

# A Sense of (Non)Place: Rethinking the 'Generic City' in terms of the Habit-body<sup>1</sup>

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#### **ABSTRACT**

A 'nonplace', in Marc Augé's view, may be defined in contrast to what he refers to as 'anthropological place'. It is a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical or concerned with identity. This article explores the sense of (non)place by answering these questions: if it is true that 'who' we are is defined by 'where' we are, insinuating that places do have an important role in shaping our identities, then what do these nonplaces tell us about us? In places that lack any defining features and reflects little of the unique local geography in which they are in, can we still develop a sense of place? What is needed now is a shift from the initial prioritising of 'cultural contexts', to the 'context of the embodied', emplaced, individual subject, a context that precedes any cognitive framework. Bearing in mind this shift in focus to the body, a phenomenological analysis of nonplaces then becomes necessary. The experiential value of a place must be assessed according to a lived, embodied engagement with it. Rem Koolhas' view of a kind of 'generic city' in which urban dwellers now live has worldwide

reverberations. This paper argues that a phenomenological analysis that puts emphasis on the subjective, embodied lived experience is a necessary step to make. By focusing on the body, the strict categorisations that have led to the negative connotations to nonplaces begin to lose their rigidity.

### **Keywords:**

•Nonplace, •space, •identity, •geography, •a sense of place, •experience, •environment, •context of the embodied, h•abit-body, •flesh of the world, •generic city, •interaction, •surrounding

Thile globalisation is certainly not a new phenomenon, what distinguishes its current form from the ones that preceded it is the worldwide spread of what sociologist Marc Augé calls 'nonplaces'.2 According to Augé, a 'nonplace' may be defined in contrast to what he refers to as 'anthropological place': "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place." Were we to define a typology of nonplaces, then I believe it is fair to claim that these are places that are built to a generic and repetitive design, possessing no particular characteristic that distinguishes one place from another place within their category, resulting in an oversimplified and uniformed modes of engagement based on transience rather than lasting impressions, more concerned with the efficiency of global network-systems even if it completely usurps the idea of shared local community, and a dismissiveness towards surrounding geographies whereby their idiosyncracies are largely ignored in order to create a seamless, boundless, continuous field.

One would be hard pushed to deny that these places have grown to be common, everyday places for urban inhabitants. In order to be reminded of this, one only need to think of the shopping malls and international airports that we visit regularly, where credit cards and the promises of chain hotels communicate a silent language shared universally. Bearing these places in mind, one of the biggest questions faced by our era is: if it is true that *who* we are is defined by *where* we are, insinuating that places do have an important role in shaping our identities, then what do these nonplaces tell us about us? In places that lack any defining features and reflects little of the unique local

geography in which they are in – places that have a paradoxical sense of being simultaneously somewhere (located in a specific 'here') and nowhere (that 'here' may be just about anywhere in the world)--can we still develop a sense of place?

Theoretical works from the late nineteenth- and early twentieh-century about urban life, from Friedrich Engels to Siegfried Kracauer, have already articulated the city as an environment characterized by anonymity, abstract detachment, isolation, and 'brutal indifference'. Since then, while the moods of detachment and dissolution articulated by these early thinkers of modern urbanity remain to characterise the urban experience, there have been significant shifts in the theoretical attitudes toward them. It is not a farfetched contention to say that if a major change were to be singled out, it would be the growing sense of optimism, instead of lament, that they are marked with. If modernity may be characterised by its volatile relation to time, exemplified by its relentless search for progress and the new, then postmodernity – for want of a better word to distinguish between two different epochs – may be characterised by a call for a more 'situated' form of thought without idealising the image of fixity.

Symptomatic of this desire is the emergence of what Edward Soja terms a 'spatial turn' within contemporary critical thinking. What this paradigmatic shift entails is the rampant problematisation of issues on space, place, geography, mappings and so forth, which represent a general interest in the significance of 'location'. In a way, what is held by the 'spatial turn' is that, despite the sense of dispersal that an increasingly 'modernised' environment creates, there remains in our nature as human beings not only to be 'in' a place, but also to seek understanding of the nature of this 'emplacement'. What differentiates this return to spatiality from previous thinking about space and place is precisely the problems that the previous era left behind, so that the question to ask becomes how we may 'situate' ourselves in an era of 'constant change and transitory commitments', typified by the rise of homogenised, mass-produced 'nonplaces' in the everyday urban environment.

