

Bodies in Form*

Motricity Across Mediums in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: American Dreams*

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I have been ruminating on *The Last of Us*¹ for years, ever since my first obsessive encounter with the game in September of 2013. I played through Naughty Dog's critically acclaimed post-apocalyptic survival story four times that Autumn: back to back to back to back. Every time the camera focused in on Ellie's face, every time the plucking of Gustavo Santaolalla's signature ronroco rose to fill my ears, every time the credits rolled, I couldn't help but sit, swept away, waiting for the scroll to end so I could start the game all over again. *The Last of Us* captured me. It was the only media I consumed that semester. And it has yet to release its grip.

I am thrilled to be here today to share some remarks on this profound work of ludic art. The impetus for this crystallization of my thinking can be traced to the release of Naughty Dog's gameplay reveal trailer for *The Last of Us Part II* at E3 2018,² and Dan Lowe's frame-by-frame animation analysis of the trailer,³ the entirety of which I watched with the utmost fascination. Somehow, Naughty Dog managed to distill the magic of their new title into a twelve-minute video, the same magic that I had sensed in the extended demo for *The Last of Us* at E3 2012,⁴ before that game had been released, before I had a chance to play it, to feel it. But, as Lowe demonstrates in his analysis, this isn't magic at all. It's craft.

It will be my contention today that the efficacy of Naughty Dog's design-work in *The Last of Us* is attributable to the nuance of their animation, and specifically, their implementation of player movement and interaction in the game-world. I will first draw out the significance of this game-design orientation through

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¹Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*, PS3, 2013.

²PlayStation, "The Last of Us Part II - E3 2018 Gameplay Reveal Trailer | PS4," YouTube, 11 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btmN-bWwv0A>.

³Dan Lowe, "The Last of Us 2 - E3 Demo - Animation Analysis," YouTube, 12 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nl8k8nRlh2Y>.

⁴PlayStation, "The Last of Us - E3 Extended Demo," YouTube, 5 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GApCMW1F7a0>.

an explication of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part One, section III, "The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity," with careful attention paid to this concept of "motricity."⁵ I will then turn to the game itself and examine the *experience of play* as both Joel and Ellie, the two playable protagonists of the game, attending to the ways in which Naughty Dog deliberately thematizes the body as it is *in-a-world* and subtly draws attention to the recursive experience of *playing* a body-in-a-world. Finally, I will briefly consider the prequel graphic novel *The Last of Us: American Dreams*,⁶ co-written by the creative director and writer of *The Last of Us*, Neil Druckmann, with artist and animator (and illustrator of the book) Faith Erin Hicks. By doing so, I hope to draw out the phenomenological thematic of the body as it operates in each 'text,' and in its translation from game to comic, so illustrating the significance of the *animate* and *animated* body as *dynamic background* to the universe of *The Last of Us*, supporting and structuring gameplay and narrative alike.

Permit me a comment on framing: I was deliberate in beginning this talk with the verb "ruminating." I wanted to capture the sense of thought first of all as *chewing*, *swallowing*, *incorporating*, *digesting*, *regurgitating*, and *excreting*. To think in the way that I want to think, in the way we *need* to think, here, is more *and* less than cognizing, reflecting, or representing. It is a way of thinking with and from the gut, of refusing the critico-transcendental privilege that has dominated much of Western philosophy. If we want to think the body, we need to think *with* our bodies, not merely as *disembodied* subjectivities floating effortlessly across the world, surveying (and surveilling) without touching, without vulnerability or contact.⁷ Our philosophical vision must be returned to its socket, must

⁵Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁶Neil Druckmann and Faith Erin Hicks, *The Last of Us: American Dreams* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2013).

