

# Body and world: The correlation between the virtual and the actual through phenomenological reflections via Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze<sup>†</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The current article deals with the correlation between virtual and physical reality as they concern the body. The thesis of this article is that the lived body transposed into virtual reality becomes a body without organs in Deleuze's terms, i.e. the lived body, a sensitive field of sensorial events immersed in a lived space, becomes a virtual body made up of intensities, of pure forces or magnitudes within a vector space, thereby losing its affective qualities. Furthermore, lived and virtual bodies build up a correlation bridged not by intentionality, as phenomenology would maintain, but by sensation. Virtuality is thus characterised by both the loss of corporeality and the simulation of the lifeworld. But how can the split between the real and the virtual body be bridged? On the one hand, in Deleuze's conception of sensation, real and virtual collapse into one another so that the real world 'resonates' with its virtual double. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's concept of form relates both realities in terms of a correlation of signification between the physical and the existential realms. With recourse to the notion of structure or form, I will argue that the phenomenal and the virtual do not represent different modes of being, but are bound by a correlation ruled by sensation as a system of intensive forces.

**KEYWORDS:** form, possible, reality, sensation

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## Introduction

In this article, I will be concerned with the issues arising from the 'virtualisation' of the body, as it is brought about by virtual reality technologies. In this context, the thesis of this article is twofold. Firstly, it claims that the lived body transposed into virtual reality becomes a body without organs in Deleuze's terms, i.e. the lived body, a sensitive field of sensorial events made up of tactile and kinaesthetic sensations and immersed in a lived space, becomes a virtual body made up of intensities, of pure forces or magnitudes within a vector space, thereby losing its affective qualities. Second, lived and virtual bodies build up a correlation bridged not by intentionality, as phenomenology would maintain, but by sensation, because sensation is both things; it is not only 'being-in-the-world', as Deleuze concedes to phenomenology, but the collapse of representation as well. In sensation, the subject experiences the world only by abolishing the distance between both realities, that is, becoming *one* with its virtual double. Thus, in virtual reality the real and virtual body coalesce in sensation. However, sensation does not suffice to resolve the split between virtual and physical reality.

The proposition I intend to prove in this article is that precisely Merleau-Ponty's concept of form or structure of behaviour may relate both realities, insofar as the virtual body – initially at least – not only behaves as if it were real, but

behaves according to the vital significance its actions would have in the real world. However, the virtual body soon exceeds the constraints of material reality due to the abovementioned collapse and becomes a system of unlimited forces, thereby losing its anchorage in lifeworld experience. Reference to the perceived world is nevertheless essential to a phenomenological subject who exists within the intersection of these fields, insofar as every determination that the subject makes in one of these fields affects both the subject and the field. Thus, the idea of structure or form of behaviour remains crucial upon considering the characteristics of virtuality and its effects on the lifeworld.

This article will firstly introduce the conceptions of the virtual in Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze respectively, insofar as they arise from the debate with Bergson's criticism of the relationship between the possible and the real. While Deleuze views the virtual as 'real', Merleau-Ponty equates 'virtual' with 'possible'. This might be the reason why the notion of 'virtual' in Merleau-Ponty's writings remains *impensé* ('unthinkable'), despite the fact that its importance has been emphasised (Barbaras, 1999; Rosati, 2009). Secondly, this article will deal with Deleuze's critique of phenomenology in order to clarify his notion of the body without organs. The central part of the article will be devoted to Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the structure of behaviour and the relationship between the phenomenal and the virtual body. The article intends to prove that the phenomenal

and the virtual do not represent different modes of being, but instead build up a correlation ruled by sensation as is evidenced in the body by the notion of structure or form of behaviour.

### Bergson's and Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of the possible

In *Labyrinthe de l'ontologie (Labyrinth of ontology)* (1958/2007), Merleau-Ponty criticises, in the wake of Bergson, the subordination of the possible to a 'logically possible' (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 417), i.e. the idea that this world is the only possible one among many others which, building an infinite series, remain mutually 'impossible', or logically inconsistent as Leibniz's 'possibilism' claimed (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 418). But the opposite conception, the 'actualism', also fails in recognising the status of the possible, insofar as the possible 'is still a form of the ideology of the necessary' (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 417). In other words, the possible must necessarily become real insofar as the possible that remains unrealised is transformed into an impossible. The world thus has no 'room' for the possible since, as Bergson denounced, 'the possibility of things precedes their existence' (Bergson, 2007, p. 156). In this vein, things become capable of representation before being realised so that everything that is real 'becomes retrospectively or retroactively possible' (Bergson, 2007, p. 158). Hence, while the supporters of the possible are not interested in the possible realisation, the advocates of actualisation exclude any becoming or reduce it to a possibility which is not yet actualised, i.e. a *dynamis* which is not yet *energeia* in Aristotelian terms.

In both cases, the world contains only objects that are already constituted and there is no room for something new and unexpected to happen. Both conceptions homogenise both being and thought, enabling the subject of representation to see the real object as corresponding to the identity of the concept as its essence. What matters is the full reality of the virtual on which its actualisation depends, and not the recognition of the 'multiplicity and variability of the objects' since they are subsumed to representation and reduced to 'the generality of the idea' (Bergson, 2007, pp. 152-153). Therefore, the possible and real would converge into a world without empty spots, i.e. without something that remains to be realised, as a possibility, in a state of permanent *dynamis*.

In Merleau-Ponty's view then, the real is not secondary to the possible. On the contrary, the possible is 'a variant of the real' since the possible is 'a sphere that is vaster than the particular case of this world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 417). Such a conception would reject a view that opposes the real to the possible and conceives of contingency as something merely 'irrational, as opacity, as residue' of the process of realisation (ibid.). Reality is not a logical determination of the possible and contingency is not to be thought of simply as something that could be otherwise. What Merleau-Ponty has in mind is 'a new possible, an ingredient as such of being'; a possible which, 'against actualism and possibilism' would be 'an ingredient as such of being' (Merleau-Ponty, 2007, p. 418). In summation, Merleau-Ponty aims at a 'rehabilitation of the possible', an 'implicit totality' of possibilities (ibid.), a realm of multiple possibilities, which remain constantly open to modifications, i.e. open to contingency. While this totality embraces both possibility and reality, which are articulated in a process of becoming, this conception of possibility rejects

the idea of a *dynamis* that is reabsorbed by its passage into an act. On the contrary, this Aristotelian *dynamis* remains as such, as an open horizon of possibilities, wherein these possibilities remain in constant *kinesis* (understood not in the narrow sense as movement, but in its wider sense as transformation).

