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# Metaphysical Imagination in the Flesh:

## Hepburn with de Bruyckere

Pauline von Bonsdorff

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### 1 Introduction

On the day I received the invitation to contribute to the symposium on Ronald W. Hepburn's legacy, I was invited to give a talk at the opening of an exhibition of the contemporary Belgian artist Berlinde de Bruyckere.<sup>1</sup> My intuition was that it might be fruitful to explore them together.

De Bruyckere's art is about violence, death, war, passion, love and sexuality; informed and inspired by classical myths and the Christian tradition. As I will show later, her work suggests a strong analogy between humans and the animate world, both animals and plants. On the other hand, there are strong paradoxes in her work. One is between the apparent violence and suffering in many of her works and the tenderness they communicate. Another is the fusion of life and death, where creatures that in one way are undoubtedly dead at the same time look expressive and alive. These paradoxes stimulate our imagination, perhaps realizing what Hepburn termed 'necessarily incomplete' 'aesthetic transcendence'.<sup>2</sup>

An important shared quality of Hepburn's philosophy and de Bruyckere's art is their existential *nisus*. Hepburn explored issues of continuing importance in human life, and recognised that the thinking individual is part of a larger setting of nature. Second, while he is widely known as a pioneer of environmental aesthetics, as he describes the aesthetic experience of nature and of art, there are more and more fundamental similarities as compared to differences. In both cases, aesthetic experience is a synthesising, multileveled and reciprocal activity where imagination plays an important part. And when Hepburn writes about imagination, whether metaphysical, cosmic, religious,

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1 The exhibition was at the Sara Hildén Museum in Tampere, Finland, 10 February – 20 May 2018.

2 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Time-Transcendence and Some Related Phenomena in the Arts' in idem, *Wonder and Other Essays: Eight Studies in Aesthetics and Neighbouring Fields* (Edinburgh, 1984), 108–30, 127–8.

or concrete, he typically gives aesthetic experience a central role. Similarly, de Bruyckere brings art and nature together: hers is in many ways an art of and with nature, suggesting our belonging among and similarities with other creatures. Third, both Hepburn and de Bruyckere work with religious and cultural traditions in exploring existential issues, but without confessing any particular faith.



*No Life Lost II* (2015). Horse skin, wood, glass, fabric, leather, blankets, iron, epoxy, 237.5 x 342.9 x 188 cm. By courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © S. Hildén Museum and Jussi Koivunen

The metaphysical imagination that I want to address deals, to speak with Hepburn, with ‘how the world ultimately is’<sup>3</sup> in a sense which includes both the structure of the world and values. Because it is imagination, it does not build a theory, but rather constitutes an open-ended chain of reflection and contemplation. I argue that de Bruyckere’s art opens a space exactly for such imagination. It is metaphysical ‘in the flesh’ in a literal sense, because flesh plays a central role in her work. However, flesh has a wider sense as well, developed by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his later

3 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination’, *Environmental Values*, 5 (1996), 191–204, 191.

work,<sup>4</sup> where he speaks of the flesh of the world and refers to the dynamic and elemental structure of the life-world. The dynamic of visible and invisible indicates a depth dimension of our life-world, one where meanings, values, experiences are on hold (in the invisible) rather than actually present to us in a particular moment of focused awareness. Imagination, as a reciprocal movement between human being and world, feeds on this flesh and is nourished by it.

In this paper, I explore affinities between Hepburn, Merleau-Ponty and de Bruyckere, whose art raises the initial questions. Her works highlight analogies between animals, plants and humans – in suffering but also as subject to care. They are cultural artefacts constituted as much by their physical forms and materials as by the narratives that support them and that they transform. Moreover, the works suggest reversibility and interdependence between observer and work. Having presented de Bruyckere’s recent art, I discuss flesh in its literal, religious and philosophical sense from an agnostic and existential standpoint. I then move on to an analysis of the varieties of metaphysical imagination in Hepburn, and suggest that our predicament – to be ‘in nature and part of nature’<sup>5</sup> – has gained more urgency today as a context for metaphysical imagination. Flesh and metaphysical imagination provide the background for addressing the paradoxical and moving character of de Bruyckere’s art. Here Hepburn’s ‘life-enhancement’ is a key concept. It encompasses both the vitality of aesthetic experience and how art can ‘prompt’ us to act in ways that serve life beyond personal interests.<sup>6</sup>

## 2 An art of suffering

De Bruyckere’s art comprises three-dimensional works (installations or sculptures) that either use or mimic organic materials, such as horses, cowhides, trees, or recycled waste from the cultural realm, including horse collars and old wallpaper, but also delicate drawings, often of human figures, skin or flowers. A striking feature is the intimate interlacing of life and death. Among the works are representations of human bodies without heads or faces, images

4 See, in particular, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible* (1964; Paris, 1991); translated as *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, 1968).

5 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’ in idem, *Wonder*, 9–35, 13.

6 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic’ in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic. Collected Essays on Art and Nature* (Edinburgh, 2001), 16–37, 18.

of separate body parts, stacked animal hides, or trunks and branches of trees severed from their site. At the same time, the works seem to be alive: an impression that arises from the delicate use of colour or the expressive postures of the creatures, often at rest but sometimes in positions that suggest experiences of pain and violence. Importantly, the moments conveyed by the works are part of historical or mythological narratives. For this reason, the suffering we perceive is individualised and has meaning as part of that narrative, which is not to say that the suffering is deserved or legitimate. In addition, despite the apparent violence that has hit the figures an overall atmosphere of peace, tenderness and dignity surrounds them.

In 2000, de Bruyckere was commissioned to do work for the *In Flanders Fields* Museum in Ypres.<sup>7</sup> Earlier she had exhibited representations of tormented and mutilated human bodies but realised that this would be too much in a context that commemorated the vast sufferings of the First World War. Instead, she created an installation that foregrounded the horses that were killed and injured in the war. In preparing the works, she co-operated with a horse clinic. When a horse had to be put to death, she had arranged with the clinic and the owner to get the body. The animal was arranged in an expressive posture; a cast was made; and, finally, the individual horse's hide, mane and hoofs were used in the work. The horse sculptures have a certain similarity with death masks, although the artist created the situations they evoke. Like the death mask, the horse sculptures are imprints of a particular individual that just died. The death mask preserves the moment when someone has just passed away, which is also the time of the wake.