The optimism shared by these writers point to the recognition that despite the transience and sense of dispersal that urban dwellers are faced with, the human desire for identification and belonging strongly remains. It is then the task for a theoretical study to respond to this 'global paradox'. The efforts of contemporary academics such as Doreen Massey, Nigel Thrift, John Urry and Tim Cresswell have shown us that by putting an emphasis on 'movement', place-making may be re-assessed as a dynamic process, a

'topological assemblage', to use Peter Merriman's words, of different subjectivites, materialities, temporalities, atmospheres, and thoughts. This is seen to be a critical response to what is argued to be 'a particularly Heideggerean' tradition that sees place as

"rooted, organic, and symbolic sites with which individuals develop fairly long-standing

attachments." Place, as these thinkers argue, is instead a 'mobile effect', characterised by the mobilisation of a complex network of differences rather than fixity and the possibility of dwelling. Responding to this, critical thinking, if it were to be possible of constant self-criticism and truly avoid any totalising tendency, needs to focus on the various contexts – political, sexual, socio-cultural, and so forth – that frame any experience. The experience of a given place is thus often comprehended as if it were a text, to be continuously re-inscribed and re-shaped according to its interpretation; beyond the interpretation, so to speak, there is nothing.

However, the fundamental flaw of the argument that one must assess experience as if it were a text is that it neglects how that place--as concrete and material--is experienced by the complex 'psycho-physical' layers of the human body. Thus, before we analyse the nonplace experience as a text inscribed by cultural definitions, we must first tend to its 'felt' dimensions that are registered through and by the body.

## Before Culture

Now so more than ever, it has become timely to reassess one of the most important lessons that place-discourse of the last two decades have taught us: the importance of a cultural, contextual understanding of experience. I am suggesting that while the issue of context remains necessary in order to emphasise the limitation of any interpretation, what is needed is a shift from the initial prioritising of *cultural contexts*, to the *context of the embodied*, emplaced, individual subject, a context that precedes any cognitive framework. Bearing in mind this shift in focus to the body, a phenomenological analysis of nonplaces then becomes necessary. Against this tendency to ascribe value to places based on categories that are established in advance of experience, I argue instead that the experiential value of a place must be assessed according to a lived, embodied engagement with it.

Before we proceed further, it is important to acknowledge that phenomenology's seeming insistence to safeguard 'lived experience' against the movements of time, and hence, against historical specificity — as exemplified by Gaston Bachelard's topoanalysis and subsequent phenomenological thinking that are influenced by it — does make itself appear irrelevant to a study of nonplaces. This is perhaps why, despite its claims of being a rigorous study of the lifeworld, current phenomenological interpretations have shied away from nonplaces in spite of its status as a prominent feature of our everyday urban life. However, as nonplaces need to be subject to a phenomenological analysis, phenomenology also ought to reevaluate its conventions in order to maintain its relevance to contemporary lifeworlds. As I hope to show in this essay, it is by addressing the lived experiences of nonplaces that phenomenology may be able to do this.

Augé argues that by virtue of being 'transit places', we do not 'dwell' in nonplaces. His now-famous example of air travel illustrates this clearly. Augé describes a fictional M. Dupont who whizzes through various 'nonplaces' – the ATMs and motorways en route to Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport, where he swiftly checks in his luggage and picks up his boarding pass, his journey then followed by a stroll around the duty free shops and a wait in the departure lounge, and finally finds him leafing through an in-flight magazine in the solitary comfort of his Espace 2000 airplane seat. These are experiences that are common to urban dwellers worldwide, and are certainly not exclusive to Paris. The point of these nonplaces is that they are repeated globally according to similar design restrictions, so that to have been in a motorway, have eaten in a franchised fast food restaurant, or have shopped in a multi-complex shopping mall in one metropolitan city is essentially to have done these activities in other metropolitan cities worldwide.