### Merleau-Ponty: The virtual as possible

This new interpretation of the possible becomes linked to the virtual in both *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942/1967) and *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1944/1962). Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty claims that my body is given to the other as an adumbration in a concrete perspective. That my body is visible in actuality implies that it is given to the other in a virtual mode 'as a signification'. The same applies to my perception of my own body: I can only have a virtual vision of my back, since it cannot be given to me in a direct perception, but rather only in an 'appresentation' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 217). Therefore, to have a body is to be 'an interlacing of significations' or virtualities, such that, among those aspects that become actually perceived, the others remain virtually intended (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 217). Hence, a horizon of possible adumbrations is built up, a realm of open possibilities. Virtuality is hereby not opposed to the real, but it is conceived of as its extension or 'projection' (ibid.), for the subject that moves keeps an area of free or virtual space in front of him in which he does not exist but 'may take on a semblance of existence' (ibid.). It is a space in which the subject 'may' exist, a space of possible existence.

In a manuscript published in *Parcours Deux* entitled *Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (1962/2000), Merleau-Ponty posits this 'virtual space' as an extension of my own 'here' to the other's 'there'. Virtual space thus bridges the distance between the respective 'heres' of two distinct bodies; it establishes a 'correlative system (*système de correspondance*)' between both spatial situations so that each one 'symbolises all the others (*chacune en vient à symboliser toutes les autres*)'. Our bodily existence engenders thus a symbolic system: It expresses the world not only through language but also through its gestures (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 42). Our capacity to point a finger at a certain spot in space, which animals cannot do, shows that 'we are already placed in the virtual, at the end of the line which our finger prolongs into a centrifugal or cultural space (*nous suppose déjà installés dans le virtuel, au bout de la ligne qui prolonge notre doigt, dans un espace centrifuge ou de culture*)' (Merleau-Ponty, 2000, p. 43). Merleau-Ponty therefore posits an 'anthropological thesis' (Alloa, 2012, p. 323) based on virtuality: Virtual space is a symbolic space that is expressed by language and bodily gestures.

This conception of virtuality as an extension or projection of the real also characterises the capacity of spatial reorientation of the own body. To illustrate this conception, Merleau-Ponty refers to Wertheimer's experiment in which a subject is forced to perceive the room into which he is introduced only through an inclined mirror. After a few minutes, the verticality of the reflected room is recovered, so that the spatial level 'tilts' and is brought into a new position. The body takes up a new position; the virtual displaces the real body. Merleau-Ponty describes the phenomenon as follows: 'This virtual body ousts the real to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is...he inhabits the spectacle' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 291). This experiment shows that

orientation does not depend on objective space or the body's objective emplacement, but rather on a 'phenomenal 'place'' which is defined by the actions a body may perform: such a body is defined as 'virtual' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 291). This experiment suggests that the body is not absolutely dependent on its anchorage in the real world inasmuch as it is determined by its projection towards a horizon of possibilities. The body exceeds to a great extent the constraints of the real and the limitations of its own concrete actuality, and opens itself to a realm of possible actions.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates this understanding of virtuality with the analysis of Matisse's painting style. A camera registers in slow motion the gestures of Matisse and reveals that his hand moves and gestures all the possible brushstrokes to finally eliminate all but one. Matisse 'looked at the actual and virtual ensemble of his canvas...and solved with a simple gesture the problem which...seemed to contain an infinite number of givens' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 44). Matisse's hand thus selected from the infinite number of solutions within virtuality a few ones that were possible within the world of perception and gesture (Merleau-Ponty, 1973). Merleau-Ponty seems to imply that the realm of virtuality contains an infinity variety of possibilities, out of which only some of them can be actualised; the world of perception is thus a limited cut-out of virtuality. In summation, virtuality may be conceived of as a potentiality that indicates the direction of the possible actualisations of actions. It takes its point of departure from reality, only to project it into the far-ranging realm of the possible.

In this description, there are some questions which seem to remain unsolved. Even though Merleau-Ponty conceives of the body in the same vein as Husserl, as being determined by its possible actions (Husserl's *Ich kann*), it remains centred around an ego that determines the limits and scopes of the realms of both virtuality and reality. Furthermore, it is not clear, as Alloa (2012) rightly remarks, how the tension toward the act may be resolved without recourse to an actualisation as a pre-established task to be fulfilled.

Merleau-Ponty supplies us with a possible answer: In the aesthetic attitude, we find that creative expression transforms the given into something unforeseen. If expression, says Merleau-Ponty, 'is creative with regard to what it transforms', it is '*precisely because expression always goes beyond what it transforms by bringing it into a composition which changes its meaning*' (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 69; emphasis in original). This answer, however, cannot be applied to the realm of nature and its laws because any becoming takes place according to an inherent normativity. If the virtual should be conceived of not simply in the sense of possibility and in its dependence on subjectivity, we may start by questioning both the ego as unifying principle and possibilism.

### Deleuze: The virtual as real

This questioning lays the basis for the strategy followed by Deleuze, who, as a result of the rich debate with Bergson's reflections, claims 'the virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual'. Taking recourse to Proust, he adds that virtual states are 'real without being actual, ideal without being abstract' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 208). The virtual is defined as 'a part of the real object', as its structure, which consists of differential elements and relations. Since 'the reality of the virtual is structure', the

elements and relations composing it 'coexist in the work or the object' (ibid.). Hence, the virtual is 'completely determined' (ibid.) and forms a part of the real object. Both parts, the real and the virtual, compose the object as actual (Deleuze, 2001).

