been appropriated by identity politics, from queerness which is more related to feelings and perception of ambiguity, disturbance, interruption and failure. In that sense desire and sexuality are queer in their very nature, whether we adopt a psychoanalytic or phenomenological standpoint. One might argue that this perspective fails to account for the logics of naturalization and legitimization that normalize some desires and pathologize and criminalize others. I would respond that if I completely agree with this critique, I also believe that this critique only stands if we “denaturalize” desire, that we disturb the relation of desire with its object, and if we establish that desires are not just equal *in law* but, more importantly, that desires are *in fact* the same. Only then, a cultural and feminist perspective can be applied in order to expose the logics of normalization, which in the case of the definition of desire I support, needs to expose not only the positive and productive legitimation of desire, but how the queerness of some “straight” desires are obscured, made invisible, and unspeakable.

A last critique that can be evoked is that the intertwining of perception and desire reflect a strategy to “de-sexualize” desire and to undo its disturbing and queer potential. I would on the contrary argue that Merleau-Ponty’s intuition inspired by his reading of Freud do not aim at taming desire but at liberating desire from its body/psyche capsule.

By taking very seriously Freud's dogma that everything is sexual, Merleau-Ponty expands this perspective beyond the the realm of language, dream and parapraxis but to our perception of the world. It is a radical externalization and spatialization of desire that is very close to Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of desire. Perception and desire are fundamentally ambiguous and queer because of this intertwining of my body with the world; it is always a perception made of Flesh.

Relying on the forces of this dissertation, there are at least two directions that this dissertation project can take. Touch is often invoked to develop a sentimentalist and utopian critique as we have seen with Looby's reading of *Moby-Dick* in chapter IV. However, this account of touch leaves aside the potential negativity of touch and more generally the queer texture of perception. I see here an interesting future contribution to the analysis of touch taking the horror movie genre as to develop this negativity of touch. As we have seen with *The Hands of Orlac*, *May* and *Mirrors*, tactility in horror movies reveals its negativity and casts a doubt on the utopian account of its relational power. This perspective also questions the very relation that the viewers sustain with the genre and maybe with cinema in general. If the relation of the viewer to the medium cinema has often been framed in terms of visual identification, mirroring relation, and psychological regression to the mirror stage, as illustrated for instance in Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982), the theoretical framework I seek to develop questions this hegemony of the visual. If vision is haunted by a haptic dimension, the screen is not only mirror but also skin; a mirror-skin so to speak. In this context, the reflexivity of touch and the sadistic drive lurking within its dimension might be a more comprehensive entrance to explain the ambivalent fascination that horror movie viewers experience.

The second direction would return to the notion of the caress as tension toward radical alterity and the creativity, experimentation and failures that it entails. The association of Levinas and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology revealed itself to have some limits, especially in their interpretative power.. We have seen that for Merleau-Ponty, that intertwinement can lead to a specific type of negativity as encroachment (*empiétement*) which is due to the fact that not only my body always remains alien to a certain extent, but that the perception of body is always in an ambiguous relation with the space surrounding me and the others' body. From this point of view Anzieu and Merleau-Ponty are very close in the ways in which they leave space for a negativity within the sense of touch. However, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological stance does not give a genealogical account of this negativity which, to my opinion, reduces the hermeneutic power of its analysis. On the contrary, Anzieu's psychoanalytic approach allows us to frame the caress' negativity within the larger theory of the subject that psychoanalysis offers. By articulating more clearly these two authors, it would be interesting to see how this negativity is expressed in different texts such as *Moby-Dick* or Jean Genet's *Querelle de Brest* (1947) and to analyze the creative potentialities and disturbances that the caress encapsulates.

These are two projects that obviously share similar themes but which also reveal a lack of theorization of the potentially fertile relation between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. I personally think that there is with Merleau-Ponty a potential escape from the linguistic dominion over the unconscious, a turn initiated by Lacan and that do not respect Freud's intuition *à la lettre*. Despite Merleau-Ponty's interest for Lacan's mirror stage, his connection of desire and sexuality with perception allows to reevaluate the role of sensations in the constitution of subject's relation to the world without the necessary

mediation of language. When Merleau-Ponty defines sexuality as a certain atmosphere in the field of my perceptive life, this atmosphere is not mediated by language but is given to me as an impersonal property of the world. It is properly speaking neither conscious nor unconscious but a tonal perception expressing an emotional state negotiated between my body, its history and the space surrounding me. In other words, forms have a meaning that language cannot encapsulate but that are just given within perceptive life. I do not need to say I am hot, to take off my coat. I constantly live in world of sensations that escape the realm of the Symbolic and constantly give shape to the emotional atmosphere of the world I live in. There is a sub-conscious life of perception that constantly frames my relation to the world and to the other. I do think that there are fascinating creative potentialities in the space between phenomenology and psychoanalysis. There is a potential body of works that should be excavated, desired, experimented and finally, caressed.

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