PROSTHETICS. REPLACEMENT AND EXCHANGE

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FIG. 1
HEINRICH HOERLE: *PROTHESENKOPF,* MID-1920S.
HTTPS://DE.M.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/DATEI:HEINRICH_HOERLE_PROTHESENKOPF.JPG

The front cover of a Turkish edition of Théophile Gautier's 1856 novella *Avatar,* originally published in French, bears a reproduction of salinocut by the German painter Heinrich Hoerle, which was printed in the mid-1920s: it is a "prosthetic head" *(Prothesenkopf),* which has replaced a human head with an artificial one.[1]

The head is portrayed in profile—like a human portrait—but at the same time is shown to be a purely mechanical, metallic, and even electronic skull, as suggested by visible circuitry around its artificial mouth, neck, and occipital area. Only the human outlines imply that this is no longer something purely human, but a replacement thereof, a sort of prosthesis that stands in for a body part, usually a limb or organ. Whereas Hoerle depicts these contours in reference to body parts, Gautier portrays them textually in reference to the entire body, which is replaced altogether. A physician gives Gautier's chronically ill protagonist Octave de Saville the opportunity to slip into the body of another person who, as his "avatar," not only grants him health, but also the affections of his previously unattainable love interest. With these themes, both Hoerle and Gautier invite reflection on a domain of "prosthethics" that arises from a prosthesis as it opens our eyes to what can and cannot be replaced or exchanged.

REPLACEMENT

In one respect, the process of successive replacement unfolds as a situation of conflict *(Auseinandersetzung,* literally "taking-apart") that has befallen a person, a process that continues onward via the body. In the case of Hoerle and his print of the prosthetic head—as with many of his other works that address injuries caused either by the recent First World War

1 See Gautier (1888). Artwork: Heinrich Hoerle in: Backes (1981): 216 (Druckgrafik no. 31 in the list of the artist's works).

or by the burgeoning progress of industrialization—the situation is one of suffered violence that has necessitated amputating whichever part had been injured or mutilated, then replacing it with a prosthesis that would allow the person to carry on living, but also working. Even if the prosthetic head is more a robotic phantasm of a head replaced with technology, thus also replacing human thought, it does indeed belong on the list of body parts that (can) no longer serve their purpose, marked by loss and lack. Loss: I am becoming headless. Lack: I am missing my head. *How can I still perceive, think, and act? What am I suffering through, why, and how? Will I be replaced by a machine? What is this "techno-logical" development confronting me with?*

For Hoerle, this machine is an actual entity of war and of capitalism. The mechanization of life extends to the body, intervenes in it, mangles it, injures and mutilates it. However, it is humans who have authored and accordingly instrumentalized this mechanization. Particularly in the twelve lithographs depicting "cripples" in Hoerle's so-called "Cripple Portfolio" (Druckgraphik no. 17) from 1919, he depicts "passionate protest against the beastliness of war, an accounting of the enthusiasms and promises of 1914: cripples. the madness, that there are people who have been divided in thirds or in half, who go on living in an indifferent world; the sickly feverish distortions of crippled existence and their individual forms of expression have been transferred with a quick hand onto these virtuosic pages," as Hans Faber describes it in the *organ der gruppe progressiver künstler, a bis z (official publication of the group of progressive artists, a to z),* of which Hoerle was the editor (See Backes 1981: 116). The same applies to his prints *Krüppel bettelnd* (Cripple Begging) (Backes: Ölgemälde no. 18) from 1921 and *Denkmal der unbekannten Prothesen* (Monument to the Unknown Prostheses) (Backes: Ölgemälde no. 67) from 1930. The figures in both works have been given prosthetic heads, making visible in art what was already visible on the streets: people who had lost parts of their bodies during the war, who had been injured, who had been casualties of armed violence committed by fellow humans (Henninger 2004: 94–96). People who, for example, could no longer reach for something with their own hand—because that hand was missing, separated by a hand grenade—or who could no longer walk on their own two legs—because one of them was missing, having been separated by a false step on a land mine.

