The question that I wish to pose in this paper concerns the nature of appearance in Merleau-Ponty. If in Husserl appearing can be apprehended only on the basis of an act of meaning-endowment in intentional experience, or thus as an act of bestowing meaning through consciousness, which transcendental reflection should secure in the medium of the pure phenomenon, then both the nature of appearance and the method of gaining access to appearance are modified from the outset in Merleau-Ponty. Although appearance on its most fundamental stratum, namely, that of sensing, is first and foremost characterized as an intentional event of sense, the concept of meaning undergoes a transformation in the works of Merleau-Ponty, generating a framework for a new apprehension of the nature of appearance and thus for a new apprehension of phenomenality: the phenomenon is not merely a correlate of meaning-bestowal through intentional consciousness. This act of bestowing meaning is no longer apprehended in the sense of the ineluctable spontaneity of the intentional act of an “I experience,” of an act of noesis which would be absolutely transparent to itself via the noema (even though even for Husserl the reduction to this transparency cannot be reached at a stroke, but must rather be iterated). For Merleau-Ponty, this transparency in the “pure phenomenon” is, in principle, unattainable, and hence the corresponding transcendental reduction is impossible. This view is closely connected to the following conviction of Merleau-Ponty: The origin of phenomena is to be sought at a level deeper than that of intentional consciousness; meaning-endowment in the sense of Husserl’s static phenomenology is not the ultimate origin of appearance, as his genetic phenomenology already shows in various contexts. Building on the project of the transcendental genesis of intentionality, in its own way and above all with its emphasis on corporeality, Merleau-Ponty pushes forward into heretofore unconsidered aspects of this project. In the following essay I would like to adumbrate Merleau-Ponty’s approach, focusing again on the question of the nature of appearing, it is on the question of the phenomenality.
My point of departure is the observation that, in his philosophy, Edmund Husserl posits an elementary phenomenological difference between lived-experience and its object, which can be regarded as the decisive approach to the question concerning the nature of appearance. When something appears, we can and must be attentive to this difference and distinguish the accomplishment of appearance from what appears. This accomplishment is to be grasped as lived-experience, which is made up of immanently “reel” components (acts of perception, memory, image-consciousness, and the sensuous contents that correspond to them), while what appears cannot be any component of this accomplishment of appearance; as an object, it is “irreel;” it is not a lived-experience, such as this can be illuminated, for Husserl, with reference to the model of external perception.

What Merleau-Ponty puts into question first and foremost in Phenomenology of Perception is not so much phenomenological difference itself, such as I understand it, namely, as the difference between the lived-experience of appearance and the phenomenon qua a givenness of content that is experienced. Even in the act of sensing, such as Merleau-Ponty analyzes it in Phenomenology of Perception, this distinction is reconstructed. And Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of divergence [écart], found in his later work, can be read, as I will try to do in the second part of this essay, in terms of a form of phenomenological difference, which, however, does not correspond to the Husserlian primordial phenomenological difference insofar as Merleau-Ponty, in his later work, wishes to overcome the dualism between experiential consciousness and its worldly content, as both are embedded in a universal (ontological) medium of the sensible, of the flesh. Yet in the late Merleau-Ponty, what we see is an approach to a new form of phenomenological difference by means of which he sheds light on the nature of appearance.

What Merleau-Ponty confronts from the outset is Husserl’s “pure phenomenon,” that non-empirical, non-worldly medium which is self-given in the attitude of the epoché as a correlate to the pure regard of the disinterested observer, who looks upon lived-experience without positing it as something worldly being and without himself being posited as a worldly entity either. For Husserl’s method, this is an essential moment: even genetic phenomenology must be able to thematize the concealed implications of the actual act of meaning-bestowal in the pure phenomenon; the context of meaning, and not any fact, is the milieu of evidence. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty expresses his explicit opposition to the classical image of transcendental phenomenology: the transcendental reduction