⁷For instance, see Emerson: "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God," in *Nature and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 2009 [1836]), 3. Alexander Galloway has described such philosophy as being "rooted in a . . . pornography of being (evident in the virtues of transparency, the strategies of capture, or the logics of *aletheia*)." See his *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 9. If you don't have access to a copy, see the excerpt on colour, photography, and philosophical optics at "The Last Instance," n.p., January 5, 2017, <http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/the-last-instance>. It should be noted: Galloway/Laruelle and Emerson cannot be strictly opposed. Galloway identifies a "*unilateralized dioptrics*" in Laruelle's thought characterized by the "immanent transparency of identity" ("The Last Instance," n.p.). This sounds very much like the experience of Emerson's transparent eye-ball. The difference lies in the fact that Laruelle "simultaneously exhibits a *unilateralized catoptrics*, in that he assigns a pure opacity to the one, a pure density, a pure imperviousness." Being is *cryptographic*: identity with the One, here, is not pure disclosure, as in Emerson, or in certain readings of Heidegger. Being, the One, the in-itself, is primordially dark—or rather, *black*: "immanent to itself . . . an *in-stance*" (as opposed to the "*stance*" of colour, position, philosophy), and "as Laruelle says, the *last instance*" ("The Last Instance," n.p.). This is a useful characterization of being, but I cannot say that it is particularly easy to think through. See my paper, "The Torqued Horizon: Preliminary Notes on the Hypersurface of the Real" (2019, unpublished, PDF), for my own attempt at thinking through the opacity of being *on the way* to the torsional and temporal being of

be *inserted* back into the world, must be compromised in its transcendental “position,” which is to say, in its capacity for “*seeing well*.”⁸ Vision, Merleau-Ponty argues, the transcendental power of the subject, is inseparable from the possibilities of “error, illness, [and] madness”; such is the risk of concrete situationality, of “embodiment,” and such is the risky, embodied situationality that plays out in *The Last of Us*.⁹

Situation is one of the key terms Merleau-Ponty deploys to describe the “meaningful whole[]” of sensation while also highlighting the orientation or “*direction*” of sensation as the original but *non-neutral* mode of existence of a body in a world.¹⁰ Sensation is *tilted* or *inclined*, and exists in this way originally. There is no low-energy state of equilibrium or poise to which a living body might return while remaining a living body, only points of tension and metastability seeking resolution.¹¹ The body is not, therefore, a site of passive reflection or theatric representation,¹² but a site of *labour, activity, achievement*.¹³

It follows, then, that the constitution of the body as a site of labour simultaneously requires the work of *organization*.¹⁴ “I hold my body as an indivisible possession,” Merleau-Ponty writes, but *indivisible* does not mean that my body is *indistinct*, an undifferentiated mass—“I know the position of each of my limbs through a *body schema* [*un schéma corporel*] that envelops them all.”¹⁵ To ‘hold’ oneself in such a way, to be indivisible from oneself and yet not entirely transparent to or immediate with oneself,¹⁶ is to be in the manner of a “form,” an organizational schematic or structure.¹⁷ To be in such a way, as form, is neither to be a “simple copy” of one’s body nor a “global awareness” hovering over the “existing parts

real subjects—which are, as Merleau-Ponty says, “psychological and historical structure[s]” (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 482).

⁸Galloway, “The Last Instance,” n.p.

⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 126.

¹⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 11-12.

¹¹Here I draw on Gilbert Simondon, “The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis,” trans. Gregory Flanders, *Parrhesia* 7 (2009): 6. Simondon considers “*physical individuation*” to be a “*case of the resolution of a metastable system*,” a resolution that necessarily requires the “*tropism*” of the individual, its turning or bending toward the world, which is to say, the “*orientation of the living being in a polarized world*” (6, 9). This sense of *polarity* or *polarization* is important in Merleau-Ponty as well.

¹²See Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, 2015, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2016), for a critique of the mind-as-theatre.

¹³As Alva Noë argues, seeing is “an achievement, *our* achievement, the achievement of making contact with what there is. We can fail to see.” See *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), xi.

¹⁴Our activities “*organize[]* us,” Noë argues. “Organization, importantly, is a *biological* concept. Living beings are organisms—organized wholes—and the central conceptual puzzle life throws up for science is that of understanding how mere matter, and the order characteristic of physics, gets taken up, integrated, and *organ-ized* in the self-making, world-creating manner of life.” See *Strange Tools*, 5-6.

