

FOREWORD: THE CRITICALITY OF TOUCH

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1. In “Late Roman or Oriental?” (1902), Alois Riegl borrowed the scientific term “haptic” from psychophysiology and applied it for the first time to aesthetics to describe the “tactile qualities” of sculptures in late antiquity.¹ Egyptian sculptures, he argued, created tangible, “impenetrable” limits that appealed to the sense of touch, whereas modern perspective relied on the “optical qualities” of artworks.² While making this sensory distinction between tangible and optical qualities, Riegl defined in fact an aesthetic form of haptic vision distinct from the direct, physical experience of touch explored by physiologists.³ Drawing on Riegl but reversing his chronology, Walter Benjamin reinscribed the haptic sense in a cultural diagnosis of modernity by extending the “physical shock effect”⁴ of modern cinema to the affective condition of “every present-day citizen”.⁵ From Riegl’s emphasis on tangible limits to Benjamin’s cultural aesthetics of remote touching, one can note a distinct resignification of haptics beyond the arts of sculpture and architecture. But Benjamin’s sociological repurposing of Riegl’s aesthetic criticism is also particularly significant to perceive the criticality of touch — beyond bodily contact, touch is a critical sense in its ability to figure the social and to defamiliarise its most concrete forms.

2. Though long considered as a minor sense, the sense of touch is now reclaimed as the “first sense”,⁶ embodying intersubjectivity from embryonic formation to social emotions and interactions. As such, the tactile sense offers the privileged sensorial entryway into affective experience. “If anything, the association between touch and affect may be too obvious”, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, reflecting on the semantic doubling of the word “touching”.⁷ For Kosofsky, the “particular intimacy [that] seems to subsist between textures and emotions”⁸ justifies a reorientation of hermeneutics towards phenomenology and affect, leading Rita Felski, in much more trenchant

1 A. Riegl, “Late Roman or Oriental?”, 181.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Laura Marks’s analysis of “haptic visuality” is indebted to Riegl’s founding use of the term “haptic”. See in particular *The Skin of the Film*, 188-194.

4 W. Benjamin, “The Work of Art”, 267.

5 *Ibid.*, 281.

6 M. Fulkerson, *The First Sense*.

7 E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 17.

8 *Ibid.*

terms, to promote affective hermeneutics beyond “the limits of critique”.⁹ However, touch matters to aesthetic criticism precisely insofar as it materialises the criticality of care, attachment, tact, and closeness. While touch constitutes an ontological form of affirmation — the confirmation of material reality and a reparative form of presence —, let’s not place haptics beyond or after critique, and engage instead with haptic criticality as a way of reading touch against the grain and registering its ability to disrupt and remodel relationality across social and sensory hierarchies. In other words, there may be unexpected affinities between touch and critique.

3. With Jean-Luc Nancy’s title-address to Jacques Derrida — do not touch me¹⁰ —, critique itself could in fact be conceived of as a tactile gesture. In *On Touching, Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000), Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive critique of tactile presence initially developed as a close reading of Nancy. Noting the pervasiveness of tactile rhetorics in Nancy’s writings even before *Corpus*, Derrida came to define touch as an “ordinary trope”¹¹ and therefore associated touch with untouchability. For Derrida, touch is not a primordial sense but an “ancestral” language which precedes the phenomenological immediacy of the body. Nancy responded to Derrida’s “skeptical distance”¹² in *Noli Me Tangere*: challenging his skeptical gesture of linguistic deconstruction, Nancy contended that “nothing or no one is untouchable in Christianity”¹³ — even as he focused on the “line that separates the touching from the touched and thus touch from itself”.¹⁴ In his 2021 talk “Touche-touche”, Nancy returned once again to the bodily remainder of deconstruction. Touch escapes in that it “moves away in touching itself”¹⁵ but — and here the dissensus with Derrida could not be more explicit — “it is never merely a metaphor. It is always a sensible reality, thus material and vibratory”.¹⁶ Reasserting the presence of touch outside language, Nancy grappled with a phenomenological limit. Perhaps touch is critical in that it constitutes itself, like the *krinein* of critique, around a conflictual line and limit — to quote Nancy, “touching is the thought of the limit”.¹⁷

4. In following this dialogue between Derrida and Nancy, one is in fact able to retrace a theoretical path from deconstruction to the increasing revaluation of the phenomenological body across the humanities — a critical trajectory, as it were, from the critique of touch to the reconsideration of

9 R. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*.

10 J.-L. Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*.

11 J. Derrida, *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*, 303, my translation.

12 J.-L. Nancy, *Noli me Tangere*, 110.

13 *Ibid.*, 14.

