



## An Examination of *Red Dragon* (2002) in Light of the Deleuzian Theory of Becoming Animal

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Volume 11.2 (2023) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2023.363 |

### Abstract

This paper explores the character development in the movie *Red Dragon* (2002) in relation to the Deleuzian theory of becoming-animal, and paintings by William Blake. A character analysis is made on Francis Dolarhyde in light of the theory of becoming, and parallels are drawn between connectionism and relationality, apparent in both Blake's paintings and the Deleuzian theory. It's argued that the theory of becoming-animal resonates with the character development in the film, and the connectivity and contradictions of concepts in Blake's paintings by which Dolarhyde's character is inspired. In this context, Dolarhyde's character is described in terms of a continuous, nonteleological process where he disrupts binaries between the man persona and the dragon alter ego, and is characterized by virtue of his becoming.

**Keywords:** becoming; Deleuze; William Blake; Red Dragon



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# An Examination of Red Dragon (2002) in Light of the Deleuzian Theory of Becoming Animal

## Kemal Yardımcı

### Introduction

This paper explores the embodied experience of becoming through the movie adaptation *Red Dragon*.<sup>1</sup> The movie is based on the crime novel written by the American writer Thomas Harris, first published in 1981, and later republished by the same name in 2009.<sup>2</sup> By focusing on the embodiment and manifestation of becoming-animal, this study is an attempt to highlight and analyze the representations of Deleuzian theories, and how some of the concepts such as ‘becoming’ resonate throughout the film. In this context, Harris’ work offers both a literal and a metaphorical perspective of embodiment and subjectivity in line with the Deleuzian theory of becoming-animal. It is through the portrayal of Francis Dolarhyde, a fictional character who seeks to become/emerge with the mythical creature in *The Great Red Dragon Paintings* by the British poet and painter William Blake (1803-1805), that the concepts of embodiment and becoming animal come to life in Harris’ work.

As it is argued in the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, the human subjectivity is not fixed or final, but rather, it is open to constant change.<sup>3</sup> Along with the arguments of Guattari, Deleuzian philosophy puts a significant emphasis on the constant process of change. In line with

this concept, an examination of the film *Red Dragon* and the fictional character Francis Dolarhyde is made in terms of the character's ongoing transformative process, from a theoretical background. The examination will be an important in terms if creating a critical framework with respect to these theories. This framework will explore how the film presents Francis' subjectivity as something progressive, dynamic, and in constant movement contrary to the traditional understanding of a static and fixed subjectivity.

For a long time, proponents of the traditional Western metaphysics, such as Plato and Aristotle, have described reality as being static, or as being composed of dynamic components that result in a static ontology. According to this view, the dynamism in question is considered secondary to the subject's ontology, and a fixed subjectivity is asserted instead. However, the idea of a fixed subjectivity contradicts with modern explanations of subjects' ontology, which argue that the subject constantly goes through a dynamic process of *becoming*. The very word *becoming*, which concerns a particular area of study under process philosophy, implies that the subject does not simply exist, or be, but rather becomes something other than itself. In light of this view, it is argued that the character Francis Dolarhyde's constant seeking of transition, and shifting states of being, both mentally and bodily, is in accordance with the Deleuzian idea of becoming. Therefore, the scope of this paper involves the examination and elaboration of Francis

Dolarhyde's becoming in terms of embodiment and subjectivity in light of Gilles Deleuze's theory of becoming.

### Deleuzian Theory of Becoming

Deleuze's concept of becoming is concerned with the consideration of the Western philosophical way of understanding identity and representational ways of thinking. It revisits the dogmatic doctrines and fixated understanding of identity, and proposes a more dynamic image of thought. Subjectivity in Deleuze's philosophy is handled as something open ended and dynamic without subordinating to fixed categories and concrete representations of being. Deleuze and Guattari's writings imply that becoming is a concept that aims a constant transformative movement towards being other than oneself.<sup>4,5</sup> The process-oriented ontology that is presented in their writings challenges pre-given modes of being such as traditional Western classifications and binary logics in metaphysics that exhaust potential modes of being under static and limited options. To give an example, one might imagine the traditional modes of classification that dictate gender binaries, or the traditional understanding of the body that is fixed and unchanged; whereas gender may be fluid or set anywhere on the gender spectrum, and bodies can be altered or aged in ways that allow for a continuous transformation. Contrary to the pre-given concepts offered by traditional views of ontology, the process-oriented ontology promotes a constant

