

Light Touches: A Media Aesthetic Mapping of Touch

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It is often helpful to start an academic essay with some comments on the title. Unpacking the key terms that appear in the title is an economical way of preparing the ground for a discourse that necessarily takes place within a limited frame. This kind of gesture is very much needed here as well.

My title consists of two parts that both, more or less, say the same – albeit in different modes. Whereas the first part “Light Touches” is rather elliptic, the second part “A Media Aesthetic Mapping of Touch” fulfills the standard form of an academic subtitle by offering additional information concerning the focus and approach. Together they suggest that the topic of this essay will be “touch”, and that the topic will be touched upon “lightly” in terms of a “mapping” which has “media aesthetic” motivations.

I would claim, however, that the double structure of my title says also something else. A certain tension, or a fundamental complication, that a discourse *on* touching needs to deal with is inscribed in it. “A mapping” is simply not enough on its own, since “touch” as a

peculiar topic challenges – or should I say contaminates – the discourse to such a degree that the approach becomes part of the issue. A discourse that in any pertinent sense is touching upon “touch” becomes also touched by its topic.¹ The expression “pertinent sense” marks here the challenge of developing a discourse in an area where the criteria for making distinctions between the proper and metaphorical senses of touch are anything but clear. In a pertinent discourse on touch, the “what” and the “how” become entangled, even inseparable. All kinds of exploration, assorting, dissecting, demarcating, defining – and mapping – presuppose contact or, at the very least, anticipation of a limit, which always means taking risks; trying, testing and contesting the limits of control as well. The “mapping” that I attempt here consists of “light touches” in this sense.

But there is still another twist: “Light” can also be understood as the subject – or perhaps more aptly: agent – of touch. Insofar as the phrase “A Media Aesthetic Mapping of Touch” specifies the chosen theoretical *view* on the topic – the *point of view* of the essay – it effectively performs a visual logic that in accordance with a long history of “hegemony of vision”² in Western thinking tends to format the discourse on touch. In short, the title hints at the fact that my discourse *on* touch, insofar as it is a “mapping” that aims at outlining the topic entitled “touch”, is itself necessarily *touched by light*, invested with visual forces that tend to organize the discourse into a visually motivated knowledge production.

In order to gain new knowledge, a researcher has to make use of some kind of tactics when sorting out whatever is under scruti-

1 This is one of the key issues in Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry, California, Stanford University Press, 2005 [2000].

2 See e.g. David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993; Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes – The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993.

ny. Usually we speak of this in terms of a method or an approach and focus on assessing its viability. It is worth noting, however, that the medium of research consists of culturally determined variables that change over time. A discourse on touching touched by light becomes a meeting place of at least two divergent logics (in shorthand I call them “visual” and “tactile”), and as such, it touches upon the cultural status of the differing modalities of sense and the roles of sense modalities in a knowledge-oriented discursive setting.

It is here that the “media aesthetic” motivations of my essay come into picture. In my use of the term “media aesthetics” I attach myself to the heterogeneous tradition that combines media theoretical questions with theories of perception and embodied experience. Its key questions revolve around the rise of new modes of representation, perceptual habits and bodily techniques enabled or enhanced by new technical apparatuses, such as photography and film, and more recently a whole array of electronic and digital media. Media aesthetics studies, from a variety of perspectives, the framing conditions of our seemingly natural sense perception against the backdrop of all these “media”. How to relate our sense experience to the technological processes that significantly contribute to our sense of reality? How does touch figure in these processes?

Walter Benjamin’s remarks concerning the historicity of the “medium of perception”³ and Marshall McLuhan’s “sense ratio hypothesis”⁴ still function as key points of reference in contem-

3 “Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history.” Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* vol. 3, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., various translators, Cambridge Massachusetts and London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, 104.

4 Cf. David Parisi in this volume.

porary media aesthetic discussions, especially with regard to the contexts of media theoretical research and sensory anthropology. As W.J.T. Mitchell notes, media aesthetic discussions often show a rather conservative tendency to return to questions of remediation of older media forms in the midst of rapidly changing new media landscape.⁵ Here, the basic conceptual settings – such as Roland Barthes’ image / music / text or Friedrich Kittler’s gramophone / film / typewriter – build, in one way or another, on demarcation of sense modalities, echoing the classical division of the “media” of drama in Aristotle (*melos, opsis, lexis*).⁶

In recent media aesthetic discussions, increasing attention has been paid to the questions of environmental mediations instead of the senses and their mediation. Transcendental subjectivity that for a long time figured as the key philosophical point of reference and, in phenomenologies of corporeality, as one of the main targets of criticism, has lost its key role as the discussions have shifted their focus to questions of relationality, non-human actors and environmentality. A proponent of this shift, Eric Hörl announces an “emergence of a general ecology” and highlights multiple cybernetic processes that lead to bypassing the subject of perception and urge us to focus on relational and technical aspects of being in the world.⁷ Questions of touch, however, introduce in this setting a new angle and open up alternative paths for reconceptualizing mediativity with regard to environmental and relational issues with-

5 W.J.T. Mitchell, “Media Aesthetics”, *Thinking Media Aesthetics. Media Studies, Film Studies and the Arts*, ed. Liv Hausken, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2013, 23.