To address agony and suffering through the animal rather than the human is common in many cultural traditions, and the horse possesses particular cultural resonance. In myths and narratives from around the world, it is known as a wise, valiant and loyal companion to human warriors and workers.<sup>8</sup> It carries the human and pulls the baggage, but there is nothing aggressive about this prey and herd animal as such. On the contrary, horses are inherently

<sup>7</sup> The museum includes in its mission to 'present the story of the First World War in the West Flanders front region', Flanders Field Museum's *Mission*, <http://www.inlandersfields.be/en/practical/discover>, accessed 18 January 2019.

<sup>8</sup> A sign of the horse's importance is that we know by name many historical horses, such as Alexander the Great's Bukefalos, Napoleon's favourite stallion Marengo, and The Marshal of Finland's (Gustav Mannerheim's) mare Kate. Among literary horses, the Houyhnhnms in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* deserve special mentioning since they were by far the wisest of the peoples he met.

co-operative and kind; and they are completely innocent victims of war while humans, as a species, are not.

In some of the installations, the animal bodies are placed in cabinets. On the one hand, this reminds one of a *lit de parade*, exhibiting the corpse for a last farewell. Yet, in de Bruyckere's works, the bodies are not lying dead, rather they are caught in movement, seeking or holding a position, sometimes reminding of still images of dance. In addition, the piece of furniture frames the creatures within the world of the household: linen and blankets have been kept in cabinets, and such textiles often appear in de Bruyckere's work.<sup>9</sup> In one work, the horse is transformed into a dog-like animal, possibly a Kerberos in chains, where the chain appears to both support and fetter the animal: it keeps it in place and preserves it as it is at that moment.

Overall, the shining pelt and expressive postures make the creatures look alive, although they also look dying or dead, evidently because they lack some body parts. However, there are no open wounds even in the mutilated bodies. Thus, while the works bring mutilation into mind, they also invoke handicapped or just deviant bodies. The perception might also be of creatures that died but were sewn together in an act of love for the dead and for the living: a body shown for those who mourn, with respect for the sorrow. These interpretations do not compete, rather they alternate, deepening and enlarging what the works are about.

The series *Vannege een Tere Huid* (because skin is sensitive) continues the theme of the death mask but takes it in a collective, anonymous direction. De Bruyckere observed how workers at the slaughterhouse carefully and almost solemnly stacked the hides of slaughtered cows on top of each other. What then appears, in a shadowlike way, is one version of the form of the animal body. In her works, however, there is no real skin: the heaps have been re-created with iron, steel, epoxy, wood, leather, textile and wax: the presentation is mediated rather than straightforward. De Bruyckere has described her work as translation: the rendering of the feeling of an experience in another form.

In the non-human natural world, mammals are closest to us. As a rule, we are able to communicate on a basic level with companion and production animals like horses, cows and dogs who grow up in close contact to humans. In a series of works originating in her contribution to the Venice Biennale in 2013, *Cripplewood*, de Bruyckere suggests an even more fundamental

<sup>9</sup> There is an affinity to Joseph Beuys, who likewise approached war through animals and organic materials, including woollen blankets.

connectedness of humans and the rest of nature; one that goes beyond the animal kingdom.<sup>10</sup> She used a fallen elm tree as a model, cast a copy, and assembled it from parts painted with wax colours.<sup>11</sup> The branches now appear like human or animal limbs, with skin, flesh and bones (but no cover of hair or clothes) transparently perceivable in their precise combinations. We recognise them as limbs although there are no recognisable body parts. The limb- and flesh-like quality of de Bruyckere's arboreal works is further emphasised by how the tree is nursed and mended. Dirty rags are clumsily tied around the joints, as on a body coming out of a war zone where the best nursing materials are not at hand. Whether the body is still alive or dead is, again, not clear.



*Embalmed – Twins II* (2017). Wax, fabric, leather, rope, wood, iron, epoxy, 190 x 145 x 570 cm. By courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mirjam Devriendt

10 The Belgian pavilion was curated by the 2003 Nobel laureate for literature, J. M. Coetzee. He describes de Bruyckere's art in these terms: 'her sculptures explore life and death – death in life, life in death, life before life, death before death – in the most intimate and most disturbing way. They bring illumination, but the illumination is as dark as it is profound.' *Designboom* 'berlinde de bruyckere cripplewood at venice art biennale', <http://www.designboom.com/art/berlinde-de-bruyckere-cripplewood-at-venice-art-biennale/>, accessed 7 May 2018.

11 De Bruyckere describes her work with wax, from the late 1990s, as being primarily about painting. Among her influences, she mentions Lucas Cranach the Elder. *In the studio of Berlinde de Bruyckere*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZotDGJONHJM>, accessed 18 January 2019.

The analogy of the human and arboreal is further explored in *Inside me II* (2011), also modelled on tree branches and painted with wax colours. This time the branches suggest intestines, while the title could refer to our innermost being or subjectivity. There is a hint of irony here, perhaps directed at the Romantic tradition and its cult of the self.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the work is not materialist. There is indeed something inside me: the metabolism that sustains us in intimate interdependence with the natural world, our source of life.



*Inside me II* (2010–11). Wax, rope, cotton, wool, wood, iron, epoxy, 82 x 225 x 88 cm. By courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mirjam Devriendt

De Bruyckere's works on animals and trees are kin to her work on human figures. She has explored themes, narratives and imagery particularly from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but also from the Christian tradition. A series of works take their point of departure in the story of the Cumaean Sibyl, who refused the love of Apollo. The god took revenge by condemning her to a slow death: she withered away and shrunk slowly, then was put into a jar until the only thing left of her was her voice. The original jar was probably a clay *ampulla*

12 In his 'The Arts and the Education of Feeling and Emotion', Hepburn pointed out that the 'traditional view of emotions as inner feelings is inadequate.' In idem, *Wonder*, 88–107, 88.

while the one used by de Bruyckere is of glass.<sup>13</sup> In her series of Sibyls, what remains is not a voice but a piece of tormented flesh – the remnant of a mutilated body that again seems oddly alive. That the passions can burn and destroy is emphasised by the literally fire-burnt materials in some of the Sibyls and in drawings of faces where black holes replace the eyes.