The repetitive homogeneity of the 'nonplace' also reduces our bodily interaction to a predicted uniformity. The way M. Dupont performs the activities described above is not site-specific; they are performed in the same way regardless of the particularity of any city he may be in. Consider, for instance, the international airport terminal. Spatially, one terminal is identical to the next, rendering geographical location futile. The system by which a terminal operates is that each must be consistently standardized in order to increase, say, efficient time-use: the more identical the layout, the quicker it will be for each passenger to board the aircraft, and the more passengers may be accommodated by an airport. It is argued that the *ersatz* orderliness and cold homogeneity of this space that invites only an equally predicted human participation, prevents these places to be truly 'lived'; this is one of the mains reasons for the negative sentiments attached to nonplaces. It is argued that the uniformity and anonymity of nonplaces that prevent interpretative

bodily interaction by predicting how we act in that place, reduce us to little more than mechanical, homogenised zombies who are oblivious, as M. Dupont is, to how the unique characteristics and cultural differences that make us human are being erased. As such, so the assumption goes, the nonplace may not be 'truly lived'.

# Nostalgia for Place

But what – and this is a question that an experience of the nonplace invites – do we mean when we say an experience is 'truly lived'? It seems that in the nonplace, this term takes on a significance quite different to what Bachelard postulates in *The Poetics of Space*. There, he reserves the 'oneiric' properties of place to places that remind us of the countless daydreams, memories and imagination first experienced in the childhood home: "All really inhabited spaces," writes Bachelard, "bears the essence of the notion of the home." Opposing the 'oneiric completeness' of the childhood home and subsequent places that remind us of it, Bachelard speaks of dwellings that are 'oneirically incomplete': "In Paris there are no houses, and the inhabitants of the big city live in superimposedboxes." The same sentiment is shared by Augé, who claims that as traditions and community are effectively reduced to a mythical status in the non-place, this prevents the subject from creating any real sense of identification with it. 11 These interpretations are problematic for they understand 'livedexperience' as a nostalgic longing for an idea of place that is encrusted by the myth of tradition and the authentic. The tendency towards a nostalgic recovery for 'place' – as historically specific, encouraging rich bodily participation, pertaining to the idea of the 'local' and so forth – is evident not only in Augé but other established accounts of what constitutes a 'sense of place'. In order to explain the place-person relation, the disciplines of phenomenological philosophy and human geography employs the method of describing as meticulously as possible people's sense of and relationship with their environment. This is believed to be a much more justifiable method rather than simply focusing only on the structures and patterns of the physical environment exclusively, as the discipline of geography proper aims to do. While this has certainly proven to be a productive enough method, but like all methods it is not free from limitations. The core problem that it eventually faces is that all descriptive accounts based on this method tend to seek out different variations of the same conclusion. That is, places that are embedded in history, which encourage complex social relations, which reflect its local geography, are significant and meaningful for so and so reasons.

As a consequence to this, knowledge about the built environment becomes simply re-written and the possibility of learning anything new prevented, as the aim is implicitly a template adhering to an already prescribed formula of what constitutes a 'sense of place'. This is one of the main reasons behind the presumed negativity that has become synonymous with the nonplace – dreary, monotonous, ubiqutuous, repetitive landscapes of international airports, motorways, franchised institutions like the Holiday Inns, the Ikeas, the McDonalds' that we can find wherever we are in whichever corner of the world – as being qualitatively inferior since the built environment is reduced to a 'simple location' where we are 'just there' rather than being engaged in some sort of positive participation with that place.