6 Ibid.

7 Eric Hörl, “A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cyberneticization and General Ecology,” trans. James Burton et al., *The Whole Earth. California and the Disappearance of the Outside*, eds. Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Francke, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013, 121–130.

out cutting the discourse off from questions of sense experience. A closer look at the senses of touch is needed – and an appropriate touch to the topic.

SENSES OF TOUCH

First, a gesture of general mapping: In Western culture, touch as a sense modality has been both over- and undervalued. Beside vision – considered the noblest of senses – touch has been regarded as vague, vulgar, drive-related, and thus even impure. Partly due to these very same – potentially subversive – qualities touch has been invested with various emancipatory expectations. At the same time, it has been seen both as the basis of sense certainty and rather normative support to the theoretical gaze. This ambivalence implies that the sense of touch – or more precisely: the *sense* of it – is over-determined.⁸ It is no wonder, then, that over the past few decades lively debates concerning the cultural implications of touch as a sense modality have emerged in many areas of research.⁹

Touch interconnects existential, aesthetic, cognitive and practical aspects of reality in an inconspicuous but intensive way, traversing both bodily and discursive practices.¹⁰ Accordingly, the range of contexts where touching figures, in one way or another, is over-

8 Bernhard Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung. Phänomenologie, Psychoanalyse, Phänomenotechnik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2002, 64.

9 See for example Laura Marks *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2002; Constance Classen (ed.), *The Book of Touch*, New York and Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2005; Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch. Haptics, Affects and Technologies*, New York and Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2007; David P. Parisi, *Archaeologies of Touch: Interfacing with Haptics from Electricity to Computing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [forthcoming 2018].

10 Cf. Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, passim; Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport, New York, Fordham University Press, 2004 [1992]; Classen, *Book of Touch*, 2005.

whelming: perception, interface design, consumer culture, sexuality, the arts, social relations, war, religion, spirituality, and so on. I will address only a few.

Touch and its cultural meanings have often been associated with the skin. An interface between the own and the foreign, skin constitutes a sensitive realm open to various interpretations.¹¹ One of the nineteenth-century pioneers of physiology, Ernst Heinrich Weber, determined and mapped the sensitivity of human tactile system and thus laid the foundation for neuro-physiological harnessing of touch.¹² Ashley Montagu's pioneering experiments on chimpanzees in the 1970s demonstrated that the tactile sense plays a crucial role in the early psychophysiological development of mammals.¹³ In the 1980s, Didier Anzieu added a new layer to these discussions by analysing various patterns of skin-related mental imagery that are momentous for the formation of the ego. He argued that the skin is a coordinative and cohesive factor behind the whole system of the senses, one that organizes the human experiential horizon in its entirety, including the structures of space, time and language.¹⁴ During the past few decades, the cultural strata of the skin, such as clothing, make-up, and tattoos, have aroused great interest.¹⁵ The digital media technologies of our times, on their part, invite us to consider something like "techno skin", or the technological consti-

11 See e.g. Claudia Benthien, *Skin. The Cultural Border of Self and the World*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002; Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin*, London, Reaktion Books, 2004; Dave Boothroyd, "Touch, Time and Technics: Levinas and the Ethics of Haptic Communications." *Theory, Culture and Society* 26 (2-3), 2009, 330-345.

12 Cf. Parisi in this volume.

13 See e.g. Classen, *The Book of Touch*, 46-47.

14 Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Naomi Segal, London, Karnac, 2016 [1995].

15 Cf. Benthien, *Skin*; Classen, *The Book of Touch*.

tution of the contacting surfaces that define our bodily being.¹⁶ Skin is not only a physiological site, it is also an existential structure.

The sense of touch as a topic clearly hints at the fact that "sense" is one of those fateful words, where language as the historically layered resource of thinking comes to the fore. Sense involves signification and sensing, but it is not reducible to the domain of meanings or clear-cut sense modalities, not even to causal relations.¹⁷ Sense has a peculiar role in verbal discourse: it doesn't exist outside the proposition that expresses it, but, at the same time, it doesn't merge with its expression since discourse needs to touch upon something beyond itself in order to make sense.¹⁸ Sense – in all senses of the word "sense" – plays a multifaceted role in a discourse without being fully captured in its operations. Outlining the *sense of* touch as a topic presupposes something like *sense for* touch in the arrangement of the outlining gestures. On the level of discourse, touch is distributed, in an ambiguous way, across the divide of the supposedly proper and metaphorical senses of "touch".