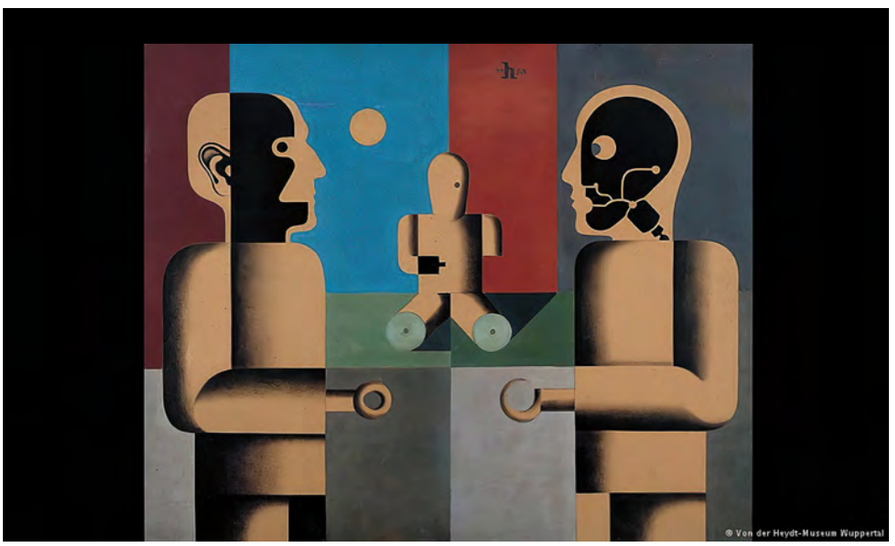

FIG. 2

HEINRICH HOERLE: *DENKMAL UNBEKANNTER PROTHESEN* (MONUMENT TO UNKNOWN PROSTHESES, 1921).

HTTPS://DE.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/DENKMAL_DER_UNBEKANNTEN_PROTHESEN#/MEDIA/DATEI:HOERLE_DENKMAL_DER_UNBEKANNTEN_PROTHESEN_1930.JPG

As with Otto Dix's 1920 painting *War Cripples,* Hoerle's artworks also depict parts that had already been replaced by prostheses—the missing and therefore invisible limbs—exposing a perspective on suffering that is indispensable for understanding what makes all violent occurrences violent (their *Gewaltsamkeit,* or violent-ness), questions with which these works confront us. Pascal Delhom remarks: "For the exercise of violence is distinguished as such from other types of action only insofar as it is directed against other

living creatures and harms them; insofar as it intends to cause suffering." (Delhom 2014: 158) The factor of the exercise of violence, which here is viewed squarely in the context of action, involves an inherent premise that this action — that is, the violent occurrence — is entangled in its lead-up as well in its lasting aftermath. *Violence aims at the face of other people; aims at that face's annihilation, both in its physicality and in its unattainability; and aims at transcending it by penetrating alterity.*

Lévinas develops this idea as follows:

> ***Corporeity is the mode of existence of a being whose presence is postponed at the very moment of his presence. Such a distension in the tension of the instant can only come from an infinite dimension which separates me from the other, both present and still to come, a dimension opened by the face of the Other. War can be produced only when a being postponing its death is exposed to violence. It can be produced only where discourse was possible: discourse subtends war itself. Moreover violence does not aim simply at disposing of the other as one disposes of a thing, but, already at the limit of murder, it proceeds from unlimited negation. It can aim at only a presence itself infinite despite its insertion in the field of my powers. Violence can aim only at a face*** *(Lévinas 2007: 225).*

The injured war veteran portrayed by Hoerle has already suffered the loss of a body part in a war that affected him and other people, and that, as with every use of violence, is attributable to human beings. "There is no violence without people who exercise it or who permit it to be suffered. And if we do not ascribe a particular instance to a person and nevertheless experience it as violence, we can do so because we ascribe it to another entity, to a god or personified destiny that we view as an intentional author. Neither a natural disaster nor an injurious attack by an animal that humans have not trained accordingly is experienced as a form of violence." (Delhom 2014: 156) *Violence is contingent upon human beings. It is part of our humanity.*[2] The same holds for all its applications, which are conceptually described using words such as "structural" or "symbolic" because they are not simply natural phenomena, and nor do they follow specific causal rules of nature. They are only violent *(gewaltsam)* because they are human-authored, that is, because human beings could have controlled or prevented them and their repercussions as natural events or because they, in their production and reproduction, fall within social processes and structures of human responsibility. "Thus, phenomena of violence presuppose a causal entity that can act intentionally and can, for that reason, be viewed as violent *(gewalttätig)*." (Delhom 2014: 156) This entity is human and cannot be replaced in a *phenomenology of suffered violence,* so conceived because it holds responsibility, especially when the violence results in the injury of other living creatures. "For a living creature does not only live *in the world,* but *on its own (von sich aus)* has a connection *to the* world and to the other living creatures in the world. As the subject of this connection to the world, it perceives stimuli, discerns objects, moves self-sufficiently, and enters into relationships. Hence, it comprises the point of departure and the center of its connection to the world and to others. This connection constitutes its life." (Delhom 2014: 156–157) At this point, Delhom elucidates that not only does an injury harm the creature's body and its physical constitution, but also has repercussions that include damaging perceptions, movements, and relationships. The injury "affects it in its connection to the world and to other creatures. The specificity of the injury lies in this link between the harm to body and psyche and the damage to perceptions, movements, and relationships. Only a creature that has a connection to the world on its own *(von sich aus)* can be injured." (Delhom 2014: 157)