Deleuze warns us about confusing the virtual with the possible. In his view, the possible is opposed to the real, while the virtual 'possesses a full reality by itself'. While the possible undergoes a process of 'realisation', the virtual becomes actualised (Deleuze, 2001, p. 211). The virtual has for Deleuze the character of an idea that harbours a pure multiplicity and excludes the identical as a prior condition. This follows precisely from the fact that the virtual is a differential structure that manifests Deleuze's commitment to the radical nature of difference: Virtual ideas

imply no prior identity, no positing of a something which could be called one or the same. On the contrary, their non-determination renders possible the manifestation of difference freed from all subordination. (Deleuze, 2001, p. 183)

Hence, it is through the actualisation of the virtual, that difference, divergence and differentiation are incarnated into a being, as Deleuze (2004b) suggests in the essay 'How do we recognize structuralism?' Here, he sheds light on the process of actualisation: 'what is actual is that in which the structure is incarnated or rather what the structure constitutes when it is incarnated' (Deleuze, 2004b, p. 178). Virtuality 'would precisely designate the mode of the structure' that is 'a multiplicity of virtual coexistence' of 'all the elements, relations and relational values, all the singularities proper to the domain considered' (Deleuze, 2004b, p. 179). Virtuality would thus have a particular mode of ideality that could be approached to a force that 'orientates, conditions and engenders' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 179) the process of differentiation of the real, breaking thus with resemblance and identity as guiding principles of the process. The movement of actualisation is, therefore, a process of 'creation' (Deleuze 2001, p. 212).

For Deleuze, 'the virtual possesses the reality of a task to be performed or a problem to be solved' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 212). The virtual exists thus as a process of actualisation. Contrary to the actualisation of the possible, which is equivalent to a sudden burst into reality, the actualisation of the virtual in Deleuze's sense 'always takes place by difference, divergence or differentiation' (ibid.), so that the actuality of an object differs from the virtualities that were actualised. The actuality of an object is only one of the multiple virtualities that become actualised. In Deleuze's words: 'For a potential or virtual object to be actualised is to create divergent lines which correspond to – without resembling – a virtual multiplicity' (ibid.).

In order to shed line on this process of actualisation as it concerns nature, Deleuze argues in 'Bergson's Conception of Difference' (1956/2004b) for a distinction between two intuited aspects of difference. On the one hand, there are the articulations of the real, which determine the difference of nature between things and, on the other, the 'factual lines' of development that show us the identical thing in its differential structure. In this process, the degrees in which a thing becomes actualised do have an effect in reality, though in a 'non-spatial form', i.e. as differences of nature. Following Bergson, Deleuze adds that behind our qualitative distinctions are numbers conceived as differences of degrees. Therefore, it is neither the things nor their states that differ in nature, but the 'tendencies' of their

development (Deleuze, 2004b, p. 34). Tendencies, as Bergson has argued, are prior to their products and their causes in time, since causes are derived retroactively from the product itself. Hence, a thing is an expression of a dynamic tendency. Insofar as things 'are always *composite*', e.g. the closed and the open, geometric and vital order, etc., what we perceive is 'a blending of tendencies' rather than differences in nature (Deleuze, 2004b, p. 35; emphasis in original). According to this conception, nature is articulated by tendencies of development, rather than by species-specific differences. The actual object as double is thus the product of the actualisation of both its real and its virtual aspects; as such it is a complex entity that is informed by a differential structure and is submitted to a continuous process of actualisation of its multiple components.

In summary, Deleuze eludes both possibilism and actualism by defining the virtual in terms of a dynamic structure that, insofar as it pertains to the real object, becomes actualised through a continuous and inexhaustible process of differentiation, which is neither pre-established by any guiding principle nor dependent upon egoic structures, and leads to the always provisional actuality of the object. Thus, the virtual is not just an indeterminate differential field, but internally determined by way of relations between differential elements composing the structure of the object. The Deleuzian approach involves the recognition of the virtual as a determinate structure that can be grasped in its continuous becoming and transformation, without imposing any form of identity. This overturning of phenomenological insights, at least insofar as teleology and transcendental subjectivity are concerned, also involves the understanding of the body and takes its point of departure from a new conception of concepts as dynamic forces.

### Deleuze: The notion of 'concept', the 'body without organs'

Phenomenological concepts, Deleuze and Felix Guattari both maintain, are the expression of a three-part set of acts of transcendence that allow the subject to constitute first a sensory world filled with objects, then an intersubjective world that include others, and finally, the common ideal world of scientific, mathematical and logical formations. Phenomenological concepts are thus the expression of those acts. They are not the contents of the interiority of the solipsist subject but rather the transcendental subject's reference to the lived; they are not perceptive-affective variables but rather functions, which find their truth value within those variables; they are not only judgments or empirical opinion but proto-opinions or proto-doxa; they are not successive contents of the immanence stream, but rather transcendent acts which determine the 'meaning' of the lived.

In their rather cognitivist reading of Husserl, Deleuze and Guattari argue that in this way, the only notion of concept that survives is immanence to a subject whose acts are relative to the lived and whose concepts arise out of the lived (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). They are thus a function of the lived, i.e. of the perceptive-affective lived experience (ibid.). Thus, the lived body makes of the concept an empirical opinion and interprets experience as a sequence of perceptual and affective clichés. Given this, Deleuze and Guattari raise the following question: 'should we, along with art, overturn opinion, raising it to the infinite movement that replaces it with, precisely, the concept?'

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 150). The notion of concept they have in mind is neither a function of the lived nor a logical function. Concepts, they argue, are neither clear nor distinct but rather vague not because they lack definition, but because they are restless, non-discursive and therefore slide along their level; they are intentional or modulating, because their contour varies; finally, they have no reference but a consistence, which is defined by their internal components. A concept is an event inasmuch as it is pure sense running through its components, so that it is endowed with an internal dynamic power that transforms it into a form or a force.