16 Since recently biotechnologies enable the development of artificial skin by means of which prostheses and robots can "feel" touch, <https://www.seeker.com/artificial-skin-offers-robots-amputees-sense-of-touch-discovery-news-1767180961.html> [accessed 4 June 2017].

17 See for example Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Constantin V. Boundas, Mark Lester and Charles J. Stivale, London, Bloomsbury, 2015 [1969]; Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988 [1972]; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1997 [1993]; *Sens en tout sens. Autour des travaux de Jean-Luc Nancy*, ed. Francis Guibal and Jean-Clet Martin, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2004.

18 Deleuze notes, with reference to Stoic philosophy, that sense "is an incorporeal complex, and irreducible entity, at the surface of things, a pure event which inheres or subsists in the proposition". Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 19.

The difficulties encountered when trying to define the sense of touch were highlighted already in Aristotle's *De Anima*.¹⁹ He noted that the objects of touch are many, and that touch has no clearly definable organ. Touch is in many ways more complex and comprehensive than the other sensory forms. It is indispensable to all animals and belongs inseparably to the living body without, however, being the faculty of any particular body part – not even the skin. In short, it is difficult to define touch as a sense modality, since it is not, in any simple way, an organ-related *mode* of sensing. What can be felt as touch are not only certain sensuous qualities; we are in touch with anything and everything that can be felt and sensed by the body. Following Bernhard Waldenfels, we can say that touch is a prototype of sense experience *per se*.²⁰ Light touches the eye, heartbeat touches the palpating finger, sound waves touch the eardrum...

Even if these examples hint at the ways in which physical contact is part of all forms of perception, it would be too simplistic to reduce touching to some kind of prototypical tactility of sense experience. From an experiential perspective touch involves also mental and social, sometimes even spiritual processes. Instead of speaking of *the* sense of touch, it seems more appropriate to speak in plural of *senses* of touch.²¹ In another vocabulary one could also speak of feeling and being affected.²² Still another angle is introduced through the vocabulary of faculties, abilities and skills,

19 Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross, vol. III, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1931. See also Mika Elo, "Digital finger. Beyond phenomenological figures of touch", *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* vol. 4, 2012, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v4i0.14982.

20 Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 71.

21 Cf. Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 1–5.

22 Cf. Mika Elo, "Formatting the Senses of Touch", *Transformations* 22, 2012. http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Elo_Trans22.pdf

especially in the arts where the skills and capabilities are pushed to their limits.²³

In a strict sense, touching always takes place at a limit. The figure of limit could even be considered the common denominator of the ensemble of senses of touch that is at stake in this essay. It is important to note, however, that the limit in this sense is not a physical border. "The limit" names the ultimate point of vulnerability that forces and allows a touching gesture to get into touch with itself, to find its measure and proper mode, its tact. It is more of a demand than a categorical delimitation. This demand is enjoyably and painfully present in all modes of aiming at pertinence, here in the space of lined-up words as well as in any kind of intercourse with pressing matters. This demanding structure is not entirely reflexive, since touching is always also transitive, as Jean-Luc Nancy's paradoxical formulation "to self-touch you" (*se toucher toi*) presses.²⁴

Touching involves a gap; it goes across a distance without any guarantee of a securing return. Tact is thus not a matter of volitional attentiveness or artfulness. It is *heterotrophic sensitivity*, that is, a response to the untouchable encountered in touching. Another name for this sensibility towards something that lies beyond ones own capabilities is *passibility*.²⁵ This pathic moment of touching shows that tact is over-determined and is thus not reducible to a skill. Already before it can turn into a social matter between two or more parties, it is answering to a singular otherness. In other words, tact is not to be understood as psychophysical discretion,

23 Cf. Mika Elo, "Notes on media sensitivity in artistic research", *Exposition of Artistic Research: Publishing Art in Academia*, eds. Michael Schwab and Henk Borgdorff, Leiden, Leiden University Press, 2014, 25–38.

24 Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, 34, *passim*.

25 See for example the thematic issue "Pathos / Passibilität", *Internationales Jahrbuch für Medienphilosophie* Band 3, eds. Jörg Sternagel and Michael Mayer, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2017.

but as a name for taking it upon oneself to “touch *without* touching, without touching *too much*, where touching is already too much”, as Derrida puts it.²⁶

The “law of tact”²⁷ that applies to touch in its all dimensions is revealing of the fact that touch is always in danger of turning into either an appropriating grip, which aims at overcoming the unbridgeable difference between the touching and the touched, or into simple avoidance of contact, which means leaving the differences encountered as they are. The twist of this law lies in the fact that tactful contact never is quite in phase with itself: a distance is inherent in even the most intimate of contacts. Tact is exposure to this difference.