#### Habit-body and the Flesh of the World

How then, do we approach the theoretically marginalised environment of the 'non-place', without falling prey to the nostalgic paradigm that implies a pre-emptive valuation of such spaces, while remaining receptive to the ambiguities and subtle nuances of our non-place experience as they take form? The motive for this question is far from the aspiration to romanticise the dystopian potential of 'non-place', but rather to challenge the theoretical inertia concerning how one forms a sense of place. If it is true that places shape and are shaped by what they contain, which confirms the active role of agency, then it is false to consider the non-place as culturally and spatially inferior to 'real places', which seems to imply a notion of place as something permanent that exists outside or beyond human experience.

Since the originary site of human experience is the body, then the problem of whether or not a sense of place may grow in these homogenous, mass-produced spaces is a question that must be answered phenomenologically. Let us take into consideration, for instance, the waiting time spent in a departure lounge. The departure lounge is the intermediary space that we must pass through in order to get from an originary place to the place of our destination. Inside the airport, the departure lounge is linked only to the terminals and the airplane that is to come, seemingly cut-off from

the rest of the world. As insular, it gives a sense of solitude to the arrangement of the chairs, framed by glass windows and the harsh lighting that envelops the room in an unnaturally bright glow. According to the writer Douglas Coupland, the international airport is "an in-between place, a 'nowhere', a technicality... an anti-experience", creating, as another writer observes, "a cognitive dissonance that comes from being a rootless monad in an opaque system." Yet despite the starkness of the furnishing and the lack of domesticity, the room itself does not appear entirely desolate, as its hostility is diluted by the overall monotony that surrounds us as we wait to board our planes.



Figure 1. Andreas Gursky, Schiphol, 199413

What kind of time is experienced in waiting? According to Paul Virilio, we are living in the 'light of speed' where we no longer need to wait; in fact, there is no room for waiting since the moment that we would have waited for takes place in a flashing instant. Yet, if technological advancement in air travel is said to eliminate time by allowing us to travel ever-faster across the world, in the transit places that exist between one place to the next, time appears to slow down as we wait for our airplane journey to begin. In the departure lounge, time seems to 'take its time' to pass. Like other waiting situations, the wait in the departure lounge is marked by idleness and boredom towards transitory distractions, since we only proceed to the

departure lounge once we have exhausted the duty free shops, the restaurant and so forth. But here, the spatiality of the

departure lounge – the sheer size and implication of confinement, for example – compounded with the traveler's fatigue or anticipation, further characterises the 'emptying out of time' in waiting with an overwhelming sense of listlessness and anxiety. As we wait, the time spent in the departure lounge serves as a magnifying glass for the fragmentation my own time-consciousness: willful attempts at productivity (of, say, reading a book or proofreading a paper) are sabotaged by fidgeting, constantly checking the time, and fleeting glances around the room to make insignificant observations about our fellow travelers.

Yet, the same space that produces such discomfort also carries the possibility for re-instating a sense of continuity to other places that are rendered discontinuous from it, a possibility that is provided by the body's habitual modes. Consider the taking over of sleep as we sit idly in the departure lounge seat. The inertia emitted by our sitting position breeds lethargy that makes its presence felt by the weight that is gradually building on our eyelids, and shoulders that are slowly relaxing and sinking down. Sensing that sleep was soon to come, we momentarily halted it to reach for a jacket that we will use as a cushion, as an attempt to defuse the unyielding, uncomfortable shape of this seat. With the rolled up jacket wedged between our neck and the top of the seat, we shift our body so that it leans slightly to its side, pulled our legs closer to the base of the seat, and brought our hands together behind the side of our head, in order to create a kind of cocooning that would induce sleep. Soon enough, thanks to the memories of the habitual mode of sleeping, the anxiety that we experienced not so long ago would be warded off by the invasion of sleep. Whereas previously the departure lounge is seen as a detached, insular entity cut off from the rest of the world that spins around it, the habitual reenactment of sleep reveals it to be deeply connected to the outside world, which, in this case, are the places where we have developed our sleeping habits. This is perhaps the 'oneirism' of place, only here, contrary to Bachelard's theory, it is felt in the departure lounge, a setting very much different to his stable, uninterrupted image of the home.