This is apparently what is at stake in Deleuze's account of the painting of the artist Francis Bacon, where he distinguishes between the lived body and the body without organs, opinion or concept, clichés or 'unliveable power' (*puissance*) (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 44). Deleuze makes a bold assertion when he states that the lived body of phenomenology is 'a paltry thing' compared with the almost unliveable power of the body without organs. The phenomenological hypothesis, he has noted, is insufficient because it merely invokes the lived body, whereas the body without organs, characterised by Francis Bacon's paintings, arises at the very limit of the lived body (Deleuze, 2004a; Olkowski, 2011). The body without organs invokes a conception of the body that is disinvested of fantasy, images, representations, a body without a psychical or secret interior, reduced to a surface of speeds and intensities, before it is stratified, unified and organised. Such a body creates and maintains concepts in Deleuze's terms (see Breuer, 2017a). Bacon's paintings 'do not take up pure form either, as they are not formless, not an image of the sublime' (Deleuze, 2004a, pp. 2, 4). They are something quite different, 'something that engages us, not on the level of opinion, but on the level of concepts' (Olkowski, 2011, p. 200).

In a Bacon painting, Deleuze argues, 'like a first catastrophe, the form collapses' (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 135). The form related to figuration and representation collapses into a form related only to a figure. This 'intense, intensive body' (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 44) is reduced to a figure, which is traversed by forces that elicit different levels of sensation. Sensation is one of the two ways to transcend figuration: 'Figure is the sensible form related to sensation' insofar as it 'acts immediately on the nervous system' (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 34). Sensation is two-sided: On the one hand, it is being-in-the-world, and on the other hand, it intertwines with the subject, so that 'I become in the sensation, and something happens through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other' (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 35; emphasis in original). In the end, 'it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation' (ibid.). This sensation, being neither qualified nor qualitative, is endowed with an intensive reality which cannot be reduced to representation but adopts allotropic modifications. Hence, 'sensation is vibration,' concludes Deleuze (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 44). We are faced with a 'catastrophic transformation in which a form related to figuration and narration collapses under the impetus of sensations' (Olkowski, 2011, p. 198). 'As a spectator', Deleuze argues, 'I experience sensation only by entering the painting and by having access to the unity of the sensing and the sensed' (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 35). The body as painted is 'experienced as sustaining *this* sensation' (ibid.; emphasis in original). Therefore, 'the figure seems to try to vanquish and eliminate the spectator by subjecting him to the overwhelming

power of the figure through the dynamism of the physical forces inhabiting it' (Olkowski, 2011, p. 200).

## The virtual body

These insights may be applied to the distinction between real and virtual world. We have seen that the virtual is a feature that attaches both to real space and body. In Merleau-Ponty's sense, the virtual is an integral extension of the phenomenal insofar as it supplies the subject with an open horizon of possibilities and meaning. The virtual defines an area of possible actions and a possible space to live in, correlative to a possible body that can adjust and reorient itself according to new spatial coordinates.

It is important to remark that the key feature that links the phenomenal with the virtual realms is 'anchorage' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 291). The body has the capability to anchor in different spatial levels, provided that it detaches itself from one in order to 'dive' into the other. In such moments, the body's motor intentions and the new perceptual field join forces, so that the actual body becomes one with the virtual body, as required by the new setting. This readjustment of the field is not the outcome of a process of association between the new positions and the old ones, or from a process of thought (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) that would enable the subject to overlook both realms simultaneously. It is rather the pre-predicative capacity of bodily reorientation, which is decisive for the constitution of a new spatial level. The body has the ability to understand space in a non-discursive way, i.e. in a corporeal way. It can adjust its coordinates, its movements and actions to the new realm and even merge with it because it literally transfers itself into it. In so far as the transposition is systematic, the body is able to change spatial levels.

Even though Merleau-Ponty does not touch upon this point, it is only under the assumption of a common nature and common physical laws that the virtual can be regarded as an extension of the phenomenal. Only under such conditions may the body readjust itself to new coordinates. One of the keys to understanding this transposition is provided by means of the notion of 'anchorage', but the other key is the notion of 'sensation' as developed by Deleuze. We have seen that in sensation the body is able to fuse with a new reality. Sensation bridges the real and the virtual realms insofar as it enables the body to immerse itself in a new experiential field.

We are now able to apply these insights to a conception of virtuality that takes into account a new experiential field opened by the development of new media and technologies. Media links participants bridging physical distances, but also cognitively detaches the participants from their respective place-bound social contexts, those contexts to which they belong bodily (Hjarvard, 2008). Computer technologies have created a simulated environment, called 'virtual reality'. Unlike traditional user interfaces, virtual reality places the subjects inside an experience and literally transposes them into a fictive world. Instead of viewing a screen in front of them, they are immersed in a new reality and able to interact with one another. By simulating as many senses as possible, such as vision, hearing, touch, even smell, the computer is transformed into a gatekeeper to this artificial world.

Following Husserl, we may characterise this experience as an aesthetic one: In the aesthetic attitude, we are not interested in the existence or 'depictiveness', i.e. the degree of resemblance of

what is offered to our senses, but only in its appearance (Husserl, 2005). The focus is set on the presented content in their 'how' (*Wie*), i.e. in their mode of presentation (Husserl, 2005), so that in such an experience we live in a perceptual fantasy and the world of everyday experience is suspended. In worlds of phantasy as well as in virtual reality, we are offered 'an infinite wealth of perceptual fictions' (Husserl, 2005, p. 620) since these worlds are 'absolutely free worlds' (Husserl, 2005, p. 642). While in the world of actual experience, the experiential horizons constantly expand in a prescribed way, i.e. according to determinate actual experience, the phantasy world's horizons are not predestinated but can be altered at will. Hence, in the 'fictional experience', i.e. in the attitude in which we are immersed in the virtual world, the world of experience is suspended (Husserl, 2005, p. 619). What is peculiar to the worlds of phantasy is also peculiar to the virtual worlds: they are unconditionally arbitrary, and their horizon is indeterminate (Husserl, 2005). On the one hand, the arbitrariness consists in the fact that virtual worlds are not conditioned by the essential style of our lifeworld, and on the other, the horizons cannot be predestinated by means of memory or expectations. In worlds of virtual reality, both the ontological principle of similarity and the logical principle of non-contradiction – the basic principles that rule and play a normative role in our lifeworld – are suspended. Liberated from these restrictions and conditionalities, the subject can 'creatively reshape, can create ever new worlds' (Husserl, 2005, p. 643) or even recreate a given world that is in conflict with a previous fashioned one.