14 *Ibid.*, 13.

15 J.-L. Nancy, “Touche-touche”, emphasis mine.

16 *Ibid.*

17 J.-L. Nancy, “Corpus”, 206.

touch as critique. As a matter of fact, haptic phenomenologies have mobilised touch as a critical sense as they variously reinterpreted the reflexivity of touch — what Merleau-Ponty identified after Edmund Husserl as the “circle of the touched and the touching”.¹⁸ Reading Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Malebranche, Judith Butler thus identified an originary touch before the emergence of discourse. For Butler, touch becomes a matter of care insofar as this “primary impressionability”¹⁹ presupposes a “requirement for alterity”,²⁰ which, if missing, creates a primordial sense of destitution. In conceiving of a “carnal hermeneutics”,²¹ Richard Kearney drew more extensively on phenomenology to rethink the act of interpretation and develop a societal critique of “excarnation”²² founded on the primacy of touch. Excarnation consists, according to Kearney, in the sense of being at once “in touch” via technology and yet disembodied. Hartmut Rosa articulated a similar critique of modernity in his sociology of resonance. For Rosa, the skin constitutes a primal form of relationality — a way of “being situated in the world” that starts *in utero* with the “system of resonance” constituted by the embryo and the mother.²³ From this phenomenology of skin, Rosa elaborated a cultural critique of capitalism firmly anchored in the tradition of the Frankfurt school: “giving increased cultural attention to the skin as a design object comes at the cost of a decreased capacity for resonance”.²⁴

5. While touch is “never merely a metaphor” in the sense that it points to a body outside language, haptic phenomenologies still refer to touch as a metaphor. From Butler’s hypothesis of a “primary touch” to Kearney’s critique of technological “contact”, haptics extends beyond physical presence. As Rosa theorises resonance, he also draws on the metaphorical meaning of skin: “when we say that *someone feels comfortable in their own skin*, we are referring not to the skin as a bodily organ, but rather to a person’s lived relation to the world”.²⁵ Metaphors of touch testify to the cognitive extension of the tactile sense. Literary studies, in that respect, are crucial to our understanding of the nexus between phenomenological bodies and the languages of touch. In allowing us to think together physical touch and tactile figures, literary texts place touch on the limit between biology and culture, allowing us to reflect on the demarcation of this biocritical limit even as they seem to erase it.

18 M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 143.

19 J. Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 41.

20 *Ibid.*, 62.

21 R. Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics”.

22 R. Kearney, *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital Sense*, 113.

23 H. Rosa, *Resonance*, 49.

24 *Ibid.*, 52.

25 *Ibid.*

6. Dominated by the eye and the voice, literary criticism has long overlooked the tactile sense. The belated rise of touch as a “critical sensibility”²⁶ displaces sensory hierarchies, questioning epistemic objects and critical methodologies but also exposing the perceptive limits of the critical tools at our disposal. Expanding across poetics, cultural criticism, and cognitive criticism, haptic criticism, as we may call it, encourages us to reconsider the importance of tactile experience both against and within the oculo-centrism, the phonocentrism, and the ablistic of our critical habits. From Santanu Das’s poetic “slimescapes”²⁷ and Sarah Jackson’s “tactile poetics”²⁸ to the cultural inquiries led by Abbie Garrington on “haptic modernism”²⁹ and Peter Capuano on Victorian hands,³⁰ the emergence of touch as a critical object does not just establish a close link between literary and tactile mediation, between text and skin, but also attends to what science historian Mark Paterson sums up as a complex process of “re-mediating”.³¹ Touch seems to be immediate but it “is always, already mediated and, through an increasing number of technologies, is effectively becoming remediated”.³² If one considers literary texts as haptic technologies of sorts, then close reading and cultural criticism are potent tools to analyse the construction of tactile immediacy. This reflection on re-mediation may even open up, following Erika Fretwell’s exploration of disabled bodies, on alternative histories of mediation through handling: “How might people have adapted literature and letters to their bodies, rather than the other way around?”³³
7. Perhaps cognitive criticism is distinct in its attempt at retrieving the phenomenological body outside its cultural archæology. Guillemette Bolens, for instance, analyses the kinesic complexity of haptic gestures in Proust.³⁴ In his theory of “empathic reading”,³⁵ Pierre-Louis Patoine reconnected early twentieth-century German aesthetics to recent experiments in cognition and neurobiology to reconsider what Vernon Lee, drawing on psychologists Karl Groos and Theodor Lipps among others, previously referred to as the “bodily accompaniments or resonances of aesthetic perception”.³⁶ While Patoine’s theory is driven by a cognitive rather than ideological inquiry, it is striking to see