AMBIGUOUS DEMARCATIONS

In order to gain further insight into the various senses of touch – and into the ambiguity of demarcations between proper and metaphorical senses of “touch” – we must search in familiar analyses of sensibility for breaking points of the conventional schematization of touch as a species of the genus sensation.²⁸ Cathryn Vasseleu has highlighted one this kind of breaking point in Immanuel Kant’s *Anthropology*. The ambivalent position that *Berührung* (referring both to tactility and affectivity) takes there with regard to the distinction between the so-called objective and subjective senses is symptomatic of the difficulties of subsuming touch under the category of sense modality, a clear-cut domain of sensory experience.²⁹

26 Derrida, *On Touching*, 67.

27 Ibid., passim.

28 Edith Wyschogrod, “Doing Before Hearing: On the Primacy of Touch”, *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*, ed. François Laruelle, Paris, Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1980, 193.

29 Cathryn Vasseleu, “Touch, Digital Communication and the Ticklish”, *Angelaki* 4.2, 1999, 155.

For Kant, touch is, on the one hand, a sense of differentiation vital to our physical relation with external objects. On the other hand, as feeling, it is a sense by means of which we partake of things affectively.³⁰

Another breaking point can be found in the extensive philosophical debate concerning the relations between touch and vision, which is known as “Molyneux’s problem”. The problem, formulated by the Irish philosopher William Molyneux, is the following: *if a man born blind regains his sight, is he able to recognize, by means of visual perception only, objects he has learned to know through mere touch?*³¹

Behind this problem concerning the connection between visual and tactile perception lies the mind-body dualism characteristic of René Descartes’ thought, and the ambivalent interplay of the mind and the body in their “lived union” articulated in it.³² The problem concerns the tensional relation between what we might call “mind’s eye” and “comprehensive grasp” and its conceptual implications. On the basis of what do we think of the so-called contact between the sensing and the sensed and between the different modes of sensing? Descartes’ contemporary, Nicolas Malebranche and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who further developed Malebranche’s ideas in the phenomenological context, have both seen in the tension at the core of the Cartesian dualism an incentive to analysing the relation of the mind and the body precisely as a question of touch.³³

Third breaking point that I would like to touch upon here can be found in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical thinking. In Freud’s view, namely, it is touch, or, “palpating impetus”, that structurally

30 Ibid.

31 Janet Levin, “Molyneux’s Problem and the Individuation of Perceptual Concepts”, *Philosophical Studies* 139, 2008, 1–28. DOI 10.1007/s11098-007-9072-5.

32 Juho Hotanen, “Merleau-Ponty ja Malebranchen subjekti”, *Kosketuksen figureja*, ed. Mika Elo, Helsinki, Tutkijaliitto, 2014, 24–43.

33 Ibid.

links together bodily being, perception and thinking, and thus forms an essential feature of what he called “extensionality” (*Ausdehnung*) of the psyche.³⁴

The multifaceted theme of psychic extensionality can be illuminated with help of a note of Freud’s published posthumously: “Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it”.³⁵ Even though the processes of knowledge formation and cognition always involve fumbling and feeling about, psychic touch is not reducible to a matter of knowledge and consciousness, *tastender Vorstoß* is not reducible to a rudiment of theory formation supported by visuality. Freud’s remark hints at the fact that psychic events take their place in a space the extensionality (*Ausdehnung*) of which escapes physical dimensionality and the cognitive framework grounded on it. What makes things even more complex is that the extensionality of the psyche is not the inner psychological horizon of conscious affects, either. Rather, the psyche is articulated as a feeling of the tension between these dimensions, and the sorting out of their relations takes place through a complex machinery of defence mechanisms and processes of rationalization.³⁶

FIGURES OF TOUCH

Further breaking points can be traced in the metaphoric patterns of languages. An alert reader has already paid attention to the ways in which visual metaphors tend to slide into my argumenta-

34 Sigmund Freud, “Negation”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX, ed. James Strachey, trans. James Strachey et al., 238. (As the English rendering of *tastender Vorstoß* by “tentative advance” here misses the tactile connotations of the original, I have used the more literal “palpating impetus”)

35 Freud, “Findings, Ideas, Problems”, in *The Standard Edition*, vol. XXIII, 300; Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008 [2006], 21.

36 Cf. Elo, “Formatting the Senses of Touch”.

tion as if they were unavoidable steps in it. As Hans Blumenberg notes, light-related metaphors function as “absolute metaphors” in Western knowledge-oriented discourse.³⁷ This means that their figurality has become naturalized to such degree that it goes unnoticed; they have become, well, “transparent”.

If I would allow the visual logic to take the lead, I would introduce here a clear-cut demarcation between visual metaphors and figures of touch. This would probably lead me to reaffirming the kind of figures that Derrida calls “haptocentric”, that is, conceptual tropes that present the sense of touch as the ultimate guarantee of tangible reality and its visual mastery.³⁸ Typical substrate for this kind of figures is the human hand. Derrida highlights this in many ways in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*. He even structures his discussion in a critical relation to the figure of the hand in five Tangents: “five, like the five fingers of one hand, like the five senses”.³⁹ Based on this haptocentric setting I could focus on some tangible examples of tactile figuration. But if I stick to the setting unfolded in the previous pages where touch is presented as something that subsists also beyond the tangible world, I need to take another path and consider whether and how touch might figure in a discourse also *beyond* figures – insofar as “figure” refers to something that has a clear shape, to something that can be mastered visually – like the hand or a pointing finger.