¹⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 100-101.

¹⁶On this lack of immediacy and transparency, see Jacques Derrida’s critique of Husserl in *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, trans. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

¹⁷Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 102.

of the body”; rather, form is a “type of existence” wherein the “subject actively integrates the parts according to their value for the organism’s projects.”¹⁸ To be *as form* is to exist as a “*dynamic*” orientation, “a posture toward a certain task,” a “*situational spatiality*.”¹⁹ To be *as form* is to be the movement of this very integrational dynamism, in the modality distinct to living bodies.

As such, the organized body, the body in form, cannot be reduced to a “determinate position in relation to other positions or in relation to external coordinates,” which is to say, it cannot be reduced to an object floating in abstract space. On the contrary, abstract space emerges from the *thickness* and ambiguity of bodily, “oriented space”—the “‘here’” of my body “designates the installation of the first coordinates.”²⁰ The living body is not a point, not an object, not an inert thing buffeted by causes; rather, it is the work of a *tensile milieu*, “polarized by its tasks, insofar as it *exists toward* them, insofar as it coils upon itself in order to reach its goal.”²¹ Between the living body and the world, in the midst of the in-itself, there occurs a Mandelbrot unfurling, a surface effect at the interface *between*, at the horizon of flesh, organizing both along lines of polarization and perspective.²² As my body, as the *form* of (an) existential labour, I am always already directed in this way, “in and toward the world.”²³ My body and my world are disclosed as an oriented and meaningful whole.

In my bodily situation “I find . . . nothing but intelligible space,” an intelligibility that cannot be “extricated from oriented space” and is “in fact nothing but the making explicit of it.”²⁴ Intelligibility is the integration of a body *together with* the oriented space around it, which is also to say, the realization of an original and continuously generative relationship between the individuated (and individuating) body and the pre-individual background, from which and within which it coils and recoils.²⁵ Consequently, sensation can in no way be reduced to *representation*, to a correlation or correspondence between contents and objects, between body and background. Rather, *the body exists as the primordial meaning of the world* in that ‘meaning’ describes the *sens* (sense; direction) of bodily being, the polarized bond, the intentional hyphen, that originally and irremediably joins the poles of polarization, the horizons of perspective.²⁶ There

¹⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 102.

¹⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 102.

²⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 104, 103. See Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 147-49, for a fascinating discussion of this bodily spatiality and orientation.

²¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 103.

²²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 103. I consider the *moment* of unfurling more closely in my paper “The Torqued Horizon” (note 7).

²³Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 103.

²⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 104.

²⁵Again, I pull from Simondon, “Problem of Ontogenesis,” 5: “The individual would then be grasped as a relative reality, a certain phase of being that supposes a preindividual reality, and that, even after individuation, does not exist on its own, because individuation does not exhaust with one stroke the potentials of preindividual reality. Moreover, that which the individuation makes appear is not only the individual, but also the pair individual-environment.”

²⁶In this, we avoid Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism in *After Finitude: An Essay*

are no mystical depths to be tabulated here; instead, in sensation, in the labour of its operation, and in its study, we discover a legible surface that pre-exists our conscious attention and in which our attention is inscribed, a contiguous subject matter that traverses the interiority of the subject and the exteriority of its world, behaving like a kind of *ergodic literature*, demanding that it be *achieved* in order for it to be read.²⁷

As such, the body now appears to our inquiry as, in Merleau-Ponty's words, a "strange signifying machine."²⁸ This does not mean that the body is some transcendental power *placing* significations in the world, organizing the raw matter of the world according to its categories, but rather that the body *works upon* the world *in the manner of* signification.²⁹ The world is suffused with the "motor field" of the body, or put otherwise, the world-for-a-body *is* a motor field, a virtuality of the real that appears to the body as that body's own material possibility.³⁰ Accordingly, the body does not exist *in-itself*, but exists as (its) *there* (to borrow a Heideggerian phrase), as potentiality and "projection."³¹ This is "a function deeper than vision, and also deeper than touch"; projection and the motor field describe "the subject's living region, that opening up to the world that ensures that objects currently out of reach nevertheless count for the normal subject, that they exist as tactile for him and remain part of his motor universe."³² Furthermore, this means that the living body's concrete existence in the world is, like the world, suffused with a *real virtuality*—indeed, the living body "*is* this power itself."³³ The living body's very constitution signifies the opening, unfurling, upsurging possibility of *newness* at the very heart of the in-itself: it is the "perpetual taking up of fact and chance by a reason that