## The splitting of the body (1) – Its overcoming through sensation

However, unlike the experiences described by Merleau-Ponty, the body itself is not transposed to a new spatial level and instead remains attached to the phenomenal world. It is only by way of sensation that virtual reality is experienced as an extension of the physical world. The body undergoes a doubling, insofar as it 'lives' simultaneously in the real and the fictive world. Hence, the 'virtualization' of the living body as a product of virtual reality entails the experience of the cognitive and sensitive splitting of the body in two distinct realms. To understand this process of bodily splitting and the consequences deriving from it, we may refer to Deleuze's account of the experience of these fictional worlds as provided by his writings on cinema.

The first aspect in this process is the *loss of corporeality*. In virtuality, the form collapses into a figure not because form collapses (virtual figures are highly figurative), but because figures are deprived of any corporeality and reduced to sensation as a system of forces. But far from abolishing representation or narrative figuration, I would like to suggest that the virtual figure is endowed with an *excess of narrative*. As Deleuze explains in his writings on cinema, the 'sound as well as visual elements of the image enter into internal relations which means that the whole image has to be 'read' nor less than seen, readable as well as visible' (Deleuze, 1989, p. 22). This excess of narrative is thus produced by the overwhelming stimuli on the body's sensory organs stemming from the rich virtual world of phantasies.

The second aspect concerns a *simulation of the perceptible world*. The image doubles the perceptible world in a literal way 'which constitutes it like a book' (ibid.). Moreover, the levels of sensation as sensible domains referring to different sensory organs (here, the visual and auditory sensations) directly seize a

vital power that overflows all other domains (like touch, smell or taste). In Deleuze's terms, this power is rhythm. In our case, it is not only the opening and enclosing movement between me and the world, but the opening of the subject to a virtual world and the virtual world capturing him by enclosing in on him. Real and virtual world, spectator and actor merge thus into each other by way of sensation so that the real world 'resonates' with its virtual pair.

With regard to the first aspect, the liberation from corporeality, the becoming virtual of a human being reveals a body that is no longer supported by bones and flesh (Deleuze, 2004a), a body that, unlike the phenomenal body, is not characterised by the correspondence of an external perception and an internal affection. On the contrary, the virtual body, far from being a simulacrum, becomes 'a surface', a 'phantasmatic projection' of phantasies, and in Deleuzian terms,

[i]t is important, once again, to distinguish, for example, between the oral stage of the depths and the oral zone of the surface; between the introjected and projected internal partial object (simulacrum) and the object of the surface, projected over a zone through an entirely different mechanism (image). (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 199)

Moreover, we may add, in the virtual body, perceptions and affections are not interrelated by a corporeal intentionality, but operate at different levels of sensations. In virtuality, the perception of a dangerous situation may not provoke a reaction either of the virtual or of the real body unless the difference between them has collapsed. Given this situation, virtual and real body free themselves from sensory-motor links; they stop pertaining to different worlds in order to become unified by sensation. Sensation builds up a pure optical, sound body. There is no longer a distinction between actor and spectator, between subject and object, between the real and the virtual. On the contrary, it is due to their indiscernibility within the field of forces of sensation that virtuality is endowed with a sensed reality. This indiscernibility entails not only an uncanny experience but unpredictable consequences, as lifeworld habits no longer command our behaviour. In sensation, real and virtual ultimately coalesce, collapsing into one another.

### The virtual as a particular mode of reality

Now we are able to understand the arguments presented by Deleuze when he declares that the lived body of phenomenology is poor compared with the almost 'unliveable power' of the body without organs (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 44). Rather than senses, such a body is left only with thresholds, the minimum intensity of value of a signal that will provoke a response. Sensation takes command and connects both the real and the virtual bodies, and their respective fields of action (Deleuze, 2004a). According to Bergson (2001), when qualitative sensation is extended into space as intensity, it is possible to measure the amplitude of its molecular movements. It is the intensities of external forces that Deleuze describes. They are so powerful that they clear away the other form of intensity, that of memory. Olkowski (2011, p. 201) suggests that 'catastrophe' may precisely be the right word to describe this clearing away of memory. I would suggest that 'catastrophe' also describes the clearing of our lifeworld motor habits. What is even more serious is that it finally ends by abolishing the difference felt between real and virtual world.

As argued in the foregoing section, we find in virtual reality an *overabundance* of narration. Sensory data not only narrates us a story through the doubling or fictionalising of the real world (Deleuze, 1989), but frees us from its underlying natural laws, as Husserl argues. On the basis of the *Time Image* analysis, we may suggest that each actual image is not only in relation with the virtual whole or world surrounding it (the large circuit) and with its own enigmatic double (any image can become part of the context for any other – the small circuit), as Jon Roffe affirms (2012). However, in our case it is locally intertwined with the lived body and the real world (an all-encompassing circle, as we may call it).

However, although the subject cognitively merges into the virtual world and his actions adjust to the possibilities offered by the new environment, the subject is still attached in a bodily manner to the real, physical world. Though sensation may bridge both realms 'as felt', it is evident that this questioning of natural laws and the concomitant cognitive suspension of the real world introduces a split between reality and virtuality that concerns not only the body, as already mentioned, but the world itself as a whole.

Let us recall that the virtual could be conceived as an extension of the real world in Merleau-Ponty's terms only under the assumption of a constant validity of natural laws. In view of the aforementioned break with those laws, the virtual cannot be regarded as equivalent to the possible; instead, it has a reality of its own: The virtual would thus be the result of a creative process of differentiation of the real that breaks with resemblance and identity as its guiding principles, much like the Deleuzian sense of the concept. Neither actual nor abstract, virtuality would thus be a particular mode of reality which informs a structure made up of elements submitted to continuous and inexhaustible transformation. These virtual structures are, much in contrast to Deleuze's conception, dependent on the egoic constitution of sense insofar as they develop in response to the actions of the subject. These structures evolve as the result of the creative power of the subject.