Delhom highlights that precisely what is affected by a violent occurrence — the aspect of *on its own, von sich aus* — defines the connection to the world and can also be described as freedom or spontaneity. "On the one hand, it is the only possible target of violence, as an intentional action. After all, what distinguishes it from all other objects is that

2 Above all, this also means not simply describing violence using terms such as bestiality or animality but bringing them back into the human realm of responsibility in order to emphasize corresponding relationships clearly.

it largely deprives the actor of intentionality and thus interferes with his privileged position at the origin and the center of his world. That is why it can only be honored or combated. It prompts either recognition or violence. On the other hand, there would be no violence either if its chosen target were entirely out of reach." (Delhom 2014: 157) Violence reaches and damages living creatures in their connection to themselves, to the world, and to others. It injures them by harming their bodies and their psychological makeup. In this regard, Delhom quotes Lévinas: "Violence bears upon only a being both graspable and escaping every hold. Without this living contradiction in the being that undergoes violence the deployment of violent force would reduce itself to a labor." (Lévinas 2007: 223) Yet violence is not only exercised, it is also suffered, and thus it is first and foremost a *misfortune* (a *Widerfahrnis,* something "befallen") and neither an action nor the effect of a structure dependent on humans. "The living creature affected experiences it as the Reversal of its connection to the world: it does not turn towards the world on its own *[von sich aus]* but is affected by something in the world to which it is exposed. Although as a living creature it is the subject of its suffering—it is not the subject in the sense of an author of an intentional act, but in the sense that it is subjected *(subiectus)* to what injures it. The subject of suffering is the subjective pole of an occurrence that has befallen it and that it cannot escape. It does not constitute an object, but rather it is affected." (Delhom 2014: 157) This suffering is precisely what distinguishes *Gewaltsamkeit,* the suffering that takes place in the mutual referentiality between suffering and its exercise or causation. "The exercise of violence can, like other forms of action, take place as a means to a specific end. It can occur as an expression of hatred, fury, or panic; it can be deployed as a demonstration of power and much more. But what constitutes the *Gewaltsamkeit* of this means, this expression, or this demonstration is that it is or could be suffered." (Delhom o. ibid. 2014: 158) Nevertheless, Delholm contends that the perspective of suffering should not be equated with that of the violence's victim. Indeed, it can also be the perspective of the witnesses of suffered violence, and "it is frequently enough the [perspective] of people who exercise or cause violence to happen and are therefore confronted with others' suffering due to said violence. Conversely, victims of violence who suffer from it can also observe it from the perspective of the act and thus understand or even justify it." (Delhom o. ibid. 2014: 159) "In other words," Delhom continues, and this is key: "the perspective of suffering is not necessarily that of the sufferer. "It also enables observation of the entire violent occurrence proceeding from what constitutes its *Gewaltsamkeit.*"(Ibid.)

For Delhom, with his phenomenological approach, this is an effort to shift the focus to the suffering, a shift based on using terminology that sensitizes to the *Gewaltsamkeit* of violence, which also means clarifying that suffering itself is not an experience in itself: "The subject of injury does not constitute that injury as its object, but is affected by the injury. Hence, *to the extent that it is suffered,* an injury is not a phenomenon. Furthermore, it harms or destroys the bodily and psychological basis for experience and movement in the world. Thus, for the sufferer, it is difficult to address what has been suffered *as suffering.* Conversely, for the other participants or witnesses of the violence, there is always the risk that they might overlook the specifically violent [gewaltsam] aspect of suffering within the object of their experience, or that they might view the violent occurrence exclusively from the perspective of the act." (Delhom 2014: 160–161) Notwithstanding, in order to scrutinize the *Gewaltsamkeit* of violence as an object of phenomenology and not as either a mere misfortune *(Widerfahrnis)*—which is only suffered and not experienced—or as the object of utterly constituted experience—which loses sight of suffering—Delhom proposes finding an approach that treats suffering as a boundary of experience and adopts a perspective of suffering that distinguishes between intrusive and exclusive violence: "Both types of violence are suffered as such; both of them affect and injure living creatures in their relationship to their habitats, in the first case though the intrusion of a foreign object that cannot be integrated and in the second case through exclusion from one's own habitat. The intrusion occurs from the outside in as an injury to integrity; exclusion from the inside out is a denial of belonging or integration. Both are injurious." (Delhom o. ibid. 2014: 161–162) And in

both cases, I observe them from within my body, from within my habitat, which I can never leave and from which I perceive the world as an exterior world of objects, from which I suffer physical violence as an intrusion.