on the Necessity of Contingency, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008): 4. We are not trapped within the relation body-world—but we must start here. There cannot be an "after" finitude without first describing it. Merleau-Ponty is conducting precisely such a description in *Phenomenology of Perception*. Later, Merleau-Ponty will in fact note that because "consciousness must rely on a previously constructed 'world of thought,' there is always a depersonalization at the heart of consciousness . . . [Consciousness] can only be consciousness by playing upon significations given in the absolute past," or in Meillassoux's terms, in the *ancestral* (139).

²⁷For "contiguity" and "subject matter" see, respectively, Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For "ergodic literature," see Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 114.

²⁹Merleau-Ponty entirely reconfigures the concept of the transcendental: "we have discovered that which is truly transcendental, which is not the collection of constitutive operations through which a transparent world, without shadows and without opacity, is spread out in front of an impartial spectator, but rather the ambiguous life where the *Ursprung* of transcendences takes place" (382). In the body's possession of a past and a world (its *facticity*), it encounters an "actual transcendence," an intimate possession that pre-exists its own appearing. The body, simultaneously, *is* a transcendence *toward* that which transcends it, overflowing its boundaries through the modality of *projection*, which "opens the world to me through a perspective" (382).

³⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 119.

³¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 115.

³²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 119.

³³Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 123.

neither exists in advance of this taking up, nor without it.”³⁴

To conclude this analysis of our bodily being, then, we see that “the life of consciousness,” the experience of our *lived* and *living bodies*, “is underpinned by an ‘intentional arc’ that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all these relationships.”³⁵ The intentional arc “creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence, and the unity of sensation and motricity,” and yet, this arc is in no way characterized by the *substance* of a “power,” “*eidos*,” or “invariant.”³⁶ The intentional arc is a dynamism, a “kinetic melody.”³⁷ But, as such, the intentional arc, our “original intentionality,”³⁸ is also subject to “disintegration,” “pathological weakening,” and “foreign intervention.”³⁹ The transcendental cogito cannot get sick, but bodies can. We exist “originarily not [as] an ‘I think that,’ but rather [as] an ‘I can,’” and this condition *as* possibility necessarily entails the possibility of *failure*.⁴⁰ My “experience [*éprouver*]” is a *test*, a *challenge*, a *proof*—it is something to be worked out and achieved.⁴¹ I signify the realization of a possibility and the possibility of a realization—but also, the possibility of a *disaster*. My very existence is a risk, a wager—and so, with Merleau-Ponty, we discover “a new sense of the word ‘sense’” in the very contingency of our situation as potentiality and projection, as the “wake” of virtuality in the midst of the in-itself, profoundly vulnerable but utterly meaningful: an irreducible “knot of relations.”⁴²

If we apply this sense of the lived body to the experience of the body at work in *The Last of Us*, we see how the body operates in the game as a structuring thematic, investing gameplay with a tactile significance and dynamism that is all too infrequently encountered in games today. To draw out this quality of *The Last of Us*, I will employ some terminology from Dan Lowe’s animation analysis of *The Last of Us Part II*, tracing back the refinements of the sequel to their shape in the original game.

As Lowe demonstrates, Naughty Dog’s animation is characterized by a remarkable amount of “blending” and “coverage,” to the point that transitions between different animation-sets are often “seamless.” NPCs (non-player characters) move through their environments with high levels of “awareness,” navigating at variable speeds and along lines that do not plainly indicate a scripted path (except, of course, when that character is in fact scripted to be patrolling an

³⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 129. We might also use Merleau-Ponty’s terms “sedimentation” and “spontaneity” in the place of “fact” and “chance” (132).

³⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.

³⁶Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 137, 123.

³⁷Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 135.

³⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 139.

³⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 138-139.

⁴⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 139.

⁴¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146.

⁴²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 483.

area—and even then, their movement is varied and nuanced). For Lowe, this type of movement indicates the thickness of a rich “blend-space,” which in turn indicates an “extremely dense” animation-driven world, as opposed to the empty rigidity and gaminess of movement in a physics-driven world (which he describes as “physics capsules” moving on a “nav-mesh”—think careening billiards balls on a billiards table). Paradoxically, it is in physics-driven games that player and NPC movement appears the *least* weighty, often characterized as ‘floaty’ by players.⁴³ *The Last of Us*, on the contrary, being animation-driven, context-full, and radically dynamic, is able to convey a far greater amount of weight to its play, which, as Lowe remarks with respect to *The Last of Us Part II*, makes the various ludic scenes that the player navigates actually feel like *real places*.

The tactile feedback that this sort of gameplay creates extends far beyond the haptic vibrations of the controller. If we briefly return to Merleau-Ponty, the thickness of the play-experience in *The Last of Us*, as opposed to the *thinness* of physics-based (or, for Merleau-Ponty, “mechanistic”) gameplay in other games, effectively plugs into the player’s own motor universe, extending the “elementary power of sense-giving (*Sinngebung*)” from the player’s physical body into the real virtuality of the game-space.⁴⁴ Joel’s and Ellie’s possibilities become the *player’s* possibilities, not as abstract data, as intellectual *as-ifs*, but as *real projections* of the player’s lived body, welding a doubly animate and animated body from this strange signifying loop. The “motor consecration” that normally establishes a habit in the lived body is, in the instance of play, an instantaneous echo of itself, a synchronic haunting: when the player first pushes Joel to mantle over an obstacle, the animated habit *engages* and the player discovers in that moment that this is both a possibility for Joel and a possibility of the play itself, a possibility *for* the player. Her own body “‘catches’ (*kapiert*) and ‘understands’ the movement” of Joel’s body in a single stroke.⁴⁵ Joel’s movement does not *represent* the possibility of movement for the player in the player’s own life; rather, Joel’s possibility *is* the player’s possibility. Similarly, when the player begins to play as Ellie later in the game, the player quickly discovers that the possibility of mantling does not have the same motor significance for her as it does for Joel, and thus neither does it have the same significance for the player. Ellie moves her body differently than Joel does; she is more agile but less muscular; her motor possibilities have a different profile, structuring the world around her differently than the player experiences with Joel. This is seen in close-quarters combat as well, where the possibilities for violence and harm play out much differently for the two playable characters. The sense of the world for Joel and Ellie is *different*; it is the same world, but its *navigable structure* is oriented along different virtual lines. In other games, Joel and Ellie would merely be different avatars, ‘skins’ covering over the same basic physics-engine.

⁴³For instance, The Elder Scrolls games, most recently the enormous critical and commercial success, *Skyrim* (2011), have often been accused of this ‘floatiness.’ These games are lore-dense and narrative-heavy, with much to praise, but when it comes to movement and world-interaction there is a lack of heft and friction that detracts from the play-experience.

⁴⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 143.

⁴⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

They would *appear* different but their possibilities would be the same.⁴⁶ In *The Last of Us*, however, the appearance *is* the difference: Joel’s *lived body* and Ellie’s *lived body* are *inserted* in the world differently; the body-world interface is tangibly distinct for each character, and the player *experiences* this difference in play through the intersection of the motor universe of the game with the motor universe of the player’s own body, concentrated in the *distal* term of the controller that is phenomenally bound with the *proximal* milieu of the body.⁴⁷ Certainly, Joel and Ellie are well-drawn characters with well-written dialogue and well-plotted narrative arcs (and there is much to say about *The Last of Us* at a narrative level). But the sense of each character as a *unique existence*, as an *animate person*, is built upon the dynamic foundation of their sense-giving bodies. This sense requires no “explicit calculation,” Merleau-Ponty would say;⁴⁸ it is *felt*. For Joel, for Ellie, their *own bodies* are “voluminous powers and the necessity of a certain free space,”⁴⁹ and for the player, Joel and Ellie do not *represent* such bodies—they *are* these bodies; they are *experienced as* these bodies. They are *real virtualities*, and the player *is them*.

