

## On the Ambiguity of Touch: A Genealogical Summary of Oppositions

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### Introduction

One's very initial engagement with the world is conditioned by the sense of touch. The skin that envelops the organism is both a place of primary love and intrigue: if, on the one hand, the skin sustains the mother-child couple connected through the nurturing touch, it also introduces a locus of separation between them as well as between one and the world. Touching objects, people, animals, plants, or ourselves is thus, even before other senses are developed, a form of preliminary formulation of subject emergence, for it is both what connects and what demarcates one from the enigmatic Otherness. The touch, which will represent the thematic nucleus of this text, functions as a precondition of the outline of the subject. The mentioned is implied by Didier Anzieu's concept of "the skin ego" (Anzieu, 2016). The ambiguities of inner-outer, subject-object, I-other, which are both sustained and collapsed through touch as - in a literal sense - a contact between porous surfaces, make it a sense that eludes placement within clear conceptual categories. The tendency to ordeal what escapes firm meanings, the tendency to deal with "anomalies" (Douglas, 1966), or "abjects" (Kristeva, 1982), can be clearly detected when the wider social perspectives on touch are examined through a historical, narrational lens.

Human relationship to touch, which is essentially conditioned by the human understanding of its own carnality, can be summarized through a genealogy of opposites. Since the emergence of the "hierarchical social" until today, one can trace radically contrasting conceptualizations of touch: be it sublime or repulsive, the ultimate instrument of verification of truth or an instance of the primordial, a source pleasure or humiliation, touch is an utterly ambiguous term (Šterk, 2020). Such opposites have either coexisted within a single notion of touch or, together with certain ideological shifts, changed with different historical periods. The aim of the following paragraphs is thus to unfold the socio-ideological determinants behind the hierarchy of the sensory-perceptual modalities. The latter is, as claimed by Constance Classen in her monograph *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (2012), always reliant upon the socio-cultural factors. Moreover, a hierarchical classification of the senses in both Western metaphysical tradition as well as a general social (dis)regard towards specific modes of sensory

perception has been oftentimes grounded in a conceptual opposition between the sense of sight and the sense of touch. Our attempt to comprehend historical and contemporary attitudes towards the senses is thus not aimed at a mere reveal of the place of touch within the mentioned hierarchical structures of the senses. Instead, we wish to place an emphasis on the wider social significations of the well-known antinomy between the skin and the eye and point towards a synesthetic bridging of such a distinction of the senses. Such a bridge, we claim, lies within the understanding of touch not as something tactile, but as haptic. In addition, we strive to avoid tackling touch as either a pure philosophical or metaphorical concept, stripped of the phenomenological and literal, or as something that can only represent its most literal meaning. Touch combines, we claim, both metaphorical and carnal, and the suspension as well as reconstitution of the subject. It is, thus, a place of elusive ambivalence.

According to Iris Young (1988) “haptic” is related to the sensorial as such and entails an inclination towards annihilating the distance between the Gaze and the object, producing an affective response. Haptic can be understood as that which functions beyond the logic of the “phallic economy” and its separation between the subject and the object (Marks, 1998). Our understanding of touch as haptic (and not solely as tactile) aims not at disregarding touch as something deeply intertwined with skin and the bodily. Instead, “touch as haptic” allows us to pay special attention to an ethical dimension of touch, the dimension which, through a suspension of the distinction between the subject and the object, opens space for an empathetic dialogue. Therefore, this text postulates touch as an interplay between proximity, the body, the senses, and the subject and the object whose clear demarcation is, when touch occurs, eradicated. There is, after all, a possibility of “the touch with the eyes”.

Although the haptic presupposes a certain dynamic, common to touch, to be attainable through other senses, touch is also, essentially and originally, tactile. A meditation on touch as both haptic (eradicating the demarcation line between the subject and the object) and tactile (executed between living bodies) is nowadays utterly important, if not even crucial. In the era where migrant and minority bodies have become numerical units to be captured by media statistics and where “online solidarity” is mostly blatantly oblivious to the palpable, embodied realities of people, writing of touch aims towards producing a certain Brechtian “alienation effect” that would reveal the common disembodied passivity proper to the scopic observer of the virtual sphere. Furthermore, to speak of touch means to put into question the concept of touch itself. Conceptualizing touch as something that bridges the distinction between the subject and the object and as that which is inherently connected to the empathetic and ethical,

uncovers certain brutally tactile facets of touch. To think of touch is therefore to consider how it (dis)connects from the “excessive touch” of violence and war or from the “untouchability of the marginalized” as a political strategy of oppression. The duty to examine the nonsensical excess touch of war or the nonsensical untouchability of the marginalized is connected with subverting the notion of people as numbers in the metonymical functioning of the world wide web.