movement that is neither particularly goal nor result-oriented. Deleuze's becoming is a constant self-differentiating flux without a finalized location, or telos. In this context, the lack of a telos implies the lack of a hierarchy or sequence in the sense that the continuous transformation in time possesses temporal characteristics, but not sequential ones. Hence, an inherent characteristic of the process-oriented becoming is its temporality. Consequently, process-oriented and temporal becomings are deliberately highlighted, and placed over fixed ontologies of identity. Becoming, to this extent, cannot be expressed through fixed subjectivities or destinations as it is inherently non-deterministic. According to Deleuze and Guattari:

A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes *between* points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points. Point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor rival, origin nor destination.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from temporality, another characteristic of becoming discussed by Deleuze and Guattari is relationality. The continuous process of transformation of being other than oneself arises from the dynamic encounters and interactions between human and other organic and non-organic bodies. The chain-like connective model of thinking regarding subjectivity provokes a transformative movement beyond fixated states of beings.<sup>7</sup> Connectivity and interactions between different forms of beings not only complicate the subjectivity by establishing linkages

but also promote a continuous process of being other than what is, and going beyond the fixated boundaries of being.

### The Theory of Becoming in William Blake's Paintings

In the 1800s, the works of the Romantic era artists frequently engaged in the questioning of relationships between human and non-human with the rise of the scientific findings taking place at the time. For example, Francisco Goya, one of the chief figures of the Spanish Romantic movement, often included monstrous human figures in his works. A proponent of the English Romantic movement in the 1800s, William Blake portrayed animals and monster-like figures in his paintings alongside human figures. In this context, it can be stated that a religion driven, or inspired, expression of these themes can be seen in the works of William Blake who took the concepts of good and evil, heaven and hell, and god and angels. He inverted, or sometimes fused, these concepts with each other to create a picture of opposites in a narrative and dynamic manner: He wrote his poetry backwards. He interpreted the conventional Christian theology in a subversive manner, and put opposite concepts against each other. In his view, good is evil, and evil is good. In his work, he argued that without contraries, there would be no progression. In this sense, contradiction is the key to progression, and the presence of this contradiction is necessary for us humans.

In line with the contradicting and evolving nature of the paintings by Blake, the main inspiration behind the theoretical arguments in this paper are drawn in relation to *The Great Red Dragon Paintings*, a series of paintings by Blake that were completed between 1805 and 1810. The paintings depict various scenes of a dragon/human like magnificent creature and a woman clothed in the sun. These paintings are a result of Blake's attempt to produce several paintings to illustrate the Bible. In *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, the dragon figure is taken from the bible:<sup>8</sup> “And behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth.”<sup>9</sup> The woman in the painting is inspired by biblical writings, and represent symbols drawn from Genesis 37:9–11 in which a dream of the moon and the sun represents mother and father.<sup>10</sup> The dragon represents Satan who tries to steal the child of the innocent woman, represented by the woman clothed with the sun. The watercolor enhances the wondrous and unearthly nature of the heaven.

The painting is most popularly used in both the book and the movie adaptation of *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris. In the book, a psychotic serial killer finds himself inspired by the painting of a red dragon. Mesmerized by the painting, he discovers his demonic strength and wrath, and begins to conceive himself as if he is in constant transition of becoming the great red dragon.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, there are apparent parallels between Blake’s portrayal of the dragon and

the man as one creature, and the ever-flowing transitions experienced by Dolarhyde as he feels a connection with the dragon depicted in the painting.

Blake's artistic vision questions the rigid understanding of humanity. Through implementing these human-animal paintings to his writings, Blake revises the conceptualization that human and nonhuman are different; and through the operation of his artistic vision he imagines an unusual, beast-like type of human. Many of his paintings have the complexity and capacity to present continuous transformation and change as a consequence of the interaction between human and animal bodies. In a way, the form of bodies represented in these paintings "has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and which it overflows," resonating with Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>12</sup>

In *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake*, Damrosch draws a picture of Blake as someone who considers life a neverending journey of consciousness—or being—through time:

Blake believed that we live in the midst of Eternity right here and now and that if we could open our consciousness to the fullness of our being, it would be like experiencing a sunrise that never ends. That would not be a mystical escape *from* reality [...] but a fuller and deeper engagement *with* reality.<sup>13</sup>

Blake's paintings underline the shared ground between human and animals, and the



flexibility of the human subject. In these paintings, human and animal bodies overlap, and are in literal contact with one another as they cross the boundaries of their subjectivities. This continuous emergence of coexisting consciousness, to an extent, underlines the multiplicity that is inherent in human nature, or the multitudes of layers that are present in human personality. In Deleuzian terms, this kind of multiplicity is meant to denote the complex human structure whose layers are not necessarily complementarily manifold, but rather independently layered so as to reflect the many dimensions without a predestined unity. The complimentary layers of human structure imply a purposeful and directional progress due to their conditional and origin-oriented layers whereas a structure of independent layers entail neither co-dependence nor a predetermined goal. As Deleuze puts it:

Multiplicity remains completely indifferent to the traditional problems of the multiple and the one, and above all to the problem of a subject who would think through this multiplicity, give it conditions, account for its origins, and so on. There is neither one nor multiple, which would at all events entail having recourse to a consciousness that would be regulated by the one and developed by the other.<sup>14</sup>

By crossing dualisms and disrupting binaries regarding human and animal bodies, Blake goes beyond the vertical model of thinking, and perhaps invites the viewer to embrace a more rhizomatic one, a rhizome being something with no beginning or end, that is always in the middle. Hence, expression of multiple, nonhierarchical dimensions

in the paintings is best represented through a rhizomatic model of thinking. The co-existence of opposite concepts and the interbedded figures in the paintings requires a non-vertical, non-directional and circular way of thinking in the sense that the figures exhibit a never-ending transformation. The adoption of a vertical interpretation of these paintings prevent any inference of becoming in Deulizian terms. From this point of view, the rhizomatic model of thinking enriches these paintings in the sense that it enables richer interpretations to be made, and arguably, reveals some fundamental points for analysis in terms of subject ontology and becoming.

As Deleuze and Guattari argue, “multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudo multiplicities for what they are”.<sup>15</sup> These paintings are not either fully human or nonhuman; and they deny the stable, fixed concept of human and animal identity. They coexist on the same space created by the artist where the subjectivities of the both parts of animal and human are emerging. In a way, the co-existence and equally changing movement manifested on the canvas also resonates with Deleuze’s writing of “Man becomes animal, but he does not become so without the animal simultaneously becoming spirit, the spirit of man”.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, in these paintings, it is not only the human subject that is becoming animal and denying the rigid boundaries of subjectivity;

but also, the animal who takes part in the dynamic process of becoming in which it fuses, or is put into relation with, the human subject. The animal is also losing its stability, and becoming something else. Neither party, in a sense, reaches a final point. They are rather unfinished and undone.

### The Theory of Becoming Animal in the *Red Dragon*

In the movie *Red Dragon*, Francis Dolarhyde is a serial killer who murders people and leaves bitemarks on his victims' bodies as a sign of his oral fixation, as a result of which he is nicknamed "The Tooth Fairy". His psychotic tendencies and troubled personality are the product of his traumatic past with his grandmother who used to subject him to physical and emotional abuse as a child. Arguably, due to his troubled past, he is in need of constant change and transformation as a way to escape from his actual identity, of which he is ashamed. He, therefore, develops an obsession with the Red Dragon painting by William Blake. He even tattoos a dragon illustration on his back, in a sense, to actualize or materialize his becoming.

I don't believe you'd tell them who I am. Besides, what particular body I currently occupy is trivial. The important thing is what I am becoming. I know that you alone can understand this transformation.<sup>17</sup>

The above quotation from *Red Dragon* is taken from Dolarhyde's letter to Hannibal Lecter. In his personal letters to Hannibal, Dolarhyde talks about how he is becoming something

other than the man he is. The use of the word ‘currently’ as he talks about his current bodily form highlights the temporality and the fluidity of his identity, and how he is in constant change of becoming another. Dolarhyde expresses his suppressed identity as a killer through the identity of the Dragon; therefore, there is a relational communication between the animal and the human that is represented in his mind. Another line between Dolarhyde and a news reporter, again, supports the idea of his becoming, and in betweenness: “But you see, I am not a man. I began as one but now I am becoming other, and more than a man.” He is neither the man or the dragon, but rather he is in the process—or constant state—of becoming another.