EXCHANGE

"No one could understand the disease which was slowly undermining the constitution of Octave de Saville. He was not confined to his bed, but led his usual life, and never a complaint issued from his lips; yet it was obvious that he was dying. He could tell the physicians, whom the anxiety of his friends had compelled him to consult, of no particular pain or suffering, and their science could discover no alarming symptoms in him. When his chest was sounded, the result was favourable; and when the ear was applied to his heart, it could scarcely be said that its beating was either too quick or too slow. He had no cough and no fever; but his life was evidently gliding away and taking flight through one of those invisible crevices of which man, according to the saying of Terence, is full. Sometimes a strange faintness turned him pale and chill as a statue. For a minute or two he would seem dead; then the pendulum of life, stayed for the moment by some mysterious hand, was let go again and resumed its oscillations, and Octave woke up as it were from a dream." (Gautier 1888: 5–6).

Gautier opens his fantastical novel *Avatar* with an account of the illness of its main character Octave, an illness whose precise characteristics no one seems to know. At the start, it remains uncertain, as Gautier describes with a reference to Terence, who speaks of "imperceptible crevices in the human fabric." For Terence, this is something that can be affected by another person's misfortune or unhappiness: "I am a man; I consider nothing pertaining to man foreign to myself." (Terentius 1832: 5 line 25) In an adaptation of a lost comedy by the Greek poet Menander, the Roman Terence gives this line to the man who punishes himself: the self-tormentor Menedemus who prefers to work in the fields alone, without the help of farm hands, who he could afford. He argues that everything human is related and therefore also pertains to him and represents a human attitude that includes goodness, clemency, and consideration.[3] *A consequence of humanitas: One must practice temperance.* The Delphic maxim "Know thyself" also calls for thoughtful consideration *(Besonnenheit,* temperance) of the fact that to be human means to be mortal, which expresses a kind of incompleteness and limitation, as Plato articulates in the dialogue between Charmides and Sokrates:

> *There you are, Socrates, he said: you push your investigation up to the real question at issue—in what temperance differs from all the other sciences—but you then proceed to seek some resemblance between it and them; whereas there is no such thing, for while all the rest of the sciences have something other than themselves as their subject, this one alone is a science of the other sciences and of its own self. And of this you are far from being unconscious, since in fact, as I believe, you are doing the very thing you denied you were doing just now: for you are attempting to refute me, without troubling to follow the subject of our discussion.*

> *How can you think, I said, if my main effort is to refute you, that I do it with any other motive than that which would impel me to investigate the meaning of my own words—from a fear of carelessly supposing, at any moment, that I knew something while I knew it not? And so it is now: that is what I am doing, I tell you. I am examining the argument mainly for my own sake, but also, perhaps, for that of my other intimates. Or do you not think it is for the common good, almost, of all men, that the truth about everything there is should be discovered?*

> *Yes indeed, he replied, I do, Socrates.* (Plato 1927: 166b–e)

3 See, for example, Melanchthon (2018), 6–7. This maxim also inspired Cicero, Seneca, Montaigne, Herder, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Kant, and Novalis, for example.