In order to track the effects of touch in the discourse beyond figures we need to redirect our attention to questions of rhythm, punctuation and intensity. Here, the figures of touch are not only shapeless, they are also weightless. Or, more precisely, they are

37 Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999, 10–12.

38 Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, passim.

39 Derrida, *On Touching*, 182.

weightless *in themselves* like the fulcrum between the scales. They gain weight and become concrete only in a particular relation. This complicates the question as to where to draw the dividing line between the metaphorical and proper senses of touch – and whether this line can be drawn at all.

In order to counterbalance the tendency in international discussions to tracing concepts back to their Greek and Latin roots, I will make a detour to the Finnish language and to the semantic network of a couple of words that play a local but crucial role in the conceptual arrangement of senses of touch. I am not making this detour in order to establish more solid conceptual proof. Instead, I want to highlight the fact that language is a rich and multi-layered archive of displaced similarities and connections that contribute to the sense-order we tend to take for granted.⁴⁰

The first word I would like to single out as a point of contact with the ways in which senses of touch operate in the Finnish language is the verb *tuntea*. It aptly collates the meanings of “feeling” and “knowing”. It suggests that when you know, you also feel, and when you feel, knowing is already implied. The weight of this word in any particular idiom demonstrates how obscure the boundaries between the bodily and mental aspects of touch are from the viewpoint of embodied experience. The Finnish expression *tuntea nahhoissaan* (literally: “to feel in one’s skins”), for example, expresses a concrete state of knowing by bodily experience. Touch, feeling, and recognition are entangled, and their ensemble implicates a sentience that can be articulated both as cognitive apprehension and affective tone. Especially evocative is also the Finnish version of the classical imperative “know thyself” (*gnothi seauton*), *tunne itsesi*.

40 I am referring here to the mimetic dimension of language that plays an important role in Benjamin’s philosophy of language. See for example “On the Mimetic Faculty”, *Selected Writings* vol. 2/2, 722.

The second word that contributes to the conceptual arrangement of the senses of touch is the Finnish verb *tarttua* (“to grasp”, “to catch”, “to apprehend”, “to seize”). It points towards the multiple intertwined aspects of touch in a slightly different way. The word refers both to grabbing or holding firmly and to being exposed to the possibility of contamination. A hand, dirt, disease, laughter and various fancies may be caught and catching in different ways. The semantic network of this word suggests that every contact, whether mental or bodily, is potentially contagious.

The question whether these entanglements are just metaphoric, or do they have something more concrete, or “proper”, about them, brings me to the third word I want to ponder here: the Finnish word for “concrete”, “palpable” or “tangible”, *kouriintuntuva*, which literally means “what makes itself felt/known to the hands”. It hints at the fact that not only the physical contact of the appropriating hand but also the heterotrophic feel are involved in what we normally conceive as “concrete contact”. Physical contact is suggestive in its seeming immediacy, and it obviously serves linking comprehensive grasp and mind’s eye, as for example when we confirm the correctness of a visual impression by palpating the object seen. What is less obvious is the fact that the experiential fullness established through such coordination of the hand and the eye always ultimately relies on alterity. The physical and mental contact never fully coincide. In experiential terms, every concrete contact has two sides: the self that feels and something felt. The latter, as precisely *this* something that is felt, always escapes the control of the self. It is close by, but at the same time it remains at a distance, it remains something other, something that cannot be fully appropriated. With touch, thinking faces the paradoxical challenge of concreteness: What is most tangible is the foreignness at the heart of the familiar.

The verbal entanglements that I highlighted through the selection of these three Finnish words hint at the ways in which the theme of touch interlinks the physical, biological, psychophysical, social, mental and affective dimensions of contact. Their operative logic – linking, connecting, intertwining – reflects the intimate connection between affective and tactile aspects of touch and the vulnerability of embodied existence. Here we encounter the fact that besides the historical lines of conceptual filiation and discursive tropism, sheer moments of juxtaposition, idiomatic dispositions, and horizontal relations contribute to sense – in every sense of the word “sense”. We all know how this logic of contiguity is enacted in jokes and in word games that reveal how words constitute a “cavernous network” with hidden interconnections.⁴¹

Whereas sight upholds metaphors of light that outline the phenomenal world cognitively, thus creating the basis for a uniform discourse on truth, touch tends to complicate metaphoric patterns and even decompose them. While metaphors of light produce continuity and uniformity, that is, *homeostasis*, the effects of touch represent furthermore a *diastasis* (*dia*–“separate”, *stasis*–“localisation”) of language.⁴² Here, we are literally dealing with a spatiotemporal dislocation of the processes of signification in the structures, ac-

41 Walter Benjamin, “Denkbilder”, *Gesammelte Schriften* IV/1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser in cooperation with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem, Frankfurt am Main Suhrkamp, 1991, 432. With regard to the mimetic dimension of language that is at stake here, one of the key texts is Werner Hamacher’s “The Word Wolke – If It Is One”, *Benjamin’s Ground – New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Rainer Nägele, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988.