Now, to be clear, none of this is to say that *The Last of Us* is the only game to operate in such a way. The lived body of the player remains the same in its basic vital constitution, which means that, to a degree, *all* games are experienced in this way. But as signifying machines, games, like bodies, have the capacity for *failure*. It has been my contention, here, that *The Last of Us* is particularly successful in this project of bodily signification, uniquely *catching* the player in her body and giving her play a *lived sense* that *indwells* the lived sense of the playable characters. To consider this notion of indwelling further, which I draw from the thought of the Michael Polanyi, and to follow the prior line of reasoning to its conclusion, we can say that *The Last of Us* deploys a thematic of the body that *strengthens* or *intensifies* the pre-existent contiguity of bodies in play, and indeed, makes the tacit structure of this thematic explicit (ludically and narratively) through the construction of and alternation between the *differently formed bodies* that the player indwells through play (most directly experienced in the “Winter” section of the game). As Polanyi argues, the “performer,” or here, the playable character, “co-ordinates his moves by dwelling in them as parts of his body, while the watcher,” or here, the player, “tries to correlate these moves by seeking to dwell in them from outside. [The player] dwells in these moves by interiorizing them.”⁵⁰ Through play, the moves become the player’s *own*. The

⁴⁶This is, in fact, how multiplayer in *The Last of Us* feels.

⁴⁷For “proximal” and “distal” see Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 10.

⁴⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144.

⁴⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 145.

⁵⁰For “indwelling,” see again Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 30: “The performer co-ordinates his moves by dwelling in them as parts of his body, while the watcher tries to correlate these moves by seeking to dwell in them from outside. He dwells in these moves by interiorizing them.” The movements *become my own* through this interiorization or indwelling of them. In the same way that my awareness inhabits the tool that I use (for instance, my consciousness in using a hammer is located at the end of the hammer as I swing it; it does not hover over my body, pronouncing that “I swing a hammer”), so too does my awareness inhabit the *performed*

player *dwells within them*. In the same way that my awareness inhabits the tool that I use—for instance, taking up residence in the head of the hammer that I swing, rather than hovering above it and determining this activity through statements of fact—so too does my awareness inhabit the *performed movement* that I witness, and here, that I *play*. Joel moves, Ellie moves, and I move *as* Joel, *as* Ellie. I am *there*; I am *transported*; I am *put into play*; I live, I move, I fight, I die—my body is *put into question* with the bodies on the screen, and I find myself there, discovered in the vulnerability, the opening and openness, of those bodies’ movements, those bodies that have become my own. As such, we can consider *The Last of Us* to be a radically realistic game, insofar as it deconstructs the prevailing notion of realism in games as the *rule of physics*, wherein play is determined only by abstract quanta. Indeed, it is due to the *increased* craft or artifice of Naughty Dog’s design, the fact that they do not leave the experience of the game up to the chance of physics, but structure the world of the game through a dense system of interacting animations, that the game feels *so real*. Naughty Dog’s realism does not create a representative regime of an ‘objective’ world through which the player-character might float, weightlessly and without friction; the play itself involves the player in a motor universe—thick, dense, and full of bodily signification—that is contiguous with the player’s own, a virtual extension of it in the same way that the motor universe outside of the game is *always* a virtual extension, a projection, of the body’s lived space. I do not *merely* play—I am, myself, “at stake in the game from the outset.”⁵¹

But what of *The Last of Us: American Dreams*? How does the *bodily play* of *The Last of Us* translate to the comics medium? Certainly, there remains an ergodic quality to comics and graphic novels, insofar as the format requires greater bodily involvement (due to their size) than do typical printed books, and a different modality of reading than mere line-scanning and page-turning (or page-scrolling on digital platforms). The comics-form is indeed distinct in the bodily ways that it involves its readers.