This example shows that one's environment – even the supposedly cold, anonymous and homogenous nonplace – remains receptive to the morphology of the body. This is an idea that Husserl theorised by the 'lived body', where he argues that on the most fundamental level, we construct a sense of who we are through accessing the world via our bodily senses. Prior to theunderstanding of cultural concepts that are believed to define how we

experience our surroundings, on a more fundamental level, there is already the 'texture' of experience formed by the immediately felt, tactile fabric of the environment in which we are immersed. This idea is continued in Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of what he refers to as the bodily 'intentionality' that forms our perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception, our pre-reflective, immediate engagement with the world, is characterised by its intentional nature: my perception of a phenomenon – for example the nondescript setting of the departure lounge - is necessarily governed by the specific task or project that frame it. This is why, as in the above example, through the embodied intentionality of 'sleep', we are able to transform the generic impersonality of the departure lounge into a thoroughly personal 'sleep world', unique only to ourselves. The above experience highlights two important points concerning whether or not a sense of place may be developed in the nonplace. First, when we consider the nonplace in terms of embodiment - how perception is formed out of the subjective, prereflective interaction with a given surrounding – the strict, preestablished categorisations between 'place' and 'nonplace' begin to collapse. For, even the nondescript setting of the nonplace remains compliant to the demands of the habit body, acting here as a navigational tool that maps out our bodily actions in a relatively unfamiliar surrounding. Second, contra Bachelard, 'lived experience' no longer appears exclusive to places that bears the idyllic elements of the childhood home, nor, contrary to Augé, does it need to occur in places that appear to be "relational, historical, or concerned with identity." It is not for these reasons that we create a bond with places. In order to further clarify an alternative explanation as to how this bond is created, we may refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in especially the concept of 'flesh' as well as the 'reversibility thesis' linked to it.

With the example of one hand that is touching another, Merleau-Ponty argues that intrinsic to touching is the sensation of being touched, and while the two remains distinct to each other they nonetheless take place simultaneously, coinciding with each other. In the last chapter of the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* entitled 'The Intertwining – the Chiasm', Merleau-Ponty speaksof the act of seeing not as the positioning of a thing as an object of my gaze, but rather as the act of being drawn into the field of the sensible in which my perceiving body is part of. Here, the idea of the flesh is introduced. In a number of occasions, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty does not designate the term 'flesh' for one single purpose. My 'flesh' and the 'flesh' of the world here signify two different things: the former implies subjective personhood and the latter implies the world that exists

outside it. But Merleau-Ponty also speaks of it in a third way, that is the flesh as an 'adhesion of being', which "we must think of it... as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of Being." This is an especially interesting way to explain the flesh, as here Merleau-Ponty describes it as an 'element', a 'concrete emblem' and 'a general manner of Being'.

In the history of Western metaphysics, the concept of 'element' often refers to an underlying cosmological principle that holds all existence together. For example, the pre-Socratics theorised that air, earth, water or fire as concrete foundational elements of being. Both Allen Weiss and Martin Dillon suggest that Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh' may be understood in the same way: 'flesh', as the 'adhesion' between my body and the world, is seen as that 'elemental Being' of 'human incarnation'. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in suggesting that 'lived experience' is formed in the 'flesh of the world', at the delicate interstices in which my body and the world delicately interweaves, thus explains why the experiential value of a place cannot be established prior to embodiment. This is why, despite cultural connotations that point otherwise, and because of the embodied, habitual memory of sleep, we are able to create an intimate relation with the nondescript seat in the generic, impersonal space of the departure lounge.

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Rem Koolhas' view of a kind of 'generic city' in which urban dwellers now live has worldwide reverberations. In view of this unique historical phenomenon, theoretical discourse about space and place must rethink their methods, conclusions and normative assumptions about how a person forms a relation with the built environment. The perspective that holds that there can be no meaning to our experience of the supposedly rootless nonplaces is disheartening, and we must question its validity. For, our understanding of the place-person relationship is historically specific, and needs to respond to specific cultural shifts. Here, I propose a way of doing this by arguing that a phenomenological analysis that puts emphasis on the subjective, embodied lived experience is a necessary step to make. In the process, I hope to have shown how the nonplace-experience reveals that a sense of place does not develop out of the pre-emptive use of empty cultural signifiers to evoke a sense of local specificity. Instead, a sense of place grows out of the interaction between a person and their surrounding, according to the specificity of his/ her body. By focusing on the body, the strict categorisations that have led to the negative connotations to nonplaces begin