If all of the listed (one could speak of “skewed” forms of touch) had already taken place in the past, it was only the recent COVID-19 pandemic that, through prohibiting physical touch, revealed its long-lasting absence from contemporary life. The absence of touch and virtualization of bodies in which actual palpable and corporeal realities are overlooked, became heightened and thus revealed in all of their harshness. The imperative of a 1.5 meters of distance between moving bodies may have eradicated touch. But it has also made us more attentive to its individual and socio-political dimensions and its position in the contemporary era. As commented by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, the pandemic “offers us a magnifying mirror of our planetary contagion” (Nancy and Lawtoo, 2022). Our undertaking to trace a genealogy of touch is consequently an implicit reconsideration of contemporary socio-political production of subject/object categories and the way bodies and the world are interwoven precisely through touch, be it tactile or haptic. But what exactly do we mean when we say “touch”? If touch is the absolute minimum for existence without which no organism can survive, its destruction necessarily putting the latter to death (Aristotle), then perhaps its dense intertwinement with birth, death, separation and individuation makes it difficult to be grasped by simple definition. Our approach is based on a philosophical delimitation of touch that understands it in an ontological (crucial for the subject and their empathetic development) and phenomenological (dependent on the senses and embodiment) perspective. As such, touch is always a failed endeavor.

### **Touch as failure**

The possibility of the body to touch uncovers its porous nature. Such porosity, symbolically limited by the skin (itself being porous), represents a place of endless displacement of the subject. It presupposes, namely, constant encounters with various forms of Otherness and a never ending process of redefinition of the subject. Furthermore, it demands a constant engagement with one’s task to separate what we conceptualize as “touch” (a haptic empathetic response where subject and object are not fixed categories) from excess, violent touch. As remarked by Jacques Derrida (2005), touch is essentially what fails, for it is untouchable and

fugitive in its unwillingness to stabilize the passive relationship of the “touched” and the active relationship of the “touching”. A touch devoid of mutuality, therefore, in philosophical terms, is based on a violent fixation of the two poles of touch. This violent touch was, concretely speaking, addressed with the *#MeToo* movement. To consider how touch is conceptualized within different historical discourses is also an attempt to highlight the limit between “touch”, which we understand as an empathetic encounter, and “excessive touch”.

The first finds its philosophical resonance in some aspects of Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of the “caress”. The caress is a gesture of seeking that respects the plurality of what manifests itself to the subject as Otherness. Thus, in a mutual touch with a loved one, there appears something unreachable. The subject is moved (touched) by the endless processes of meeting the never completely knowable Other. What we postulate as touch is consequently characterized by a functioning different from that of “hold (on to)”, whose etymological roots describe it as “to contain, to grasp, to retain”. This failed touch, around which we weave our essay, may find itself, besides caress, close to “contact”. The Latin *con* (together with) and *tangere* (to touch) are, in an etymological sense, congruent with the nonpossessiveness embedded in our understanding of touch.

Touch is the unclosable opening of a subject to the world. Even if one closes their eyes, wears earplugs, or is unable to taste and smell, there is always a part of them that is touching (both physically and metaphorically, as a living being in the world) an object or the rest of existence. As disclosed in previous paragraphs, touch can be usurped, skewed and locked within stiff categories of activity and passivity and thus a source of violence and trauma. However, an empathetic touch is a basic precondition for the feeling of safety. The mentioned relates not only to childhood years, but is paramount in all life stages. As some studies have shown, physical touch, such as a simple tap on the shoulder, promotes somatic and emotional well-being (Morrison, 2016); (Burlison and Davis, 2014). Notwithstanding its importance for subject formation, the touch as a theme of inquiry had for centuries been omitted from Western metaphysics, grounded in the uncoupling of the mind and the body.