26 E. Fretwell, “Common Senses and Critical Sensibilities”. I would like to thank Thomas Constantinesco for this reference.

27 S. Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 35-72.

28 S. Jackson, *Tactile Poetics*.

29 A. Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*.

30 P. Capuano, *Changing Hands*.

31 M. Paterson, “Re-Mediating Touch”.

32 *Ibid.*, 131.

33 E. Fretwell, “How to Read Disabled Bodies in History”, 176.

34 G. Bolens, “L’Haptique en art et en littérature”.

35 P.-L. Patoine, *Corps / texte*, my translation.

36 V. Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness*, 125.

how it urges us to revalue the reader's bodily participation in the politics of the text.³⁷ Alternatively, tactile cognition may embody ideological critique in the text itself. In her analysis of modernist cognition for instance, Melba Cuddy-Keane highlighted the communal politics of touch in Virginia Woolf's fiction. Detecting a significant "ripple effect of repeated gesture" in the final scene of the dance in *The Years*, she showed how Woolf replaced an oppressive politics of coercion with a cognitive "schema of collective inter-responsiveness".³⁸

8. When considering the textual mediation of the tactile sense, linguistic and biological conceptions of touch meet a critical limit — especially since, in literary texts, touch is not simply referential but extends to "the haptic quality of language",³⁹ to quote philosopher Mirt Komel. However, the idea that literary haptics should lead us beyond critique seems misguided. If the experience of touch constitutes itself around a cognitive and bodily surface – the limit between self and other and within oneself as another —, haptic criticality may be practiced as a reflection upon the liminality of touch. Touch is critical — rather than postcritical — insofar as, to quote Michel Foucault but also Jean-Luc Nancy's distant echo to Foucault, it implies the "analyzing and reflecting upon limits".⁴⁰ These borders are at one and the same time sensory and social, encoding patterns of gender, race, and disability even as they pass as immediate. By focusing on these conflictual faultlines, one may foreground the reparative impulse of touch, but not to the exclusion of the affective crises they embody.

9. The criticality of touch dwells on such affective crises. In theorising "haptic scepticism", philosopher Rachel Aumiller intended "to mark touch as a site of epistemic and ethical questioning and crisis"⁴¹ and, turning to the social phenomena of #metoo and Covid, commented on "the crisis of (not) touching".⁴² As limit-experiences, tactile loss and tactile invasion challenge literary representation. "What, then, can I touch?"⁴³ the character of Rhoda asks in *The Waves*, unable to reassure herself with the tangible presence of reality. "Who touched me?"⁴⁴ Julia Martin cries in a Christ-like utterance of panic in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. In 1931, Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys each formulated a crisis of touch through two distinct interrogations which underpinned and informed their writing practices. The Pyrrhonian turn of the first question articulates the intangible; the second one

37 P.-L. Patoine, *Corps / texte*, see in particular 180-184.

38 M. Cuddy-Keane, "Distributed Cognition", 205.

39 M. Komel, "A Touchy Subject", 124.

40 M. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", 45.

41 R. Aumiller, "Sensation & Hesitation", 4.

42 R. Aumiller, "Haptic Scepticism".

43 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 115.

44 J. Rhys, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, 164.

voices the untouchable. In both cases, touch is not so much a metaphor of affect as a visceral anxiety that binds the necessity of writing to the vulnerability of the body. Literature engages with touch as a site of trouble, at the same time as it sketches alternative forms of reparation, inclusion, and remediation. By retracing these sensory disturbances as well as their potential of social subversion, literary criticism, in turn, can rethink the affects of touch as so many radical experiences of relationality. As such, haptic criticism can attend to, but also generate haptic trouble.

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