Flesh is however more than vulnerability, fragility and finitude: it is eroticism and playfulness as well. De Bruyckere's art includes drawings of fruit- or flowerlike genitals, bringing out the affinity between human embodiment and natural forms in a more playful way. These tender sides of flesh are important since positive sensations, perception and enjoyment, in their many varieties, contribute as much as experiences of pain and effort to the first-hand knowledge we have of the flesh that is ours and a shared predicament with fellow natural creatures. Positive, negative and ambiguous experiences, further moulded by cultural and religious imagery, create the ground for our immediate reactions, imaginations and reflections in the face of flesh such that it appears in de Bruyckere's art.

### 3 Flesh

Flesh is an ambiguous word. On the one hand, flesh is the living tissue of humans and other mammals; on the other hand, it is flesh as in the butcher's shop, the flesh of slaughtered animals.<sup>14</sup> These two instances of flesh – where the second is still very close to the first – present themselves simultaneously and as inseparable in de Bruyckere's works: the flesh of a living body or a body that was alive just a little while ago. In addition to animals, flesh in de Bruyckere's art, however, extends towards plants. Moreover, we perceive the works as of flesh precisely because they look alive: blood seems to flow, or has recently flown, through veins in the branches. On a physiological level, this underlines the affinity among everything that is alive. Hepburn acknowledged the 'network of affinities, of analogous forms, that spans the inorganic or the organic world, or both.' And he pointed out that '[t]his is not necessarily a "humanizing" of nature; it may be more like a "naturizing" of the human

13 Glass resonates, whether intentionally or unintentionally, with Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963).

14 De Bruyckere's father kept a butcher's shop and was a hunter. In an interview, she recalls her dread of having to help him move the catch when he returned from hunting trips. *In the studio of Berlinda de Bruyckere*.

observer.<sup>15</sup> In animals and plants, cells breathe; renew themselves and die; and blood or sap and other fluids flow through the tissues that constitute us as living creatures. Flesh is matter in movement: a movement from within, a constant change.

In his late work, Edmund Husserl made a point of the existential fact that our bodies are not objects among objects, but intimately part of us as *lived* bodies: bodies that we both have and are.<sup>16</sup> There is a unique word for the lived body in German: *Leib*, which resonates with life, *das Leben*, while *Körper* can refer to all kinds of bodies, abstract or concrete, and in fact often refers to objects or bodies as dead.<sup>17</sup> Husserl wanted to make a fresh start of phenomenological philosophy from our actual, situated existence. The life-world, *die Lebenswelt*, is the world as experienced by us, in relation to us; historically formed by cultural and societal practices and personal experiences.<sup>18</sup> This is the actual ground of our being, the one that provides the conditions for thinking and acting, the place from which we think and act.

The idea of the lived body was radicalised by Merleau-Ponty in his last, unfinished work, *Le visible et l'invisible*, where flesh becomes a central figure for thinking existence in its constantly evolving imbrication with the world.<sup>19</sup> Not only does Merleau-Ponty suggest that we are flesh; the world is flesh as well. Here is an example of how he describes the relationship between body and world: 'the sensible mass that it [i.e., the body] is and the mass of the sensible [i.e., the world] wherein it [i.e., the body] is born through differentiation and towards which, as seeing, it remains open.'<sup>20</sup> The relationship is not given finally; instead, there is an ongoing exchange in the living tissue or 'element' that constitutes our world and us – in flesh.

15 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 21.

16 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (1970; Evanston, 1997).

17 DWDS *Das Wortauskunftssystem zur deutschen Sprache in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Leib>, <https://www.dwds.de/wb/K%C3%B6rper>, accessed 11 January 2019.

18 Husserl first used the term around 1918–20; at the same time as his student Martin Heidegger; Dermot Moran, 'From the Natural Attitude to the Life-World', in Lester Embree and Thomas Nenon (eds), *Husserl's Ideen* (Dordrecht, 2012), 105–124, 114–15.

19 Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, particularly the last chapter, 'L'entrelacs – le chiasme', 172–204.

20 *Ibid.*, 179. The translation by Lingis, in Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 136, is slightly changed.



*Sibylle II* (2015–16). Wax, leather, iron, wood, glass, epoxy, 59 cm x 23 x 46 cm. By courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © Mirjam Devriendt

Among the senses, Merleau-Ponty privileges vision and touch,<sup>21</sup> which does not mean that he excludes other senses.<sup>22</sup> One reason to privilege vision is that it has a special role for how we humans explore the world.<sup>23</sup> Another is the link between vision and cognition. The visible stands for what we are aware of, for where our attention is located, in a particular moment. That objects only become visible from a ground of the invisible therefore has a more general meaning: what we consciously perceive stands out from a larger

21 Merleau-Ponty's approach to perception can fruitfully be compared to Gibson's ecological theory of perception, cf. James J. Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston, 1966).

22 Vision has a special position throughout Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, from the early works on perception until his last phase. But alongside painting the temporal arts of music, film and language play a central role in his thinking from the 1950s. See, for example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* (Genève, 2011). Moreover, we should remember that perception in his thinking is a process, in other words primarily a verb, not a noun.

23 Compared to many other mammals, our hearing and our sense of smell are rather poor.

field of peripheral awareness.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, although this insight about the nature of perception may have been one starting point for the late Merleau-Ponty, he extends and elaborates the idea, and takes it far beyond its original context. The invisible is not only what we cannot see at a particular moment; it is the fecund elemental being of any structure of life, understanding or culture; it is where such structures are at home and from where we construct them. There is reciprocity and exchange between the visible and the invisible: the relationship is flexible and contingent on many things. In addition, the invisible engenders and supports the visible, which inhabits the invisible and is dependent upon it. Without the invisible there would be no visible, and no dynamics, change, development or life. Furthermore, the dynamic and reciprocal interdependence between the visible and the invisible holds true for all our expressive and symbolic practices, including language, where meaning arises from the tension of said and unsaid.<sup>25</sup> On a fundamental level, the relationship between visible and invisible is also the one between culture and nature. Flesh refers to this dynamic totality.

The historical and cultural constitution of both body and life-world is highly relevant for de Bruyckere's art. Merleau-Ponty often refers to the process of constitution, and to its results, as sedimentation. Layers of meaning are hidden as in the ground, invisible, yet affect the whole even when we do not know them. De Bruyckere, as I pointed out earlier, cherishes the individuality of a horse or a tree; and extends the sacredness of flesh as living matter to the natural world in its cycles of life and death, beyond the privilege of the human. The historical concreteness, including contingency, of the lifeworld is relevant also when contemplating other works by her, where she recycles old materials, such as furniture or tools. She draws on the reverse side of pieces of maps or tapestry, reminding the viewer that there is a material history even when it is unknown. Temporal depth is part of the flesh of the world.