### **Touch in contemporary humanities**

This radical separation of the psyche from the corporeal that privileged the first at the expense of the latter, can be traced back to Plato (2021). In the *Republic*, the philosopher presupposes the existence of the world of Ideas one can reach only as long as they fulfill a certain precondition. One must be freed from the “cheating senses”. In order for the soul to touch the

truth, we have to give up the carnal touch.

This dualistic legacy and the degradation of touch as the most irrational of all senses was further solidified with the rationalistic project of the enlightenment. During the last decades, however, the phenomenon of touch has been gaining relevance in academia, art, and technology. Undertakings common to haptic philosophy, carnal hermeneutics, haptic technology, and numerous performances and contemporary artistic projects and practices that deal with touch as the core of their work have played an important role in alleviating the dominant audio-visual culture of the modern world. A good example is the performative dance project *T-dance* by the German dancer and choreographer Vera Tussing. The performance features four dancers connected with one another by wooden sticks between their shoulders. As they move, careful that the sticks would not fall, they underline the questions of touch at a distance, the interplay of personal and collective in touch, and the virtualization of contemporary society who, one may say, is still searching its ways to touch within the spatio-temporal coordinates of the internet. Even though we are “chronically online” and attempt to draw alternative ways of touching (such as ASMR) in this new context, the time-space categories that define touch in the physical space are totally different to those that frame virtual worlds. With their immediacy, the space is radically shrunk, if not nullified. But so is time. The flickering images represent a constant stringing, which makes any sort of slow and thoughtful contemplation seem really difficult. So, touch is to be either recreated in the context of the internet or redefined or reawakened in the physical world. The once absent attention contemporary humanities have started to place on touch and the body are thus of little surprise.

However, with some of the focus on touch, one cannot but shake the impression that touch is utilized as a niche peculiarity, which is always thought of in opposition to the ruling or the authoritative structures of society. In accordance with such an apprehension, touch remains locked within a constation of conceptual binarisms and imputed with an inability to escape its own marginal condition. Therefore, it gives an impression of an irrational Otherness, sacrificed for the needs of a performed institutionalized subversion.

Instead, we claim, touch is neither quite opposing nor dominant. The importance to meditate on it lies in the fact it falls into an ambiguous place of intimate and political, of personal and social. If the mere existence of touch represents the absolute foundation of corporeal and subjective autonomy of a person (if I can touch, I am not an amorphous entity), touch is also something that constitutes a community (Aumiller, 2021). The codification of touch, which installs the way in which we are allowed to touch, represents a non-verbal corpus of

community. A violent touch can be executed on a systemic or on a personal level, but, intertextually speaking, these layers always intersect. A touch may therefore be more or less intimate, but it ultimately almost intertwines with wider social codifications of touch. The acknowledgement of the importance of the embodiment and the touch is thus crucial, for it unveils the real, palpable existence of human beings that bear the weight of society (nowhere else but) on their physical bodies, connected with the world through touch.

### **The eye vs. the skin**

The centuries-long obliteration of touch from the Western *episteme* is well expressed in the hierarchical opposition between the skin and the eye. Ocularcentrism as a distinctive characteristic of the Western metaphysics (Jay, 1988) has been further exacerbated by the scopophilic arrangement of modern technology, in particular social media. Initiated by Plato and perfected with the enlightenment project, ocularcentrism enthroned the sense of sight as a principal mechanism of rational access to the sensible reality. This supposition of the inherent overlapping between sight, science, and rationality that is based on the imperative of preserving distance between the subject (active) and the object (passive) of perception as something that according to the Western epistemological tradition all three have in common, caused the erasure of tactile and bodily foundations of many paradigms. Paterson (2012) provides the example of geometry and measuring units whose basic principles were at first operationalized through the early mathematicians' interactions with the physical space, body, and touch. Geometry as a prototypical invention of visual abstraction demanded the oblivion of corporeality, touch, and of a diverse spectrum of somatic perceptions as preconditions for the conceptualization of abstract categories (ibidem).