In his dialogues with Claire Parnet, Deleuze argues that becoming is never about arriving at a certain destination point, but rather a process during which the only constant is the transformation, and the flow. He explains the inherent flow of movement, of life, of becoming as follows:

To become is never to imitate, nor to “do like”, nor to conform to a model... There is no terminus from which you set out, none which you arrive at or which you ought to arrive at...The question "What are you becoming?" is particularly stupid... As someone becomes, what he is becoming changes as much as he does himself. Becomings are not phenomena of imitation or assimilation.<sup>18</sup>

A psychoanalytic analysis of his character is hinted both through the traumatic experiences of his past, and his correspondences with Dr. Lecter who is himself a psychiatrist. In

this context, a link can be drawn between the process of becoming and the troubled mind of the man, or his unsatisfied self that is revealed through his obsession with the transformative, continuous, and ongoing process of becoming. It provokes the question: Does Dolarhyde's psychotic behavior bring about a disoriented, or disrupted, sense of becoming from the perspective of the disoriented mind? If becoming necessarily coexists with the self, or the identity, do fluctuations in the human psyche reveal themselves in terms of obsessions, compulsions, or even psychotic behaviors that root from the desire to throw oneself to the process of becoming another as a way of distraction? In his case, he expresses narcissistic and delusional behaviors as he becomes more aware of the process, almost in a sense where he is obsessed with the process of becoming itself:

I am the Dragon and you call me insane? You are privy to a great becoming, and you recognize nothing. You are an ant in the afterbirth. It is in your nature to do one thing correctly: Before me, you rightly tremble.<sup>19</sup>

### Blake and Deleuze on Connectivity and Contradictions of Concepts

Given the apparent signs of becoming in the *Red Dragon* (2002), and the shared ground between humans and animals in Blake's paintings in terms of dualism and disrupted binaries, there is a common denominator in the connectivity, or relationality between the ever-changing

states of the subject, between what it was and what it becomes. In both Blake and the film, the themes are arguably the relations themselves rather than the elements that construct these respective relations. In other words, what makes Dolarhyde's character development an excellent illustration of becoming is not the particular characteristics, or decisions that he makes, but the in-between, transformative subjectivity exhibited by him that offers a look into the relational nature of his being, or rather becoming. In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze explains the dynamics of becoming through a relational ontology as follows:

If one had to define the whole, it would be defined by Relation. Relation is not a property of objects, it is always external to its terms...Relations do not belong to objects, but to the whole, on condition that this is not confused with a closed set of objects. By movement in space, the objects of a set change their respective positions. But, through relations, the whole is transformed or changes qualitatively.<sup>20</sup>

In the series of Red Dragon paintings, it is the contradiction that is recurrently highlighted between good and evil, heaven and hell, or the moon and the sun. The characters in Blake's paintings are mere figures from religious scriptures, namely the Bible. What is special about the paintings is Blake's vision in highlighting these contradictions, and therefore, highlighting the relations themselves. In the *Red Dragon*, on the other hand, a close inspection reveals that it is not simply the idea of turning into the Dragon, but rather, Dolarhyde's obsession with the process of becoming such that there is a constant battle/alliance and communication, or

progress and destruction, between the man and the creature, the process of which itself characterizes his identity. In this sense, there is a constant differentiation in its own right rather than a transition towards one identity. Dolarhyde is neither the dragon nor the broken man with vulnerabilities; his character is defined through the relation of connectedness between these two personas. In his case, he does not have his mind set on turning into something else. He does not switch between alter egos, or personas. He is defined on the basis of this becoming, of this continuous, non-teleological process. He cannot be defined as a hybrid of the two personas, as he is in a state of *intermezzo*, constantly changing in a transformative yet fluid manner. This state is crucial for the process of becoming and is explained through the definition of a rhizome as it “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*”.<sup>21</sup> Hence, becoming is the establishment of transformative connections or alliances between stabilities, or constructing fluid structures. What is molar, fixed, and categorized is disrupted into molecular structures that destroy binaries, and are inclusive yet transformative, and ever-changing.