Finally flesh in de Bruyckere's art resonates with the Christian tradition, its narratives and imagery; merged and influenced by mythological sources that deal with passion and finitude. She does not, however, emphasise the theological interpretations of her art but presents its tragedies as existential and universally valid reminders of the fatal risks we face in life. Religion provides

24 Among Merleau-Ponty's influences is Gestalt theory, which he discusses at length in *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945; Paris, 1992) and some earlier works.

25 See also Pauline von Bonsdorff, 'Emotion and language in Merleau-Ponty' in Ulrike M. Lütke (ed.), *Emotion in Language* (Amsterdam, 2015), 99–112. An excellent discussion of Merleau-Ponty's late thinking in relation to the 'image' is Mauro Carbone, *La chair des images: Merleau-Ponty entre peinture et cinéma* (Paris, 2011).

imagery and practices. In an interview, de Bruyckere concurs with the fifteenth century Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden, whose paintings offered churchgoers comfort and the opportunity to cry.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Merleau-Ponty uses terms such as spirit and flesh that resonate with the religious tradition, but frees them from any particular Christian connotations and carries them instead in a secular or agnostic direction.<sup>27</sup> For both, the key question is one of life rather than after-life, in a treatment that defies dualism.

#### 4 Metaphysical imagination

Both de Bruyckere and Merleau-Ponty use elements that are rooted in the Christian tradition – motives and narratives in de Bruyckere’s, concepts in Merleau-Ponty’s case – without emphasising the theological dimension. Still, in de Bruyckere’s art, the Christian elements evoke universal and topical conditions of the life of humans, animals and larger nature in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The stories and their artistic transformations enable us to imagine and contemplate experiences which, without some such treatment, would remain beyond our grasp, but which address us beyond any particular faith. In Merleau-Ponty, spirit and especially flesh are key notions in the new ontology he tried to articulate, and saw coming in the philosophy, arts and sciences of his own time. This ontology emphasises the inseparability of spirit and matter, imagination and reality, activity and passivity, to name some themes that are relevant here, and the dynamic, temporal and transformative relationships within them. It acknowledges life and nature as elemental conditions of human existence: not just encompassing but also constituting us from the very core of our being.

In philosophy, it is more common to treat metaphysics and ontology separately from imagination. Not so, for Hepburn, who approaches metaphysical, cosmic and religious thinking precisely in terms of the imagination, which ‘as such’ plays a central role ‘in the very construction of our perceived world, the *Lebenswelt*.’<sup>28</sup> Imagination is indispensable as a synthesising activity, which in

26 *In the studio of Berlinde de Bruyckere*.

27 Carbone points out that flesh in Merleau-Ponty is by no means just a Christian notion, cf. *La chair des images*, 62.

28 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Religious Imagination’ in Michael McGhee (ed.), *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge, 1992), 127–43, 127–8. Other papers that address imagination include his ‘Poetry and “Concrete Imagination”’: Problems of Truth and Illusion’ in idem, *Wonder*, 56–74; ‘Landscape and the Metaphysical

relation to everyday perception has the function of offering spatial, temporal, historical, cultural, etc. contexts of what is directly present, making a ‘world’ from a ‘sense-manifold’, to use Hepburn’s terms.<sup>29</sup> As the character of the imagination is to go beyond or transcend the immediately here and now, there is an affinity between imagination and metaphysics, cosmology or religion.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, as discussed by Hepburn, imagination in any of its varieties is close to the structure of aesthetic judgement as we know it from Kant: it is a free, reflective play of our mental faculties, which does not end in determinate judgment.<sup>31</sup> Hepburn often explores the varieties of imagination either through the arts or through landscape experience, with confluence between the aesthetic experience of nature and of art.<sup>32</sup>

Hepburn analyses the varieties of metaphysical imagination in a series of papers with a fine eye for the nuances and the overlaps between different thematic foci in addressing ‘how the world ultimately is’. Broadly, one can say that metaphysical imagination has two sides. On the one hand, there is the cosmic-scientific dimension and, on the other hand, the religious (or existential) dimension. While the cosmic-scientific and the religious-existential have different emphases, they also connect and overlap, partly because of their themes and partly because they are varieties of imagination’s synthesising activity. For this reason, metaphysical imagination is more than the sum of two sets of concerns.

How does Hepburn address cosmic and religious imagination? First, while metaphysical imagination, especially as cosmic-scientific, is checked by its relationship to what we can plausibly hold to be true about nature or the universe, this does not mean that it is a realm of certainty and knowledge. Here one could add that despite the rapid growth of scientific knowledge, the amount of what we do not know is still much bigger than what we know. Moreover, to synthesise what we know, to form one picture from the specialised fields of knowledge, is perhaps more demanding than ever, due to the increasing

Imagination’; and ‘Values and Cosmic Imagination’ in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 148–65. There is a phenomenological undercurrent in Hepburn’s thinking, manifested by his interest in and respect for actual experience.

29 Hepburn, ‘Religious Imagination’, 130.

30 Ibid., 129–30. However, Hepburn repeatedly points to the possible fallacies of imagination when left to itself.

31 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790; Hamburg, 1990), §§ 6–9.

32 ‘[I]here are important networks of interconnections between aesthetic experience of natural objects and works of art.’, Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Nature in the Light of Art’ in idem, *Wonder*, 36–55, 36.



complexity of both the manifold pictures within such a picture, as well as of the whole picture.<sup>33</sup> Second, while the cosmic dimension of metaphysical imagination comprises nature as a system and the universe as studied by the natural sciences, Hepburn points out that it is also about values. Cosmic imagination is ‘the mental appropriating of objects, events, processes or patterns perceived in nature-at-large [...] so as to apply them in articulating our own scheme of values [...] and in our quest for self-understanding.’<sup>34</sup> Cosmic imagination is, then, inseparable from the person who imagines. It is *about* the world; yet as an activity, it is firmly *in* the world.