A wide corpus of antique texts was written alongside with the disciplinary emancipation of Ancient Greek philosophy. These texts, some of them more and others less explicitly, present the rudiments of what one may call tenacious "somatophobia" (Grosz, 2008, 4). The author of *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* Elizabeth Grosz connects it with the "establishment of philosophy as a form of knowing, a form of rationality, only through the disavowal of the body, specifically the male body, and the corresponding elevation of mind as a disembodied term (Grosz, 1994, 4–5). Plato's notion of *chora* – a term that was centuries later adopted and critically subverted by Julia Kristeva – that appears in his work *Timaeus* interweaves a violent splitting of form and matter, body and mind, *soma* and *idea*, with the binary couple of male and female. Western epistemological thought is therefore rooted in the

usage of the dichotomous and hierarchical distinction of “man” and “woman” that attempts to rationalize relations of dominance and submission (ibidem). Touch as the most carnal sense was deemed as “low”, “irrational”, and belonging to the world of incomprehensible wildness of nature. As such, it was confined within the category of “pure matter” that counted on the concept of logic as its diametrical antipode.

If on the one hand corporeal and material turns in art and humanities delegated attention to both body and touch, the dominance of the visual over the corporeal still remains a symptom even in the 21st century. Stepcounter apps and similar techno-digital inventions that try to capture the body into numerical or pictorial representation very much abide by the notion of the “savage body” whose somatic ferocity must be rationally tamed by the eye in order to function.

### **The Christian touch**

In the reasoning of Christian theology, the contradistinction between form and matter was translated into the separation of soul, granted to the human by God, and the ephemeral, lustful carnality (Grosz, 2008). Nevertheless, Christian messianism concerns a particular ethos of embodiment that merges the divine and the Earthly, encapsulated in Jesus as the central figure of Christian theology. Moreover, the body is of central importance in religious rituals. Namely, it is not only that the engaged, moving body is a requirement for obtaining sacraments. The Eucharist itself is founded upon the notion of the body and its metaphorical passing between the Earthly and the divine. A similar ambiguity as the one that applies to the body can be detected in Christian consideration of touch.

In the *New Testament*, touch functions as a backbone for numerous religious images and allegories. Such segments of the text that build on the motive of touch as a concept that can symbolize both divine and the sinful, document an utterly ambiguous attitude towards touch. If the touch of Christ heals and cloaks from death and thus acts as a conductor between the mortal earthly and the eternal divine, then Christian ethics can be mostly designated as an ethics of bodily co-presence (Grundmann, 2015). The scriptures we are referring to, namely, portray a moral code of touch, which defies repulsion, fear, and disease<sup>1</sup>.

One can, on the other hand, in the *Bible* too, detect representations of touch as a lure into the perverse and forbidden. Unlike those referred to above such passages base Christian religious

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<sup>1</sup> A recent major challenge to such interpretation of ethics has been the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the discourse of ethics changed from selfless touch to the prohibition of touch.

doctrine on prohibition, regulation, and negation of touch. The most renowned depictions of touch in the religious text in question – at least if we presuppose their usage and questioning in art and philosophy as our main criteria – are most likely to be found in the *Gospel of John*. In all the ambiguity they embody through the reference to touch, the pieces we have in mind were compared and analyzed by Jean-Luc Nancy, “the first proper philosopher of touch”, a title he has been given by his colleague Jacques Derrida who had dedicated him the book *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Derrida, 2005, 4). In *Noli me tangere*, Nancy (2003) juxtaposes the scene *Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene* to the scene *Jesus Appears to Thomas*, which are described in the 20th chapter of *The Book of John*. The first sequence concerns Jesus’ apparition to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection. She is mourning him in the garden and, although he is right there, in the form of a gardener, does not recognize him right away. When she does, however, his response is “*mé mou háptou*” (in Greek) or “*noli me tangere*” (in Latin). The most common translation of this phrase is “cease holding on to me”. What the mentioned segment implies is a doctrine of faith that rests upon firm trust that gives up any need for tangible confirmation or empirical evidence. “The touch of the divine” that depends on true belief is thus only possible without the demand for material verification (ibidem). Perhaps this void, the emptying of physical touch that stands at the core of religious belief, suggests the ultimate unknowability of God. An ontological puzzle that can only ever be felt through phantomable glimpses. Rudolf Otto’s *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*, with which he describes the numinous, cannot be materially touched precisely because of an otherness that is too immense and ineffable (Otto, 1958). The gist is probably, however, in the fact that giving up the ultimate thing that enables one’s existence (touch, let us remember, is the precondition of life), represents the greatest sacrifice. Thus, a most notable leap of faith.