Temperance in dialogue: The uncertainty of self-knowledge is part of the *drama* of every body, which for Octave takes place in the here and now, as Gautier expressed using words such as "faintness," "strange," or "mysterious." Octave *is* his body, which he *has* as a physical vessel. And he *is* his suffering, which he *has* as an illness. Thus, to follow this main character, with Gautier's help, also means following him in his disturbed relationship to the world, to the others, and to himself. Thus the author reveals to us the experience of Octave's own body, his mode of existing. This mode is ambiguous because—to bear with Merleau-Ponty and paraphrase him here—if we chose to think of him in the third person as a collection of processes, such as sight, motor functions, and sexuality, we would realize that these processes cannot be interlinked and connected to the outer world via causal relationships. Rather, "they are all obscurely drawn together and mutually implied in a unique drama. Therefore the body is not an object. For the same reason, my awareness of it is not a thought, that is to say, I cannot take it to pieces and reform it to make a clear idea." (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 231) This *ambiguity of the body,* its dual existence, prevents Octave, his doctors, and his relatives from knowing any more about him beyond the notion that no other road can lead to knowledge of him besides that of *experiencing, inhabiting (er-leben)* his body, "which means taking up on my own account the drama which is being played out in it, and losing myself in it." (Ibid.) As such, Octave himself *is* his body, at least inasmuch as he calls an acquisition his own. And inversely, his body is like a natural subject, like an preliminary draft of his overall existence. "Thus experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality." (Ibid.) Here, Merleau-Ponty stresses the ambiguity of the mode of existence through the experience of one's own body, which departs from the Cartesian tradition, in which the mode of existence has only two meanings and no more: existence as object and existence as consciousness. The object is thoroughly an object; consciousness is thoroughly consciousness; the body is the sum of parts without an interior; the mind is itself present being without any distance. This is precisely the point at which Gautier begins. Octave tries to say farewell to his body's drama, seeks to leave his sick body as a sum of parts without an interior, and takes along his mind as an existence that, to itself, is right there *(sich selbst gegenwärtiges Sein)* without any distance.

Gautier invokes the phantasm of transmigration, which for Octave signifies a way out of his existence, which has been determined by illness, but also an absolute fixation on another person, on the object of his affection who has been inaccessible to his current, impaired body, Countess Praskovia Labinska who is married to Count Olaf Labinski. Octave achieves both aims—to escape his body, which is suffering from illness but perhaps also from longing, and the possibility of unrestricted access to the countess—through an exchange staged in the book. With the help of the physician Balthasar Cherbonneau, Octave is able to switch minds with the Count; from that point on, his mind occupies the Count's body:

> *Doctor Balthazar Cherbonneau, as he stood between the two inert bodies, looked, in his white robes, like the sacrificing priest of one of those sanguinary religions which pile up the bodies of men on the altars of their gods. He suggested that priest of Vitziliputzili, the hideous Mexican idol of which Henri Heine sings in one of his ballads, but his intentions were certainly less murderous.*

> *He drew close to the still perfectly motionless body of Count Olaf Labinski, and pronounced the ineffable syllable; which he then rapidly repeated over the profoundly comatose form of Octave. The usually odd looking figure of M. Cherbonneau seemed at this moment endowed with a weird majesty. The mightiness of the power he wielded ennobled his irregular features; and, if anyone could have seen him thus performing these mysterious rites with so*

> *sacerdotal a solemnity, he would scarcely have recognized in him the Hoffmannesque doctor, who challenged, while he defied, the pencil of the caricaturist.*
>
> *Then some strange and wonderful things took place. Octave de Saville and Count Olaf Labinski seemed to be simultaneously shaken with a convulsive agony. Their features were contorted, and a slight foam frothed round their lips. The pallor of death bleached their skins, while two little quivering bluish gleams, burned with uncertain light over their brows.*
>
> *At a gesture of the doctor, charged to the full with magnetic influence, which seemed to point out to them the journey which the master bade them take, the two phosphorescent points set themselves in motion, and leaving behind, as they flew along, a track of light, sought their new resting-places. The soul of Octave hid itself*
>
> *within the body of the Count Labinski, and the count's soul in the body of Octave.*
>
> *The Avatar was accomplished!* (Gautier 1888: 56–57)

From that point on, Octave's minds lives in the body of another man. This gives him access to another world that does not belong to him, one in which he can meet his beloved, as he is now also her husband. Gautier has Octave's mind descend into the body of the count, completing a descent that points to the literal meaning of the Sanskrit-derived word avatar. In Indian religions, the word *avatar* refers to the incarnation of a god on earth, especially Vishnu. Gautier highlights this cultural etymology early in the novel while setting the scene of the physician's office:

> *Along the walls were hung miniature water-colour sketches, the work of some painter at Calcutta or Lucknow, representing the nine Avatars already accomplished by Vishnu in the bodies of a fish—a tortoise—a pig—a lion with a human head—a Brahmin dwarf—Rama, a hero fighting the thousand-armed giant, Cartasuciriargunen—Kitsna, the miraculous child in whom some dreamy minds have seen an Indian Christ—Buddha, the worshipper of the great god, Mahadevi—and, last of all, he was represented as in deep sleep, in the midst of the Milky Way, lying on the five-necked serpent, whose five bent heads formed a canopy over him, awaiting the hour of his last incarnation when he should assume the body of a white-winged horse, and by letting his shoe drop down upon the universe bring about the final destruction of the world.* (Gautier 1888: 45–46)