The other dimension of metaphysical imagination is the religious. In his ‘Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life’, Hepburn describes how humans ‘attempt to relate themselves and their projects to a much wider context. Human rationality and the religious imagination persistently prompt us to reckon with, or take account of, the cosmic setting of human life.’<sup>35</sup> Seen ‘in non-theistic terms’, religious imagination is part of a larger complex of issues that have no final answer, at least in terms of what an individual can grasp. In his ‘Religious Imagination’, Hepburn describes the work of the imagination, in the religious context, in these terms:

To hold to, not to betray, the unconceptualizable, unimageable transfigurations of experience [...]: this can be seen as faithfulness to an inner religious logic, not an expression of scepticism. It is the logic that negates all substantializing and localizing of transcendence.<sup>36</sup>

He characterises this kind of thinking as ‘undogmatic, religious-agnostic faith’.<sup>37</sup> Michael McGhee’s observation that there are important distinctions between ‘religion’, ‘religious belief’, ‘belief in God’ and ‘belief in the existence of God’

33 Climate change is a good example of this. There is, for example, scientific evidence for the impact of many human activities on carbon emissions but no *full* knowledge about *all* the mechanisms that impact climate change.

34 Hepburn, ‘Values and Cosmic Imagination’, 148. In addition, it refers to ‘the synthesizing activity of the mind in our appraising of items in wider nature itself or as a whole’.

35 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life’ in idem, *Wonder*, 155–83, 171.

36 Hepburn, ‘Religious Imagination’, 132–3.

37 Ibid., 133. He adds, in a characteristic manner, ‘if it is to have any content [...] it can have no claim to exemption from philosophical *criticism*.’

is illuminating here.<sup>38</sup> Hepburn and McGhee agree that the meaningfulness of religious imagination and reflection is not ousted by a positive or negative answer to its rationality, especially if rationality means a strictly cognitive perspective, where questions of the certainty of knowledge and its criteria have priority. Faith is also practice and commitment, reminds McGhee.<sup>39</sup> For Hepburn, the central concept is imagination. He describes a religious-agnostic stance as one where, in religious imagination, the ‘transcending gesture’ is ‘endlessly’ repeated without ever becoming fixed in ‘dogma, which we would not immediately know to be deceptive’. The religious-agnostic option is one where we ‘live with the ambiguities’.<sup>40</sup> Metaphysical ambiguity is common in art that addresses existential themes and, as Hepburn shows, it can be part of the aesthetic experience of landscape.

Overall, religious imagination is meaningful beyond any particular religion, as a way of nourishing our engagement with existential themes. It confronts questions that religions address, often through narratives and the arts, about ultimate issues and fundamental values, and it reminds us of our responsibility, finitude and fragility. These are part of our existential situation. Religions still provide the richest source for reflections on them, also for non-theists, since material and immaterial religious culture includes a legacy of narratives and imagery about suffering, evil, love, birth, death and life, and moral values; as well as the idea that we are not the sole arbiters of good and evil. This is the kind of material de Bruyckere uses in her art, and it is part of the flesh of the world as suggested by Merleau-Ponty.

In addition to metaphysical imagination with its two emphases, the cosmic and the religious, Hepburn discusses a third type, namely ‘concrete imagination’. This is not an additional category, but an additional take on imagination, typical for the arts, and it shows how imagination for Hepburn, through its ‘*nisus* for going beyond’ seems always to have a metaphysical aspect. ‘If we are to appropriate the insight, the “truth” [of a work of art], our minds have to make leaps [...] to larger and different realities, and to discern the bearing of the one upon the other. Such leaps are pervasive in experience of the serious arts.’<sup>41</sup> Thus in aesthetic experience of some magnitude we reach beyond the

38 Michael McGhee, ‘Introduction’ in idem (ed.), *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, 1–8, 1.

39 Ibid. 1–4. This is most evident in Buddhism but holds for other religions as well. Thus, ‘Abrahamic faith [...] is not dependent upon prior rational deliberation about real existence’ (ibid., 3).

40 Hepburn, ‘Religious Imagination’, 131.

41 Hepburn, ‘Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic’, 18.

immediate life-world: the experience is sensuous, emotional and intellectual. Transcendence, however, by no means implies that we lose touch with the concrete life-world. As Hepburn emphasises elsewhere: '[i]t is only as dwellers among the objects of the world that we come to have the value-experiences we do have.'<sup>42</sup>

We might now ask what metaphysical imagination in its existential, moral, and scientific dimensions, and as 'religious-agnostic', might be about today. What do we think about when we turn towards 'how the world ultimately is', to our own place in the universe, and our responsibility for ourselves, and our co-inhabitants on earth? How does metaphysical imagination today resonate with the world, as we perceive it? While this is a complex question, it is both possible and meaningful to address it from the particular position, in space and time, where we are.

The perception of the role of humans on our planet has changed radically during the last decades. The term 'Anthropocene' was introduced in 2000 to indicate that the impact of human activities on the earth have reached a scale which is geologically significant, and might signal a new geological epoch. It includes erosion and sediment transport, changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere, oceans and soils, and altered environmental conditions throughout the biosphere.<sup>43</sup> In this situation, many intellectual and cultural currents – such as new materialism, post-humanism, animal rights movements, and veganism – turn away from a humanistic and anthropocentric worldview towards recognising the interdependence of humans with other species. Instead of focusing on the differences between *homo sapiens* and other species, similarities between humans and other creatures rise to the fore.<sup>44</sup> The ecosystem now appears as consisting of many overlapping systems, without a fixed order of priority.<sup>45</sup> One could argue that many urgent contemporary

42 Hepburn, 'Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life', 181.

43 Working Group on the 'Anthropocene', <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>, accessed 28 January 2019. The Working Group belongs to the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, a constituent body of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, which is part of the International Union of Geological Sciences.

44 See, e.g., Yuval Noel Harari, *Sapiens. A Brief History of Humankind*, trans. the author with John Purcell and Haim Watzman (London, 2014), which opens by pointing out that our own species, *homo sapiens*, was originally one of at least eight species of humans. Research on the cognitive and social competence of non-human animals is growing all the time, and so does our insights into how plants communicate.

45 Compare here Markus Gabriel's argument, in *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Berlin, 2013), that 'the world' does not exist: we should stop conceiving the world as one totality,

problems, such as climate change and the mass extinction of species, are ultimately consequences of misperceiving the position of humans in relation to other species and life on earth. From a moral or 'religious-agnostic' perspective, fundamental questions are about how to live and act in a way that contributes to steering the course of things towards less devastating consequences, or redressing the balance towards a healthier state.