If he repudiates Mary Magdalene’s plea to touch him, Jesus does not, however, act in the same manner in the scene that is also known under its alternative name *Doubting Thomas*. Namely, Jesus does not refuse Thomas’ demand to touch him, but when touched by the named disciple, he speaks the known phrase “/because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” A concept of touch that stems from the described two passages is therefore one that confirms the understanding of touch as the ultimate instrument for verifying the truth, while at the same time suggests the renunciation of physical touch as a precondition for the touch of faith.



Yet, this oxymoron of faith draws upon the interplay of material and spiritual touch precisely because, in real life, one should most likely come into literal contact with things (through haptic engagement) when seeking the “truth”. This should be so at least when the field of inquiry addresses actual, palpable realities of people. The mentioned mostly relates to ivory towers of academia, when, in fact, the truth always already relates to embodiment and the haptic (as well as tactile) touch between subjects and the world. Touch as haptic is here an important concept because it may be thought of as a bridge between tactile understanding and emotional knowing. If one, we claim, can never fully exist without the other, which makes them more two sides of a continuum of seeking for truth than two distinct things, then it is precisely touch in the sense of haptic engagement that enables them to come together.

Still, one should have in mind constant processes of change and the plurality of what we swiftly term as “truth”. Touch oscillates between subject and object, Earthly and divine, and material and spiritual, which makes it an instance of high ambiguity. Nevertheless, touch may be taken into possession and turned into a violent one. When codified, it is also what cocreates communities and thus functions as a bridge between intimate and social. Therefore, as something that testifies about actual realities of people, there is something harshly unambiguous about it.

### **Tactile cosmology and touching objects**

Let us move several centuries forward, to The Middle ages. Historical science’s nomenclature that refers to the period in question as “the Dark Middle Ages” suggests that during those times, the corporeal and touch were violently tamed. Classen (2012) problematizes such generalizing, which she refers to as an invention of a post-enlightenment view on history, which essentially conceals the fact that the life in the Middle Ages was defined by a “tactile cosmology” (Classen, 2012, 27). The universe was envisaged through conceptual oppositions of hot and cold and moist and dry (ibidem). Because these sensations are exclusively accessible through touch, touch was acknowledged as the ultimate pathway to truth. Confirmation for such claims can be found in numerous artworks, which depict God and the divine touch in terms of a craftsman, a sculptor, who used their own hands to create Adam (ibidem). Furthermore, in the light of the new interest in the individual subject and physiology, many Christian societies in the Late Middle Ages became fixated on the imaginary of Christ’s suffering and its replication on people’s own bodies. Christ’s wounds, when pressed onto a believer’s own body, were believed to bring one closer to an intimate dialogue with the divine (Classen, 2012).

Diptych Löwenstein, which was painted in 1457 and is nowadays displayed in the National Museum in Nürnberg, is composed of two separate, but conceptually intertwined images. The right side of the diptych shows Count Löwenstein holding a book in an ecstatic manner, and, astonished by something that seems ineffable, stares in the direction of the other image in the diptych. The core motive of the latter is Jesus whose body is encircled with a golden aureole. Blood is dripping out of the open wound on his ribs (Pleydenwurff, 1457).

The described artwork – as well as others based on a similar trope – undermine the idea of the visual image as the necessary birthplace of spiritual and cognitive realizations that dominated in the religious and intellectual discourse of the High Middle Ages. According to Ganz (2017), sight did enjoy the highest status among the senses, but when it came to everyday life, a generally accepted hierarchy of the senses could not be spoken of in the West. A confirmation may be found in the aesthetics of medieval sacral texts: its calligraphy, ornaments, and embroidery that turned mere sequences of letters, woven into tales, into sacred objects able to mediate between the earthly and the divine worlds (Ganz, 2017). The process of reading such texts was therefore a specific visual and tactile undertaking, a choreography of the seen and the touched.