This distinctness does not tell us, however, how the game, *The Last of Us*, is translated in its dynamic specificity (successfully or unsuccessfully) into the more static form of graphic narrative (to bracket out the visual kinetics of reading comics at this time). In the same way that *The Last of Us* is not unique in *catching* the player’s body, but is simply more effective than most games at doing so, so too might *all* comics be said to catch and organize the reader’s body in the specific visual mode of *reading-comics*; this general mode is not what I wish to describe today. Rather, I want to try here, with the remainder of my time, to locate the *bodily thematic* of *The Last of Us* as it persists, much or little, changed or unchanged, in the prequel comic, *The Last of Us: American Dreams*.

movement that I witness. I am *there*; I am *transported* ; I dance; I live; I fight—my body is *put into question* with the body on display, and I find myself there, discovered in the vulnerability, the opening and openness, of its movements.

⁵¹I borrow this phrase from Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 351-70, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978): 352.

The first hint that the co-creators of the comic are sensitive to this thematic is the mutability of Ellie’s appearance. In the first pages of the graphic novel we are presented with two distinct drawings of Ellie: one by Faith Erin Hicks in her more “cartoony”⁵² style, and one by Julián Totino Todesco in what I will cautiously label a more ‘realistic’ style—which is only to say, a style that more closely approximates Ellie’s *appearance* in the game. This juxtaposition highlights a certain *virtuality* to Ellie’s form and a careful attention to the fact of her *insertion* in the world *as a body*, or, in a different phenomenological phrase, her *appearing*—the always ongoing *process* of her appearance. In Hicks’s drawings, at first, Ellie is rendered as childlike, her head and eyes exaggerated and round and her frame diminutive. She has an almost ‘cute’ proportionality that highlights the constant vulnerability of her position. But, as the narrative progresses, Ellie’s features become more angular, making her appear older and, by extension, more capable, more at ease in the world—even when she is not, in fact, at ease at all. In scenes of violence (particularly in chapter four), her features take on a purposive thrust that is noticeably different from the rounded lines of Hicks’s earlier pages. As a supplement to Hicks’s illustrations, Todesco’s art for the chapter-breaks serves to remind us of the character we know from the game, who appears much older than Hicks’s Ellie but is actually no more than a year older than her graphic novel self. Through these variations, the artwork of *The Last of Us: American Dreams* effectively ushers us into the *inside* of Ellie’s experience, achieving a similar result to what Naughty Dog accomplished through the subtleties of character animation and the deliberate alternation between bodily animation-forms in the “Winter” section of the game. Ellie’s appearance in the graphic novel is *contextual*, contiguous with the projection of her possibilities and the changes therein over the course of the narrative. The interface between her body and the world is *legibly* transformed as she grows and learns through her experiences. As she learns to read the world differently, so too do we learn to read the meanings of her features differently. Her age does not change nearly enough to explain the changes in Hicks’s depiction of her, and, along with the significantly different style of Todesco’s art, we are led to conclude with Merleau-Ponty that, just as there are “*several ways for a body to be a body*,” so too are there several ways for Ellie to be Ellie.⁵³ We must learn to read these ways, in all of their “physiognomic” difference, in the same way that Ellie must learn to *live* them, which is the same way we learn to live *differently* as Joel and Ellie in the game.⁵⁴

The second hint that the artwork of *The Last of Us: American Dreams* provides us as to the bodily thematic here in question is the construction of vulnerability through *perspective* that Hicks achieves through her drawings. As just noted, Ellie’s appearance in *The Last of Us: American Dreams* is highly mutable

⁵²Hicks herself describes her art in this way. See Jesse Schedeen’s interview with Hicks and Druckmann at IGN, <https://ca.ign.com/articles/2013/04/09/expanding-the-saga-of-the-last-of-us>.

⁵³Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 125.