Having arrived at a more precise determination of the virtual, we still have to resolve the problem of the splitting of the body as felt. The notion of 'form' as developed by Merleau-Ponty may supply the link sought for.

### The splitting of the body (2) – Its overcoming through the notion of 'form'

We have seen that sensation alone does not provide a full answer to the question of the virtual because it remains at the level of physical forces. Hence, we still have to resolve the splitting between the virtual and the physical body. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's concept of form or structure of behaviour supplies the key, insofar as it relates both realities not in terms of a pure physical reality but in terms of a correlation between the physical, the physiological and the mental fields that encompass organisms as a whole.

Let us recall that Deleuze invokes a conception of the body that is reduced to physical intensity or sensation. This conception also applies to his revision of lived space, which Deleuze reformulates as a vector field, a model consisting of vectors, which may be projected in an infinite number of possible trajectories in space-time. In the *Structure of Behaviour*, Merleau-Ponty agrees to a scientific characterisation of the

world as consisting of spatial relations between objects and the geometrical characteristics of objects. But he also raises an important question: How can the physical world be transformed into a staging ground for behaviour? Merleau-Ponty argues that the variables on which behaviour depends are not found in stimuli in the material world but in structures or forms of behaviour, according to which each type of organism elaborates physical stimuli (Merleau-Ponty, 1967). For this reason, the gap between behaviour and physical events will have to be bridged.

In his apparently non-phenomenological but rather empirical approach, he claims that this gap and its bridge rely on the distinction between physical events as they exist in themselves, and that the same situation exists for organisms that feel, perceive and think (Olkowski, 2011). Such structures are divided into three interacting fields. First, there is matter or quantity, the field of physical forces taken up by physics; then, the physiological field of life engaged in by the so-called sciences of life; and finally, the mental field consisting of mind, value or signification – the realm of psychology and philosophy. 'Equally applicable to the three fields', the notion of form 'would integrate them as three types of structures by surpassing the antinomies of materialism and mentalism, of materialism and vitalism' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 131). In this universe of forms each local effect is determined by its function, value and significance in the whole. Thus, the question becomes in what sense forms can be said to exist both in the physical, virtual and material world, without erasing their 'structural differences' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 136). Actually, as Merleau-Ponty points out, 'matter, life and mind must be understood as three orders of significations', and so he endeavours to 'seek out in what sense forms can be said to exist 'in' the physical world and 'in' the living body' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 137). This raises a central question: Can the concept of form resolve the antinomy between quantity or matter and mind?

As a first step towards this aim, Merleau-Ponty develops the notion of structure and claims that 'structure and law are...two dialectical moments' insofar as 'form is not an element of the world but a limit toward which physical knowledge tends and which it itself defines' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 142). So then, form is the telos, that point towards that which all the separate moments of an individual tend towards in order to assemble in an individual unit. Now we have to address the issue of how form bridges the gap between behaviour and physical events like virtual reality. This calls for a distinction between physical events as they exist in themselves and the same situation for organisms that feel, perceive and think. This distinction calls forth the notion of 'form', which Merleau-Ponty defines as follows:

Form, and with it the universe of history and perception, remains indispensable on the horizon of physical knowledge as that which is determined and intended by it...Thus form is not a physical reality, but an object of perception, without it physical science would have no meaning, moreover, since it is constructed with respect to it and in order to coordinate it. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 143)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty concludes, 'far from the 'physical form' being able to be the real foundation of the structure of behaviour and in particular of this perceptual structure, 'form' is itself conceivable only as an object of perception' (Merleau-Ponty,

1967, pp. 144–145). In *Sense and Nonsense*, Merleau-Ponty argues that, with the notion of 'form', *gestalt* theory

teaches us to stop distinguishing between signs and their significance, between what is sensed and what is judged...It is impossible to understand perception as the imputation of a certain significance to certain sensible signs, since the most immediate sensible texture of these signs cannot be described without referring to the object they signify. (Merleau-Ponty, 1991, pp. 50–51)

But the concept of form indicates that 'the reference to a sensible or historical given is not a provisional imperfection; it is essential to physical knowledge' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, pp. 144–145). This is precisely what Deleuze seems to have missed: the idea of structure or form, which as Merleau-Ponty claims, is immanent both to the physical and to the living, phenomenological subject and moreover, to their respective worlds. Given this correlation between the physical and physiological domains ensured by the concept of form, Merleau-Ponty concludes that 'laws have meaning only as a means of conceptualising the perceived world' (ibid.), so that every determination that a subject makes in one field affects both the subject and their respective fields. Forms are therefore defined as

total processes which may be indiscernible from each other while their 'parts', compared to each other, differ in absolute size; in other words, the systems are defined as transposable wholes. We will say there is form whenever the properties of a system are modified by every change brought about in a single one of its parts and, on the contrary, are conserved when they all change while maintaining the same relationship among themselves. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 47)

Although the laws of virtual reality exceed those of physical reality, reference to the perceived world is nevertheless essential to a phenomenological subject who exists within the intersection of these fields, insofar as every determination that the subject makes in one of these fields affects both the subject and the field. This is the reason why the role of the notion of form in the reciprocal action between physical and lifeworld realities proves to be crucial when it comes to clarifying the internal connection among 'afferent excitations on the one hand, the motor influences on the other, and finally between both of these systems' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 47).