42 Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 78.

cents and rhythms of language.⁴³ On a linguistic level, at stake is the unstable relation between the supposedly proper and metaphoric senses of touch. In existential or experiential terms, this reflects the intimate connection between affective and tactile aspects of touch and the vulnerability of embodied existence.

Against this background, touch appears as a sense of being in the world, of being exposed. This is to say that touch exceeds the tactile world – and not only metaphorically. “Touch” as the topic I am touching upon, is more than the sense of touch, more than a sense modality; more than “a species of the genus sensation”.⁴⁴ This implies that theoretical attempts at upholding a clear-cut distinction between an “immediate” and a “deep” touch is insufficient.⁴⁵ It is true that touch is not only a matter of contacting surfaces, it also has, at the same time, affective depth, touch is inevitably ambivalent, since exactly the same kind of physical contact can strike one in different ways depending on the situation. As Edith Wyschogrod remarks, the ordinary language reveals that “to be touched” is to be moved in the whole of one’s being.⁴⁶ Coming into touch, or being in touch – actually, I am tempted to say even “being *touch*” – involves an *exposure*. With the word “exposure” we encounter again the double bind between vision and touch: whatever is exposed in terms of touch, is exposed to light as well, insofar as it is recognized in its appearance, that is, insofar as it becomes phenomenal.

43 Here we encounter processes that Julia Kristeva famously has termed *significance*. See e.g. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora and Alice Jardine, Oxford, Blackwell, 1980 [1969].

44 Wyschogrod, “Doing Before Hearing”, 193.

45 Cf. Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 1–14. I see the definite article in the title of Paterson’s book as a symptom of a theoretical inclination for clear-cut definitions that sets the tone to Paterson’s approach.

46 Wyschogrod, 199.

THE PATHIC MOMENT OF TOUCH

If I was asked to highlight one point of major importance in the series of “light touches” that I am presenting here on the peculiar topic of “touch”, I would point with my finger at – if you allow me to use this figure of a gesture that is absolutely impotent in this case – I would *point with my finger at* the pathic dimension of touch. This theme figuring in many ways in the phenomenological tradition – most prominently in the thinking of Erwin Strauss, Henri Maldiney, Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernhard Waldenfels – takes us to the obscure borderlands of the phenomenal world and beyond the domain of visually structured representations.⁴⁷

The term “pathic” is derived from the Greek *pathos*, which refers to sensitivity, sentience, affectability, and suffering. As is well known, this kind of sensibility functions as a protective mechanism and in this way serves the life processes. It is also well known that *pathos* is a necessary aspect to every theoretical engagement with a subject matter not yet known. Transformation in and through contact is one of the basic concerns of hermeneutics, for example.⁴⁸ But there is still another concrete, though usually ignored, signification to *pathos*: exposure to something excessive and unexpected that may leave painful marks, wounds even. Accordingly, the pathic aspect of touch is a matter not only of active sentience, but also, and more generally, of *susceptibility to ruptures in the horizon of abilities*. As Bernhard Waldenfels has shown in *Bruchlinien der*

47 Cf. Sami Santanen in this volume.

48 Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode – Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik. Gesammelte Werke, Band 1*, Tübingen, J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990 [1960].

Erfahrung in great detail, such ruptures characterize the structure of experience at large.⁴⁹

The fractured horizon of pathic experience pre-exists all psychological and social settings of tactile and affective behaviour. In this terrain touch appears as a “sense for foreignness” (*Fremdheitssinn* as Waldenfels puts it – Derrida’s related term is “tact”)⁵⁰. Touch is “sense for foreignness” in two senses: Firstly, insofar as touching is an ability, it is an ability to touch something foreign, something other. It is impossible to touch the same. We do not feel the same, we feel only differences – or, in the extreme case, the lack of them. Secondly, insofar as the pathic moment of touching marks the rupture of all forms of being able, it implies that touching relies on a foreign element, which necessarily remains beyond reach, untouchable, not as “the untouchable” in general but as something that a singular touch encounters at – or as – its own limit. The pathic moment cannot be pointed at, it needs to be felt. In discourse, this implies engagement in presentation.