In line with this idea, in interpreting the red dragon metaphor in relation to the *Red Dragon* paintings by Blake, it is not the elements from which a relation is formed but rather, the relation itself that reveals itself in the narrative. In this sense, the theory of becoming is arguably recurring behind these works in which a temporally dynamic process without destination is

observed. In both Blake's paintings and the character development in the *Red Dragon*, there is a sense of deterritorialization, which is almost simultaneously followed by reterritorialization.

Deterritorialization is described as a major "movement by which 'one' leaves territory".<sup>22</sup> It can be interpreted as the continuous movement that both the character in the movie and the figures in the paintings go through, which brings about the change and the transformation they experience. The deterritorialization can be vaguely imagined as the point left behind, and reterritorialization as the destination, although they absolutely do not represent a beginning or end, but rather a flow of movement in a rhizomatic way. For example, the deterritorialization exhibited by Dolarhyde's character can be defined in terms of a movement towards the unfamiliar territory of the man, and an entry into the zone of becoming-animal. However, this movement is not a simple transference from man to animal, but rather a movement towards "dynamic contact zones, liminal passages or threshold states with their animal others".<sup>23</sup>

When considering the becoming exhibited by Dolarhyde's character, another aspect to be taken into consideration are the ontological implications of this becoming. Since there is no hierarchy between the elements in becoming, there is also no hierarchy between the dragon and the human ideals, or bodies, in the case of Dolarhyde. In this sense, all bodies and forms are ontologically equal. As Deleuze puts it: "A body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of



sounds a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity”.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that “bodies are open-ended compositions which are implicated in the larger flows of life; assemblages”.<sup>25</sup> An implication of this ontology can be found in Dolarhyde’s body, which he uses to express his becoming persona, his continuous and fluid self. He puts tattoos on his body, and keeps and uses his grandmother’s teeth as a souvenir, or accessory, from his troubling past. This is to say that he shapes and changes his bodily form in accordance with the becoming ideals that continuously flow and change his mind.

## Conclusion

This paper argues in favor of a consideration of Dolarhyde’s character in the movie *Red Dragon* (2002) from a becoming oriented perspective, rather than a fixed or binary one. The reasons for these arguments can be appreciated through the character development in the narrative, which is not aimed towards a finished character ideal, but rather a continuous and transformative one. The becoming is inspired by the *The Great Red Dragon Paintings* by Blake who portrays human and non-human figures in a fusiform, nonbinary, and continuous fashion. In line with the Deulizian concepts in subject ontology, the film does not present a progressive and unidirectional narrative with Dolarhyde’s story. Instead, a complex character portrayal is drawn, in which there are no binaries in the description of the main character, no transitions from good to bad or vice versa, and no progressive goal is achieved other than a constant battle of becoming. Given these points,

an appreciation of the film in light of the Deulizian theory of becoming serves the purpose of the plot in view of the hidden plot, that is, the meaning behind the *The Great Red Dragon Paintings*.

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## ENDNOTES:

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- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, [1987] 2004), 322.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- <sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, 293.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 25.
- <sup>8</sup> William Blake, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*, 1803/1805, black ink and watercolor over traces of graphite and incised lines on wove paper, 43.7 x 34.8 cm., Brooklyn Museum, New York City, New York, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4368>
- <sup>9</sup> Revelation 12:3–4, KJV.
- <sup>10</sup> Genesis 37:9-11.
- <sup>11</sup> Harris, *Red Dragon*.
- <sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, 21.
- <sup>13</sup> Leopold Damrosch, *Eternity's Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2015), 3.
- <sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (London: Althone, [1986] 1988), 14.
- <sup>15</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 8.
- <sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The logic of sensation*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 21.
- <sup>17</sup> Ratner, *Red Dragon*.
- <sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Ratner, *Red Dragon*.
- <sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 11.
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- <sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, 508
- <sup>23</sup> Suphi Keskin and Burcu Baykan, "Becoming-Animal in the Narrative and the Form of Reha Erdem's Kosmos," *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 8, no. 1 (2020): 249-285, accessed December 24, 2020 <http://cinej.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/cinej/article/view/275/546>.
- <sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: practical philosophy*, (CA: City Lights Books, 1988), 127.
- <sup>25</sup> Burcu Baykan, "Dismantling the self: exploring the infinite becomings in Orlan's body of work" (master's thesis, Bilkent University, 2010), 95.