When Merleau-Ponty sets out to analyse the vital structures characterising the human order, he stresses that actions and reactions of the organism towards its milieu can only be classified 'according to their vital significance' and not according to the devices in which they are realised and measured. This vital significance is not the product of a synthetic judgment that achieves the unity of the matter of the discrete data, but it arises at the fundamental level of corporeal intentionality or a structure of behaviour overlooked by both empiricism and intellectualism (Merleau-Ponty, 1967). The fundamental and originary level presupposed by any synthesis of judgment is a synthesis involving a meaning structure on the existential level (ibid.). In conclusion, in Merleau-Ponty's *Structure of Behaviour*, the notion of 'form' builds the bridge between the physical and the existential realms. This is precisely the function that the notion of 'bodily schema' fulfils according to Merleau-Ponty's statements in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

## The bodily schema as anticipatory structure of meaning

As Merleau-Ponty affirms in *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is the lived experience itself 'which appears clothed with a signification', it is constituted 'in the hold' which my body takes upon the given. Upon understanding the given, it is the bodily schema which offers an anticipatory 'schema of all possible being, a universal setting in relation to the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 429). This is because the bodily schema is 'a total awareness of my posture in the sensory world, a 'form' in the sense used by Gestalt psychology' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 100). Conversely, the world is the 'schema of intersensory relation' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 327).

Hence, the notion of 'schema' is essentially linked to a corporeal understanding, so that the contents of the world are anticipated by the experience of this bodily presence (Rosenthal & Bourgeois, 1990). In terms of the body, to understand means 'to experience the harmony between what we aim at and what is given, between the intention and the performance – and the body is our anchorage in the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 144). This anticipatory schema is acquired in terms of a habit that develops in response to a bodily grasping of meaning entailing motor significance. It is the body which 'gives to our life the form of generality and develops our personal acts into stable dispositional tendencies' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 146). It is precisely the 'form of generality' and the 'stable dispositional tendencies' which, on the one hand, make up the anticipatory structures of meaning, and on the other hand, ensure the development of memory on the corporeal level, as Bergson has pointed out. Therefore, every bodily habit is both a motor and perceptual habit, so that the signification of the given is a meaning in relation to this basic level of bodily habitual behaviour. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 373) claims,

[t]he thing is correlative to my body and, in more general terms, to my existence, of which my body is merely the stabilized structure. It is constituted in the hold which my body takes upon it; it is not first of all a meaning for the understanding, but a structure accessible to inspection by the body.

Insofar as the bodily schema ensures a corporeal understanding of its posture and performance in the world, it allows for a self-awareness which is based on self-experience. I recognise myself as an experiencing body insofar as my bodily schema endows my movements and habits with meaning – a meaning that is not predicative but essentially sensorial (see Breuer, 2017b). The immediate is not the impression, as Husserl would claim, but rather this fundamental structure of sensorial meaning which is revealed by introspection. Hence, for Merleau-Ponty, the anticipatory and sensory aspects of the structure of meaning belong to the realm of pre-reflective, vital intentionality (see Rosenthal & Bourgeois, 1990).

## The correlation between the virtual and the phenomenal

This correlation between the organism and its milieu can be interrupted by 'a 'catastrophic' behaviour' when the organism is momentarily reduced to the conditions of the physical system. However, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, it is a question here of

pathological cases of laboratory phenomena, cases wherein perceptual reactions are artificially isolated from their natural context of action and explained by physical models (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 150). In such cases the privilege of certain forms, instead of expressing the natural behaviour of the organism considered, depends only on the 'objective character of the stimuli presented'. But these structures, Merleau-Ponty concludes, not centred in the total and natural activity of the organism, are 'either labile formations that are pathological' or because we consider them not as bodily reactions, but as isolated acts 'addressed to a certain milieu' (ibid.).

As my previous reflections have suggested, the relationship between the physical and the living worlds as described by Merleau-Ponty can be paralleled to the relationship between the virtual and the lifeworld realms. In virtual reality, the virtual body is considered as a segment of matter, a sum of physical actions; as such, all the events that unfold in this virtual body possess the same degree of reality so that there is no distinction between the normal and the pathological. This qualitative indifference characterises the 'catastrophic' behaviour of the virtual body when disengaged from the actual body and reveals in my opinion one of greatest perils involved in virtual reality. This qualitative indifference among different forms of behaviour explains the reason why, as advanced at the beginning of this article, the virtual body is no longer bound to the structures of meaning proper to the real body. Freed from these bounds, the virtual body soon exceeds the constraints that material reality imposes upon the real body and becomes a system of unlimited forces, thereby losing its anchorage in lifeworld experience.

At this point we may already have become conscious of the catastrophic consequences entailed by the collapse of memory due to the reduction of the body to a system of intensive forces in virtual reality. The erasure of bodily memory does not only imply a breakdown of our bodily habits, but the collapse of the anticipatory structures as well. Given the coalescence of physical and real body ensured by the structures of behaviour and the notion of form, as claimed by Merleau-Ponty, and under the assumption of a functional parallelism between these realms and the pair virtual/real world, we may conclude that what happens in one realm implies unpredictable modifications of the other one, such that if the difference between both collapses, the subject becomes pathologically alienated.

Nevertheless, there still remains an irreducible difference between both realms. As Merleau-Ponty points out, 'the significance and value of vital processes...are assuredly attributes of the perceived organism...(i.e.) the 'phenomenal body'...The gestures and the attitudes of the phenomenal body must have therefore a proper structure, an immanent signification', not only because 'vital acts *have* a meaning' ensured by corporeal intentionality, but owing to the fact that 'the structure of the body in man is the expression of character', that is, of a certain type of behaviour (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, pp. 156–157; emphasis in original). In science, on the contrary, local phenomena are not united in an organism by submission to a single law. A law, in the physical system, 'gives the probable value of a pre-set state in terms of the immediately preceding state' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 155), so that they are related by causality, as Husserl claims.

There is thus an unbridgeable gap between both types of realities. 'The unity of physical systems', in our context the case of virtual reality, 'is a unity of *correlation*, that of organism a unity of *signification*' (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, pp. 155–156;



emphasis in original). Correlation by laws, Merleau-Ponty points out, 'leaves a residue in the phenomena of life which is accessible to another kind of coordination: coordination by meaning'. Therefore, 'nothing justifies that the vital dialectic can be integrally translated in physico-chemical relations and reduced to the condition of an anthropomorphic appearance' (ibid.). In conclusion, our lifeworld is endowed with a surplus of vital signification that no virtual reality may ever reclaim.