The figure of rupture, the “fracture-lines” (*Bruchlinien*), in Waldenfels’ delicate attempt of describing the pathic reality of experience hints at the extreme difficulties of overcoming the deep-rooted conceptual setting where continuities, coherences and abilities are privileged, whereas interruptions, gaps and inabilities are denigrated. In this setting, the pathic tends to be the underdog. As Dieter Kliche suggests, we can historically speak even of *pathologization* of pathos.⁵¹ He shows how the origins of modern

49 Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 71.

50 Ibid., 64.

51 Dieter Kliche “Ästhetische Pathologie: Ein Kapitel aus der Begriffsgeschichte der Ästhetik”, *Archiv der Begriffsgeschichte* Band 42, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001, 197–229. See also Kathrin Busch, “Ästhetiken radikalisieter Passivität”, *Internationales Jahrbuch für Medienphilosophie* Band 3, eds. Jörg Sternagel and Michael Mayer, Berlin, de Gruyter, 2017, 52–54.

aesthetics is marked by a shift from Baroque rhetorics that combines the knowledge of the passions with ethics and medicine to a separation of aesthetics from anthropology that involves a devaluation of the concept “pathological”. In Kliche’s diagnosis, the philosophical skepticism towards affectivity gaining a systematical shape in the critical philosophy of Kant marked the point where *pathos* was subordinated to active mental capacities. This shift in conceptual framing – not Kant’s philosophy as such – contributed to the fact that *pathos* came to be seen as something pathological, morbid, a lesser capacity of the senses that belongs to the concerns of anthropology rather than those of aesthetics.⁵² This shift led to a diffusion of the concept of aesthetics; and it seems to be haunting the discourse on touching as well. In philosophical debates, the hierachization of abilities implied in the pathologization of pathos has been contested in many ways. Various gestures of rehabilitating *pathos* can be discerned in the writings of Nietzsche, Artaud, Blanchot, Deleuze and Agamben, and others.⁵³ All these gestures, in their peculiar ways, address the ways in which the pathic is constitutive of experience at large. In knowledge-oriented discursive settings, however, the pathic moment tends to become subordinated to knowledge production.

TOUCH AND MEDIA

What can be gained from this schematic account of the multiple senses of touch with regard to contemporary media technologies that in one way or another involve touching?

I would like to end this essay by outlining some media aesthetic implications of my take on the topic “touch” culminating in highlighting the pathic dimension of touching.

52 Kliche “Ästhetische Pathologie”, 201.

53 Busch, “Ästhetiken radikalisieter Passivität”, 51–62.

Firstly, we need to take into account the fact that the enabling limits of human experience are constantly being displaced – both on individual and phylogenetic levels – through the very movement of experience. This movement requires and presupposes sensitivity to the boundaries between the proper and the improper, between the familiar and the foreign. On this elemental level, new media technologies do not introduce any radical break into the structure of experience, but they can function as catalysts of transformation.

Secondly, in these sensitive areas – at the enabling limits of human experience – we are invited to think in terms of immunity, contamination and responsibility, which should make us aware of the high relevance of the overdetermined theme of touch in this context. Insofar as media technologies touch upon these boundaries and contribute to shifting them by introducing new practices, new conceptualizations, and new sensibilities, they have effects on our existential integrity. New media do not only introduce new social mediations in our lives, they also reshape our subjectivity. This means that the goings-on of the media technological operations that touch upon the enabling limits of experience become an ethical question in terms of “production of ethical subjectivity”.⁵⁴ Touch as the “sense for foreignness” prototypical of pathic experience plays here a crucial role.

We live in a world where the imperative of making present constitutes one of the key issues of contemporary media technologies. One could even speak of a media technological megatrend, that is, the aspiration to eliminate the effect of spatial-temporal distances, to bring things right to our fingertips “in real time”. In this sense, the mainstream of media technology of our times consists of techniques of making present. Within this megatrend, touch is under-

54 Boothroyd, “Touch, Time and Technics”, 333.

stood from a point of view that Derrida calls “haptocentric”: the sense of touch is seen as the guarantee of tangible reality and the ultimate support for optical intuitionism.⁵⁵ The haptocentric ideal is a seamless co-operation between vision and touch, and a clear-cut distinction between the different senses of touch.⁵⁶ This is attempted at through representational harnessing of the sense of touch. With Cathryn Vasseleu we could also speak of *formalization of touch* that involves a reduction of the ambiguity of touching through technical and conceptual processes that aim at separating the affective and tactile dimensions of touch from each other in order to make them manageable and programmable within digital systems.⁵⁷

Modern neurophysiological research has, in this vein, chopped the sense of touch into neurophysiological subsystems determined by different receptors (temperature, movement, pain, balance, etc.).⁵⁸ However, the difficulties of defining touch are also appearing in neurophysiology: efforts to locate the subsystems as clearly defined representations in the cortex that would be comparable with the centres of sight and hearing, have so far failed.⁵⁹

55 Cf. Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, passim.

56 On the critique of “haptocentrism” put forward by Derrida, see Elo “Digital Finger”, 2012.

57 According to Vasseleu, this leads to prioritization of tactility over affectivity. Cathryn Vasseleu, “Touch, Digital Communication and the Ticklish”, passim. In other words: tactility is programmed to *serve* affectivity, which in turn is *formatted* by tactile mediations. Cf. Elo “Formatting”

58 See e.g. Matthew Ratcliffe, ‘Touch and Situatedness’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 16, no.3, 2007, 299–322; Peter W. Ross, ‘Common sense about qualities and senses’, *Philosophical Studies* 138, 2008, 299–316; Thomas A. Stoffregen and Benoit G. Bardy, ‘On specification of the senses’, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 24, 2001, 195–261.