to lose their rigidity. Furthermore, it also shows that if any essence may be extracted from lived experience, it is its incompleteness; that is, how it is never a static and permanent entity that remains unchanged by the movements of time, but – as the nonplaces of our everyday urban environment shows—is instead continuously shaped by them.

#### **End Notes:**

This article is part of my doctoral thesis, *The Phenomenology of Nonplaces: Body, Memory, Aesthetics* (University of London, 2011, unpublished). The 'generic city' is a term used by Rem Koolhaas in Rem Koolhaas, Hans Werlemann and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994).

- Marc Augé, Non-places: An Anthropology of Supermodernity, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), Other thinkers have referred to the same types of places with different terminologies, for instance 'site' (Edward S. Casey, Remembering: A Phenomenological Study (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); 'omnitopia' (Andrew Wood A Rhetoric of Ubiquity: Terminal Space as Omnitopia" in Communication Theory, 13(3) (2003), 324-344); 'global city' (Saskia Sassen, The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).); 'ageographical city' (Michael Sorkin, (ed.) (Variations on a Theme Park: the New American City and the End of Public Space (New York: Hill & Wang, 1992)); 'generic city' (Rem Koolhaas, ibid.); and 'flatscapes' (ChristianNorberg-Schulz, Concepts of Dwelling (New York: Rizzoli, 1993)).
- <sup>3</sup> Augé, *ibid.*, 77-78.
- Consider, for instance, the general sense of optimism shared by the following writers: Deyand Sudjic, 100 Mile City (New York: Harcourt, 1993); Alain de Botton, The Art of Travel (London: Penguin, 2003); Pico Iyer, Sun after Dark: Flights into the Foreign (London: Vintage Books, 2005).
- Edward Soja. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Malden, New York and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 1996).
- See especially Doreen Massey, 'A Global Sense of Place', *Marxism Today*, June (1991),24-29; Massey, 'Travelling Thoughts' in P. Gilroy, L. Grossberg, and A. McRobbie (eds.) Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall (London: Verso, 2000), 225-232; John Urry, Sociology beyond Societies (London: Routledge, 2000); Tim Cresswell, 'The Production of Mobilities', *New Formations*, 43 (2001), 11-25 and 'Imagining the Nomad: Mobility and the Postmodern Primitive' in G. Benko and U. Strohmayer (eds.) *Space and Social Theory: Interpreting Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Nigel Thrift, *Spatial Formations* (London: Sage, 1996).
- Peter Merriman, 'Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway', *Theory Culture Society*, 24 (2001), 145 167.
- For instance, Edward Relph's attempt of employing a Heideggerian reading of place leads him to conclude that nonplaces breeds a global sense of placelessness; offered by places that "not only look alike and feel alike" are "bland possibilities

- of experience" (90). Yi-Fu Tuan articulates a similar sentiment by writing of a superficial identification to place, one that is borne out of a transient engagement with place, which prematurely severs the possibility for rootedness. Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).
- Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (East Sussex: Beacon Press, 1992), 26.
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- <sup>11</sup> Augé, *ibid*.
- Douglas Coupland. 'Hubs', in S. Bode and J. Millar (eds.) *Airport* (London: The Photographers' Gallery, 1997), 70-73. J. Thackera. 'Lost in Space a Traveler's Tale', in *ibid.*, 58-69.
- http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1995.191.
- Paul Virilio, Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromology (New York and London: Continuum, 2005).
- Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible,* Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 147.
- M. C. Dillon, "Erotic Desire" in Research in Phenomenology, 15 (1985), 150; Allen S. Weiss, "Merleau-Ponty's Concept of the 'Flesh' as Libido Theory" in SubStance, 10:1 (1981), 91.

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