If we take a closer look at these different structures, we may add, along with Merleau-Ponty, that 'a mechanical action', as it takes place in virtual reality,

is one which the cause and the effect are decomposable into real elements which have a one-to-one correspondence. In elementary action, the dependence is thus unidirectional, the cause is the necessary and sufficient condition of the effect considered in its existence and its nature. (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, pp. 160–161)

On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty adds,

physical stimuli act upon the organism only by eliciting a global response which will vary quantitatively; with respect to the organism, they play the role of occasions rather than of cause, the reaction depends on their vital significance rather than on the material properties of the stimuli (Merleau-Ponty, 1967, p. 161).

Hence, between the external variables (or conditions) and the conduct itself 'there appears a relation of meaning' that 'depends upon the vital significance of the situation' (ibid.). In Husserl's terms, a situation *motivates* varying and qualitatively different behavioural responses in accordance with their equally varying significative content. Motivation, in contrast to causality, leaves an open horizon of possible responses, so that the lived body behaviour is characterised by an essential openness and indetermination, which no behaviour of the virtual body ruled by causality will ever be able to equate.

## Concluding remarks

We may summarise the development and results of our argumentation as follows: Resulting from the rich debate with Bergson's criticism of the relationship between possibility and reality, Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze develop quite different conceptions of the virtual. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the virtual in terms of the possible, while virtuality is defined as a potentiality that indicates the direction of possible actualisation of actions. The virtual is thus a projection or extension of the phenomenal fields, which supplies the subject with an open horizon of possibilities and meaning. This conception, however, relies on the ego as the unifying principle and on a teleological process of actualisation whose *telos* is pre-established. Deleuze, on the other hand, eludes both possibilism and actualism by defining the virtual as having a reality of its own: the virtual is a dynamic and differential structure of the real that can only be grasped in its continuous becoming. This overturning of phenomenological insights departs from Deleuze's conception of concepts as dynamic forces, which ultimately also invest the body, now conceived of as intensity, i.e. as a body without organs.

By means of this connection, I have emphasised two key features that link the phenomenal with the virtual realms. First, the notion of 'anchorage' provided by Merleau-Ponty: The body is able to anchor in a new spatial level thanks to its capacity of systematic transposition. Merleau-Ponty assumes here tacitly the permanence of common physical laws, in accordance with his conception of the virtual as an extension of the phenomenal. Second, the notion of 'sensation' as provided by Deleuze: In sensation, the body is able to fuse with a new reality insofar as there is a continuity of bodily stimuli. These notions are highly relevant to the experience of virtual reality as developed by new media and technologies. We have characterised this experience as an aesthetic one on the basis of Husserl's analyses of fictional experiences. In such experiences, the body remains anchored to the phenomenal world while simultaneously projecting itself into the virtual. However, in contrast to the experience of immersion or transposition described by Merleau-Ponty, the virtualisation of the living body entails a cognitive and sensitive splitting of the body in two distinct realms since it 'lives' simultaneously in the virtual and the real world.

We have taken recourse to Deleuze's analyses on cinema to shed light on this uncanny experience. The first step in this process is the *loss of corporeality*, insofar as the body in the sense of a body without organs is reduced to sensation, while it is submitted to an excess of narrative provided by the overwhelming stimuli on its senses stemming from the rich virtual phantasies. The second step concerns a *simulation of the real world*, that can, ultimately, entail the suspension of the natural laws governing phenomenal life. Both real and virtual worlds and bodies merge into each other by way of sensation, so that the world 'resonates' with its virtual pair to the extreme of collapsing into one another. However, though sensation may bridge their mutual distance 'as felt', the cognitive suspension of the real and the concomitant liberation of natural laws 'as felt' in the virtual reinforce the split between both realms. Hence, the virtual cannot be conceived of as the extension of the real world in Merleau-Ponty's terms, but as having a reality of its own. In the Deleuzian sense, the virtual is thus the result of the creative process of differentiation of the real. Neither actual nor abstract, *virtuality* would thus be a *particular mode of reality* made up of virtual structures, which, in contrast to Deleuze's conception, are dependent on the egoic constitution of sense insofar as they originate in the creative power of the subject.

As regards the problem of the splitting of the body 'as felt', the notion of 'form' or 'structure of behaviour' as developed by Merleau-Ponty supplies the link we have sought. This notion, understood as a whole process much in the sense of the *Gestalt*, relates both realities in terms of a correlation between the physical, the physiological and the mental fields of an organism as a whole. Hence, the structure of behaviour builds up a bridge between the physical and the existential realms, a function that is also fulfilled by the bodily schema. This schema as an anticipatory structure is acquired in terms of a habit that develops in response to a bodily grasping of meaning entailing motor significance and ensures a corporeal understanding of the posture and performance of the body in the world. Thus, in Merleau-Ponty's conception, both the anticipatory and the sensory aspects of the structure of meaning belong to the realm of pre-reflective vital intentionality.

This correlation can be interrupted by a 'catastrophic behaviour' when the body is reduced to a mere physical system,

which is precisely the case in virtual reality, as our previous reflections have shown, so that Merleau-Ponty's insights can thus be easily paralleled to the virtual and the lifeworld realms. In virtual reality, the virtual body is reduced to a system of physical forces that are deprived of qualitative connotations. This 'catastrophic behaviour' results in the collapse of both bodily memory and habits, and of the anticipatory structures as well. Given the coalescence of physical and real body ensured by the structure of behaviour and the mentioned parallelism, we may conclude that the collapse of their difference entails the pathological alienation of the subject.

However, there is an irreducible difference between both types of realities, since the unity of the physical/virtual system is a unity of correlation, while that of an organism is a unity of signification. Hence, we may conclude that our lifeworld is endowed with a surplus of vital signification that no virtual world can ever match.

In a nutshell: With recourse to the notion of structure or form, we have arrived at the conclusion, together with Merleau-Ponty, that both mechanism and finalism should be rejected and that the physical and the vital, in our terms, the phenomenal and the virtual, do not represent different modes of being, but a correlation which is ruled by sensation as a system of intensive forces and whose evidence in the body is explained by the notion of structure or form of behaviour.

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