⁵⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 134.

and context-dependent (with a distinct trajectory in this context-dependency over time). In the same way that Ellie's features are exaggerated contiguously with her possibilities, so too does Hicks exaggerate her *stature* with respect to the possibilities of other characters, bending perspective to render clear the interactional dynamic between Ellie and those she encounters. Again, early in the graphic novel, we see Ellie constantly craning her neck to look up at the people and buildings around her. Hicks consistently inclines the angle between Ellie and these looming figures, sometimes to such a degree that Ellie's sizing seems *wrong* in relation to them. We see this quite clearly in a three-panel series depicting an interaction between Ellie and Riley at the end of chapter one. Ellie is once again craning her neck upward, here to look at the presumably much taller Riley. In the next panel, however, we see the two of them from the side, eyes locked, with only a small difference in height between them. The angle of Ellie's gaze in the first panel now appears wrong. But then, in another turn, the third panel reinstates this angle of perspective, with Riley looking down on Ellie at the same angle from which Ellie had looked up at her. We have two superimposed constructions of the same scene, one from the subject-position of Ellie and one from an external position that in fact obscures Ellie's distinct lived space. Through this subtle spatial torsion Hicks is able to capture something of Ellie's experience in the world at a bodily level, without resorting to narrative or expository strategies to make this experience explicit. The reader is forced to read these panels *through* Ellie's experience. Where the game uses animation to differently configure the possibilities of its playable characters, and so draws attention to this meaningful difference, the comic uses the exaggeration of perspective to position its primary character, Ellie, in the distinctive possibilities of her own bodily being-in-the-world, so calling into question our own perspective, as readers, on these possibilities.

It is significant, then, that the graphic novel closes with a scene of Ellie clutching close the switchblade that belonged to her mother and which Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies, gives her near the end of the book. This is the same switchblade Ellie wields in the game to great effect, the same switchblade that distinguishes her close-quarters combat mechanics from Joel's so distinctly. Where the big and burly Joel only ever uses expendable shivs as knives (a more obviously 'gamey' balancing decision on Naughty Dog's part), Ellie's switchblade is unlimited in use. Where Joel overpowers enemies with sheer brawn, Ellie strategically targets their weak points, using her superior agility and small size to deadly ends. It is no wonder that the gameplay portion of the trailer for *The Last of Us Part II* begins with an extremely graphic close-up of Ellie silently killing a marauder with this same knife. It is no wonder, likewise, that the *The Last of Us: American Dreams* closes on an image of Ellie and this knife. The switchblade becomes an extension of her possibilities, an extension of the multiple potentialities of her body, and a profound symbol of the plasticity of her (and our) bodily being-in-the-world. The switchblade is not some object to be used by Ellie as if by some abstract power (check dexterity to use switchblade; do x amount of damage with switchblade); it creates a new *opening* on to the world, it discloses the world to Ellie, and to

us, in new ways, and consequently, discloses our hybrid body, this welding of player and character, in new ways as well.

Through these two mediums in which the world of *The Last of Us* has been explored, we encounter a consistent bodily thematic that recognizes the body as *dynamic situationality*, *plastic contextuality*, and *radical possibility*: in short, what I provisionally refer to as the *body in form*. Living bodies cannot be compacted into determinate, discrete objects. Living bodies have a *world*; they do not float across a causal mesh but *dwell, struggle, and labour* within a profoundly dense milieu of intersecting perspectives, projections, and *enframings* that constitute the collective but (in the last instance) incommensurable virtuality of *lived space*. Naughty Dog's craft is such that they effectively catch their players in this space, as their bodies, tapping into the material experience of being a body-in-the-world in a way that few other developers have managed. Furthermore, through the careful counterposition of Joel's and Ellie's bodies in "Winter," Naughty Dog takes this element of their craft and makes it *thematic*, a theme which Hicks then takes up in her illustration of *The Last of Us: American Dreams*. Thus, we can say in closing that *The Last of Us* would not be what it is without this dynamic foundation of the animate body, and that the characterization and dialogue and plotting that operate at the narrative level of the game find in the animate body a rich and fertile spring of significations to draw from and indeed, to work within.

To play *The Last of Us* is to *learn* to be a body, and to learn to be a body *differently*—open, vulnerable, and incomplete, but in so being, singularly *irreducible*.