The Avatar was accomplished. The transmigration has been completed. In Hinduism, an avatar is only a vessel and no exchange occurs between the deity and the figure of an animal or human; rather, the deity takes animal or human form after "descending" into the avatar. By contrast, in Gautier's version, an exchange takes place in the phantasm of a transmigration, which proves deceptive, however, as the following scene illustrates:

> *The rest of the breakfast was eaten in silence. Prascovie was not pleased with him whom she took to be her husband, while Octave was in a state of mental agony, fearing lest he might be asked other questions to which he would be quite unable to reply.*
>
> *The countess rose from the table and retired to her own room.*
>
> *Octave, left alone, began playing with the handle of a knife, and felt inclined to stab himself to the heart, for his position had become almost intolerable. He had reckoned upon an immediate victory; and now he found himself lost in the mazy*

> *labyrinth of another man's existence, out of which he could find no way. In stealing Count Olaf Labinski's body, he ought also to have possessed himself of his thoughts and views; of the languages which he spoke; of his childish recollections; of the thousand little private matters which go to the making up of a man's personality; the threads which unite his existence with the existences of others; but for all this the skill of Doctor Balthazar Cherbonneau had been insufficient. The misery it was to be in this paradise, and yet not to dare to take one single step forward!*
> *(Gautier 1888: 99)*

Octave's suffering continues, even as an avatar, because via the actuality of his new body, he cannot retrieve what constituted that new body (but also his own, abandoned one): the habits, the skills, the linguistic knowledge, the memories, the *hidden details* described by Gautier that make up a person's selfhood, the relationships that link one person's life to the lives of others. At these moments, Gautier's prose invites us to perceive Octave's "avatarization," which has been initiated by suffering and brought about via longings or fantasies, as an idea that gradually withdraws from its bodily basis, for in the end the avatar Octave has nothing left to say: he cannot access any of the experiences that proceeded his own being-right-there *(Gegenwart). His being-there is left emptied of sense; he cannot answer to it.* From there, it is not a stretch to observe the avatar not only in text—via a phantasm, a fiction, or something imagined—but also in mediality and pictoriality, in the rise of algorithms and digitalization. This demonstrates that the avatar depicted there, with its telepresence *(Telepräsenz),* on the screen, whether controllable or not, having a presence *(Anwesenheit)* without being-right-there *(ohne Gegenwart),* does indeed create leeway for possibilities of self and other between the image and viewer—and shows that meanings can shift accordingly. Nevertheless, this is certainly nothing more than an ethereal-ization of our world in so-called cyberspace, which, as a result of its de-materialization, elevates visibility but does not solve the puzzle of invisibility; it exists in a loss of inter-corporeity, and thus cannot visibly expose the hidden details mentioned above. As Käte Meyer-Drawe stresses, "No one will discover in digitized bodies how humanity will achieve a meaningful world. The visible space is becoming dense. It does not leave behind any void in which a Cartesian pineal gland could serve as the guardian of sense." (Meyer-Drawe 1996: 140) Meyer-Drawe builds on Merleau-Ponty (2000: 215): "Meaning is invisible, but the invisible is not the contradictory of the visible: the visible itself has an invisible inner framework *(membrure),* and the invisible is the secret counterpart of the visible."[4] It thus remains puzzling even if we, joining Michel Tibon-Cornillot, assume that an "intermediary" sphere has spread out, "a meta-real seam in which the mechanical and artificial takes a place across from its human producers, who recognize it for their part as far superior to the classical machine." After all, according to Meyer-Drawe, the meaning "with which we equip our world at their suggestion will not be revealed by studying neural networks, nor will it be decrypted by information models. To understand that meaning, we have to return to the fact that we are not, after all, glass people in a glass world." (Tibon-Cornillot 1982: 146) In other words, this aesthetics of existence would only be perceivable as such if the bodily self becomes tangible *as a locus of exposure vis-à-vis other people,* in obtaining inter-corporeity, in a presence *(Anwesenheit)* that includes being-right-there *(Gegenwart),* and when corporeity is conceived as the actualization of humanness and as realization and not "avatarization," because only in realization is *ineluctable vulnerability and mortality* revealed.

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4 See also Meyer-Drawe 1996: 140.