Among the most important forms of metaphysical imagination today is the imagination about nature. Hepburn, who could not foresee its present urgency and the growing awareness of it, in fact suggests this, as his work testifies to the existential and metaphysical relevance of the aesthetic experience of nature. The landscape is a concrete setting, here and now, but also a cosmic setting for aesthetic reflection that comprises elements of both the beautiful and the sublime – with elements of enjoyment and harmony between subject and world as well as awareness of aspects that are beyond our grasp.<sup>46</sup> Nature is present to us on many levels and scales, from tiny details to large vistas, including temporal and dynamic elements such as approaching thunderclouds, and alternating standpoints, 'gestalts', and contexts.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, while the reflective experience of pondering one's own position in the larger whole often preoccupies Hepburn, he emphasises that 'we are *in* nature and part *of* nature'; 'earth-rooted'; 'connatural' with nature.<sup>48</sup> Yet he also describes the viewer as '*completing* the world', for example by perceiving a landscape with grazing wild animals in a way where 'their visible forms, sounds, the course of their lives, are brought together, synthesized by our imagination, understood, grasped, and valued.'<sup>49</sup> There is an intimate connection between perception and imagination, and the synthesis appears as a joint creation of an individual and a particular landscape. This is like Merleau-Ponty's flesh in two respects: first, the dynamic and reciprocal, co-creative character of the relationship of human being and world, and, second, the complex and intertwined relationship between humans and nature.<sup>50</sup>

because reality appears in manifold ways, in 'ontological provinces' or 'fields of sense'.

46 See, e.g., Hepburn, 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination'.

47 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty', 15.

48 Ibid. 13; Hepburn, 'Optimism, Finitude and the Meaning of Life', 182; idem, 'Trivial and Serious in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 1–15, 5.

49 Hepburn, 'Values and Cosmic Imagination', 163.

50 For the latter, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature* (Paris, 1995) Merleau-Ponty's thinking is, among other things, a continued dialogue with the life sciences.

## 5 Life-enhancement

Let us return to the central mystery and challenge of de Bruyckere's art: how does it communicate a sense of life despite death, of life that defies death aesthetically and as art? Above I described the figures' expressiveness and postures, the colouring that evokes living flesh, and the signs of nursing and support. Yet we also perceive that the figures cannot be alive, for they are mutilated, headless, uprooted. There is a paradox in what these works suggest to us.

Hepburn's notion of 'life-enhancement', in its several meanings, is useful here. I start with life-enhancement as part of the structure of aesthetic experience, and art's capacity to enliven the mind despite its at times gruesome subject matter. A second meaning, not explicitly discussed by Hepburn in the context of life-enhancement, is how art enhances life through providing occasions and company for emotional, existential or indeed metaphysical experiences. A third meaning points to how our beliefs, values, and behaviours can change through engaging with the arts. In the last case, it is not primarily the mind that is enlivened, but the larger setting of life is understood in new ways and reorganised, which may lead to enhancement in how we live and affect others. It is however important to remember that the different meanings and aspects of life-enhancement are simultaneously present and penetrate each other.

In his 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics', Hepburn discusses the vivifying effect of aesthetic experience, as 'the aesthetic object initiates a self-sustaining, "vital" activity on the part of the spectator'.<sup>51</sup> He quotes Kant, who described *Geist* or spirit "in an aesthetical sense" as "the animating [*belebende*] principle in the mind": it works upon material that "sets the mental powers into ... a play which is self-maintaining".<sup>52</sup> Hepburn describes a progression in Kant from 'particular enlivenings' of beautiful objects over 'sublime enlivenings' (with the realization of our freedom against phenomenal nature) to 'aesthetic ideas', where creative imagination 'puts reason "into motion [...]" towards an extension of thought that ... exceeds what can be laid

51 Ronald W. Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics' in idem, *The Reach of the Aesthetic*, 63–76, 66. In his 'The Arts and the Education of Feeling and Emotion', Hepburn refers to the 'emotion-revivifying power' and the 'imaginative vitality' of art, in idem, *Wonder*, 88–107, 95, 101.

52 Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics', 66. Double quotation marks indicate Hepburn's quotations from Kant.

hold of in that representation or clearly expressed".<sup>53</sup> Moreover, '[i]magination is given an "incentive to spread its flight over a whole host of kindred representations, that provoke more thought than admits of expression in a concept determined by words", once more "animating the mind by opening our for it a prospect into a field of kindred representations stretching beyond its ken".<sup>54</sup>

Importantly, in works of art with 'qualities initially discouraging to appreciation', the intensity of engagement is, according to Hepburn, often enhanced because of the appreciator's imaginative efforts. The resulting feeling can then be one of strong participation and co-creation, 'as if the music were emanating from the hearer's own imagination, his or her own creativity'.<sup>55</sup> Apparently, the 'initially discouraging' qualities can be of various kinds, from unexpected metaphors and unfamiliar stylistic features to representational or narrative content that challenges habitual patterns of thought or systems of value – as with works that may first seem everything but life-enhancing. Hepburn however points out that works which deal with 'agony, despair, death' can treat these themes in ways that are 'not depressive but zestful: the art-work is not itself crushed, defeated, extinguished by the defeat and extinction it contemplates. Art [...] shows most impressively its powers of life-giving, when it manages to "animate" even our imagination and anticipation of death'.<sup>56</sup> Not any kind of animation will do, however. Hepburn emphasises art's capacity to convey a truer picture of its subject matter, 'a less stereotyped and better-focused view [...] than we can normally manage'.<sup>57</sup>

Hepburn's analysis of the vivifying character of imagination as set in play by encounters with works of art, and how art can modify and enrich our understanding of the most sinister themes, illuminates the expressive dynamic of de Bruyckere's art. There is indeed a productive paradox around her work: no final concept, or answer, is reached. No meaning is given to suffering. The ideas and emotions that circulate in and around the work address our existential condition as finite beings, foregrounding how we share this earth with other finite creatures and plants; historical tragedies, especially the atrocities

53 Ibid., 67.

54 Ibid. Hepburn describes the 'temporal adventure' of the mind when it engages 'with the sensuous and the material' in music. 'Time-Transcendence and Some Related Phenomena in the Arts', 115–16.

55 Hepburn, 'Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics', 69. This may be a key to why we experience some works of art as 'real' or 'true'.

56 Ibid., 69–70.

57 Ibid., 73.

of war, myth and religion, their narratives and images of passion, death, and the contingencies that affect our choices.

Another meaning of life-enhancement through art is based on the relational aspects of aesthetic experience. Hoping that her works might offer comfort and consolation, and the opportunity to cry, de Bruyckere suggests that we can share feelings *with* art, whether in the company of other people or alone with the work. There are several aspects to this. One is related to the character of feeling, another to the work as a companion, and a third to the presence of the artist in the work.