59 Waldenfels makes this observation in 2002. Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung*, 69.

From a neuroscientific point of view, the senses of touch seem to be embedded in a distributed network of brain regions.⁶⁰

Today, “haptocentric” rhetoric is used to prop up the idea of fullness of presence. Media operations are designed and programmed so as to enhance this fullness. Analysing the pathic moment of touch offers us an occasion to as well as matter for a critical investigation of the various formatting processes active in the background of the megatrend of making present. It helps us trace the ways in which conceptual, sensuous, discursive, affective and technological formats are intertwined in interface technologies.⁶¹ Against this background, contemporary touchscreen technologies, for example, appear as sites where not only the multiple aspects and ambivalent tendencies of touch but also the enabling limits of experience at large are negotiated – on the level of our fingertips.

As soon as touch is articulated as a technological application field, as soon as it is harnessed⁶² and formalized⁶³, the approach to it is by definition haptocentric, since the very idea of applying knowledge of touch is based on and motivated by representations of touch (as a sense modality). Interface design is typically motivated by operative structures that can best be described in terms of a feedback that affirms sensory and mental recognition and forms in

60 Cf. Sjoerd J. H. Ebisch et al., “Differential Involvement of Somatosensory and Interoceptive Cortices during the Observation of Affective Touch”, *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, Volume 23, Issue 7, 2011, 1808–1822.

61 Elo, “Formatting the Senses of Touch”, 2012.

62 Cf. David P. Parisi, “Tactile Modernity: On the Rationalization of Touch in the Nineteenth Century”, *Literature and Media in the Nineteenth Century: Image, Sound, and Touch*, eds. Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011, 189–213.

63 Cf. Vasseleu, “Touch, Digital Communication and the Ticklish”, passim.

its functionality a circle that feeds the sense of selfpower.⁶⁴ Within this haptocentric mainstream, the pathic moment of touch and the ethical dimensions of feedback remain in a dead angle. As noted already above, the ethical implications of “sensory enhancement” are not restricted to the level of practices and attitudes (in other words, the mediations of an ethical relationship), at stake are also the mechanisms of the constitution of an ethical subject.⁶⁵

To sum up, the harnessing of touch can be seen as an effect of the intricate interplay between technological, sensuous, discursive and affective aspects of formatting. Insofar as the implicit or explicit aim is to functionalize touch and to integrate it into a system of digital mediations, these processes of formatting tend to represent touch as a sense that works in synchrony with vision and offers a support for optical intuitionism. They enhance the role of touch as the guarantee of sensory certainty.

The logic of main stream interface design in digital culture is that of multiple targeting: it singles out functional gestures; builds up selected patterns of social behaviour; prioritises certain ways of making contact and staying in contact. Functionality of active touch and tactility is privileged. Haptocentric processes of formatting contribute to upholding the image of tangibility as the epitome of touching as well as the conception of the sense of touch as the guarantee of sensory certainty. All kinds of dysfunctionalities tend to be excluded as something pathological, as not belonging to a “healthy” communication, which in light of the casual imperative “let’s keep in touch” appears as a strange deferral of any kind of pathic event.

COLON

I began this essay by reflecting on its title. Even if I discussed various aspects of it in great detail, one element remained untouched: the colon separating and connecting the two parts of the title. Now, when focused on, this punctuation mark suddenly gains significant weight. It gives the impression of being the point around which most of the articulations of the whole essay are organized. It appears as the fulcrum of the essay. But “colon”, being also the name of the main part of the large intestine passing from the *caecum* to the *rectum*, also hints at the limits of the organic whole of the essay. It hints at the ways in which, at the limits of writing, the sense is “exscribed”, as Nancy might put it.⁶⁶ The moment of pertinence marked by the colon makes a point that cannot be a full stop.

64 Robert Pfaller has highlighted the constitutive role of this kind of circuit in contemporary Western culture at large in *Die Illusionen der anderen, Über das Lustprinzip in der Kultur*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2002.

65 Boothroyd, “Touch, Time and Technics”, 333–335.

66 Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy: “Exscription”, trans. Katherine Lydon, *Yale French Studies*, No. 78, 1990, 63–65.