As for the first aspect, Hepburn is critical of the ‘traditional view of emotions as inner feeling’.<sup>58</sup> He points out that ‘what we call the “inner” life is substantially constituted by the images, metaphors, analogies we draw from external nature and re-apply to the articulating of our emotions, feelings, attitudes’.<sup>59</sup> The circulation of images between self and world, where the world (nature, works of art) is likewise perceived-and-imagined is congenial with Merleau-Ponty’s flesh: a flesh of the world, in the world, that we partake in and modify through perceiving, communicating, thinking and acting.<sup>60</sup> Our self or subjectivity is imbricated in the world. Consequently, we can see feelings and emotions as relational and even spatial.<sup>61</sup> To entertain a feeling or emotion, especially with a work of art or a landscape, is a dynamic process where we also modify, modulate, perhaps deepen, or expand the emotion, and thereby forge a relationship to how things are in a certain respect, in a certain place, whether fictional or real.

Second, works of art offer company to the person who contemplates them. Mikel Dufrenne characterised the work of art as a ‘quasi-subject’, a characterisation close to Walter Benjamin’s ‘aura’.<sup>62</sup> From the point of view

58 Ronald W. Hepburn, ‘Emotions and Emotional Qualities’ in idem, *Wonder*, 75–87, 80.

59 Hepburn, ‘Nature in the Light of Art’, 43.

60 The creative, expressive and imaginative aspect of perception is discussed by Merleau-Ponty especially in *Le monde sensible et le monde de l’expression*.

61 For an approach from environment to self, see Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995).

62 Mikel Dufrenne, *Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique* (1953; Paris, 1992), 487–8; Walter Benjamin, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’ (1936) in idem, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1973; London 1992), 211–35, 214–18. Merleau-Ponty mentions the feeling, typical for painters, of being ‘looked upon by things’. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l’invisible*, 183. (When I first met Hepburn, in 1994, he asked me what philosophers I liked to read in aesthetics. When I mentioned Dufrenne, he responded, ‘I keep coming back to him.’)

of experience this indicates how art, like landscapes and, of course, persons, appear inexhaustible to us, and how we invest ourselves in engaging with them. Returning to a work is like returning to see a friend, someone who sustains us, and where we feel that we can recognize part of what makes us who we are. At the same time, there is a reciprocity and an interweaving of appreciator and work, where both are transformed in the experience.

De Bruyckere’s works often have a strong figural presence, a heightened degree of the kind of (metaphorical) personhood Dufrenne and Benjamin suggested. This is related to their themes and subject matter: after all, they represent living or once-living individuals. In addition, these works have an individual history that even surpasses what Benjamin referred to with the aura: the creature was once a particular horse; the cowhides suggest the past presence of individual, slaughtered cows; the trees represent trees that were growing in particular places. Their history extends beyond the moment of artistic creation, and this contributes both to their inexhaustibility and to how they parallel our own existence. These creatures regard us although they cannot look at us.<sup>63</sup>

A third aspect of relationality in art is the companionship it offers through the felt presence of the artist. In de Bruyckere’s oeuvre, this presence has a caring character, which modifies and softens the violent aspects of what the artworks present to the viewer. Dufrenne’s distinction between the represented and the expressed world of the aesthetic object is helpful here.<sup>64</sup> In de Bruyckere’s art, the represented world, consisting of the figures we see, and their histories and myths, is violent, passionate, tragic, while the expressed world is one of witnessing, caring and tenderness. As Dufrenne writes, the expressed world stems from the artist as she appears in her art, and has the unity of an atmosphere or a worldview. He points out that the expressed world is ‘not a doctrine but rather the vital metaphysical element in all humans, the way of being in the world which reveals itself in a personality’.<sup>65</sup> In de Bruyckere’s art, we are aware of the care and the craft that have gone into the making of the works, in processes of dialogue with materials that carry a history of their own. This suggests respect for the integrity of the individual creatures. Alongside what we see, other histories, which we do not know, are evoked, although they remain hidden. This awakens an awareness of the

63 Hepburn recognised the animal, ‘a sentient other’, as a ‘real object of direct moral concern’. ‘Values and Cosmic Imagination’, 155.

64 Dufrenne, *Phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique*, 221–57.

65 Ibid., 234.

invisible strata of our shared life-world: alongside what we see and know, there is so much more that we do not know. Her art does not generalise; it is not about life in general or ‘bare life’; it is about the particular life of human beings, mythical characters, animals or trees in their individuality. While this may make the art even more tragic, its recognition is part of what we might call the artist’s gesture, suggesting the similarity among living beings, and inviting us to contemplate these themes.

The gesture of invitation is in the careful arrangement of creatures and objects that protects them in a more than physical way, gives them integrity and provides the company of the artist. This becomes at the same time an invitation to the viewer, suggesting that we can join into this, that we are not alone. The arrangement of the body makes its fate bearable through introducing a tenderness that is not in the subject matter as such, but in its presentation. This gesture of invitation brings us to the third meaning of life-enhancement, the one related to values. Hepburn discussed the relationship of art and values in many of his essays, and emphasised that life-enhancement by no means refers to hedonistic enjoyment only, but includes reflections ‘on the world in which we stand’.<sup>66</sup>

Writing on art as a concrete image, Hepburn points out how art in some cases “teases” life. It sets life tasks for feeling and for reinterpreting, reorientating’.<sup>67</sup> In addition, through a work of art, the spectator may be ‘prompted not only to react, but also (importantly) to act’.<sup>68</sup> Hepburn’s point is akin to Dufrenne’s notion of the world of expression in acknowledging the importance of the subjective element of art: ‘The adopting of a perspective, again an amalgam of value-judgement and set of beliefs, is urged or thrust upon us by the presenting of a concrete situation’.<sup>69</sup> The gesture of invitation implied in the artwork’s world of expression or perspective, recognised as the presence of a subjectivity, is crucial for a deep and personal engagement with the work’s themes and subject matter. Art provides company; it draws us in, takes us by the hand. But it also teases. Ultimately, Hepburn seems to agree with the Romantic imagination, which ‘sees the objects of its memorable experiences not just as *being* but also as *pointing*, as prompting a going-beyond

66 Hepburn, ‘Life and Life-Enhancement as Key Concepts of Aesthetics’, 74.

67 Hepburn, ‘Poetry and “Concrete Imagination”’, 72. Teasing takes place when it is not clear whether the artwork primarily discloses or creates.

68 Hepburn, ‘Truth, Subjectivity and the Aesthetic’, 18.

69 Ibid.

the individual occasion of experience’. This ‘essentially incompletable intimacy’ can have ‘deep repercussions upon the subject’s system of values’.<sup>70</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

One aim of this paper has been to discuss recent art by Berlinde de Bruyckere, focusing on the apparent paradoxes of presenting life and death simultaneously, and violence and suffering in ways that signal tenderness and consolation to the viewer. Through ‘life-enhancement’ and related themes, Hepburn’s thinking has provided important resources for elaborating on how these paradoxes work – without becoming resolved – in aesthetic experience. However, we cannot answer the issue of how art such as de Bruyckere’s addresses us merely by looking at the dialogue between the appreciator and the aesthetic object, as I have done in the previous section. The paradoxes also call for perspectives that address why we want to engage at length, and repeatedly, with works of art with such painful themes.

Hepburn’s elaborations on metaphysical imagination provides such a perspective. Metaphysical imagination in whatever of its versions is about how the world ultimately is – in terms of its fundamental structure but also, necessarily, in terms of values. The conviction that art regards us, that it is about real and important matters, arises when we recognise perennial or topical themes in addition to artistic quality. I have suggested that de Bruyckere’s art is of this kind. It helps us dwell on complex and challenging issues without either demanding or offering straightforward answers. Rather, as Hepburn put it, the ‘transcending gesture’ is ‘endlessly’ repeated.

In order to engage us in metaphysical imagination, a work of art needs to have something that we recognise as important to us. In de Bruyckere’s recent works, human suffering is extended towards the realm of nature in its double role, as the nature that we are and the nature that surrounds us. This makes her art particularly topical. As we have seen above, concerning the relationship of humans to wider nature, Hepburn, Merleau-Ponty,<sup>71</sup> and de Bruyckere are on the same side. Hepburn describes ‘a network of affinities, of analogous forms, that spans the inorganic or the organic world, or both.’ Moreover, the affinities – that are more than outer likenesses – do not regard physiological constitution only. Criticizing the idea of emotions as inner feelings, he

70 Ibid., 35–6.

71 See especially Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature*.

suggests that our very personality develops in dialogue with phenomena in the world. Yet the role of humans is by no means passive: ‘we *create* as well as *discover* in our cognitive relation with wider nature [...] we partly *constitute* the nature we experience and come to know.’<sup>72</sup> Nature as we know it, then, is not just an amalgamation of biological facts, it is always also a historical and cultural construct. Art contributes importantly to its constitution.

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh provides a novel ontology and a ground for ‘metaphysical imagination’ freed from religious dogma, yet cherishing the spiritual as referring to the principle of life and cognition beyond the human. It also recognises nature’s relevance for humans beyond physical wellbeing, and foregrounds our predicament as finite, embodied creatures. Although Hepburn’s theory of imagination recognises the important role of feelings and emotions, he does not very much address the embodied or material side of imagination.<sup>73</sup> In this respect, Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh complements Hepburn’s theory of metaphysical imagination. As Carbone shows, Merleau-Ponty’s flesh is a flesh ‘of images’.<sup>74</sup> It pinpoints how our life-world is a dynamic, animate field, which we are dependent upon but which we also transform, in thought and action. The material side of imagination draws attention to its character as a more than mental, more than conscious activity; one where we are subject to the play of images as much as players. However, our predicament as carnal creatures by no means diminishes our mental or spiritual side, and while flesh has a literal application in de Bruyckere’s art, its cultural and religious resonance is equally important. Thus, her works thematise flesh in its full Merleau-Pontian richness: in its carnal, corporeal delicacy; in the experiential breadth it provides; and in how it animates and is in dialogue with predecessors and traditions that it also re-creates.<sup>75</sup>

There is an additional point of general significance for how we conceive of art’s meaning in the approach that I have developed in this paper – guided by Hepburn, Merleau-Ponty and others. We can juxtapose an emphasis on imagination and dialogue with art, on the one hand, with approaches that

72 Hepburn, ‘Values and Cosmic Imagination’, 161.

73 On this, see Gaston Bachelard, *L’eau et les rêves. Essai sur l’imagination de la matière* (Paris, 1942); Pauline von Bonsdorff, ‘The sorcerer’s hat and the carpenter’s hands: Material imagination in Pietilä’s architecture’ in Aino Niskanen, Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen and Tommi Lindh (eds), *Hikes into Pietilä terrain, Taiteentutkija*, 4 (2007), 9–21.

74 Carbone’s title, *La chair des images*, literally means ‘the flesh of images’.

75 In the essay quoted earlier, Benjamin writes: ‘The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded [sic] in the fabric of tradition. This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable.’ ‘The work of art’, 216.

conceive of art’s meaning as a product of interpretation, on the other. In the latter, the work is an object of analysis, and the task of the critic or researcher is to unravel the meaning it harbours. The meaning then becomes an object as well. In comparison, imagination foregrounds the significance of our very engagement with art as an open-ended affair. The essential is how it functions in our life. Ambiguity – for Merleau-Ponty an ontological rather than an epistemological concept<sup>76</sup> – is not to be resolved: it is an irreducible dimension of art and life.

As Hepburn discusses them, metaphysical questions, including questions of truth and value, become actual and address us in imaginative and reflective experience. His rich use of examples is not accidental, as there is an essential link between a close analysis of experience and the metaphysical themes. To acknowledge the existential value and potential of art, we need to recognise this link. In its respect for our actual, engaged and reflective experiences, Hepburn’s approach to aesthetics and the arts could be characterised as phenomenological. In a way not unlike Merleau-Ponty, he engages with philosophy and the arts as ways of trying to come to terms with human experience and to articulate it on different levels. His patience in studying topics from several angles, with a keen eye for ‘overlaps’ and ‘intrusions’ is comparable to the explorative persistency of Merleau-Ponty. A final similarity, which wraps up the themes of this paper, is the role of aesthetics. Even beyond his explicit discussion of art, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is thoroughly about the aesthetic realm, exploring ‘the logos of the aesthetic world’.<sup>77</sup> And Hepburn’s aesthetic, for its part, indeed reaches out, surpasses its boundaries, goes into ‘neighbouring fields’.

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76 See especially Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

77 *Ibid.*, 490–1.