### **Away from touch: the supremacy of the rationality and the eye**

As claimed by Martin Jay (1993), renaissance and the scientific revolution engendered an absolute supremacy of “ocularcentrism” and the corresponding material dispositif that produces a series of scopic regimes or subcultures of visibility (if we refuse to understand the term “scopic regime” as a monolith). At the same time, the acts and rituals of practicing belief were turned into more individual, discrete forms. Stemming from demands posed by reformation and the protestant movement, such a leaning towards lessening the role of touch and the body in collective religious manifestations not only diminished the importance of physical objects in the processes of worship, but also transformed the practice of collective ceremonies, which had been a privileged field of touch among worshipers (Classen, 2012).

The conviction, which asserted the primacy of reason and the separation between the body and the soul was given its most influential form with the writings of Rene Descartes. Despite it being already present in the philosophy of the Old Greeks, Descartes perfected the arguments behind the idea and adapted it to demands of modern science (as opposed to the Greek *episteme*). Furthermore, he did not merely conceptualize the split between mind and body. His

main invention laid in uprooting the soul – or the mind – from nature, in pulling the reason out of the domains of the palpable world, making corporeality and touch forever inferior to consciousness. Touch as the most carnal of the senses was pushed on the lowest position.

Another example of the ambivalent conceptualizations of touch that suggest Western society's inability to conceive of touch beyond passing through oppositions might be found in Hegel. This philosopher agreed with Aristotle's operationalization of touch as the most basic dimension of sensing. For Hegel, the purpose of sense-perception is the translation of the outer conditions of the world into a perfect inner form, which enables the emergence of an "I" as a principal category of consciousness and as a distinctive entity. "*Aufheben*", the core term of the Hegelian dialectics, refers to both steadiness and change, to lowering and rising, and is thus conditioned by touch as the force that imbues amorphous matter with difference (Vranešević, 2021). However, Hegel's "Spirit" gravitates towards the abstract. Consequently, Hegel's notion of manifestation of the Spirit presupposes progressive abandonment of the tactile for the ever more abstract, disembodied, and self-referential abstract (Pippin, 2002). Yet, there is something utterly proper to touch in sublation, as the Spirit, through negativity and resolution, (never quite) touches itself. This "almost touching" is congruent with Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of touch in *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*. As previously shown, the author defines touch as having a structure of an asymptote. Consequently, the structure of touch is that of constantly approaching the line, without ever fully touching it.

Visiting museums in the 18th century was significantly different than today's version of the same activity. Museums not only used to allow touching of the exhibited objects, but invited visitors to touch the surfaces, emphasizing the contact between the human body and museum artefacts as a medium for bringing a certain "then" and "there" into "here" and "now". Such an approach to behaviour protocol in museums underwent a radical change in the 19th century, when artworks and objects came under the exclusive domain of sight. The mentioned shift occurred at the same time as the philosophy of aesthetics was conceptualized not as science of the entire sphere of sense-perception (as the word *aisthesis* was used in Aristotle's philosophy), but as limited to the field of (especially visual) art (Komel, 2008).

The prohibition of touch that transformed forms of institutional encounters between viewers and objects most likely outgrows the pragmatic tendency for preventing wear of the exhibited objects. The notions of linear time and endless progress, which stood (stand) in the nucleus of implementation of the enlightenment discourse, in the ruthlessness of the colonial grabbing,

cemented time and transformed artifacts into documents for justifying relations of domination and submission. One-sided, linear manner of viewing history, dictated the untouchability of objects, which were claimed to precisely narrate history. Not only were time and space moulded into a different relation that served the prioritizing of linear progress, but were also stopped in time (with the untouchable artefacts) and made to support the ideological foundations of the colonial West that declared itself a privileged world of sight and denuded of the bestiality of touch. Because touch was believed to have nothing in common with the cognitive and the aesthetic, it was denied its previous constitutive role in the museum experience.

Alois Riegl, a 19th century Viennese art historian who believed an upward progression from haptic to optic art to be the norm of the developed contemporaneity, claimed that such an evolution of the artistic expression is congruent with certain societal changes. What Riegl was implying, namely, was the existence of an intrinsic connection between the emancipation of mental functions from bodily ones on one and the transformation of art into more abstract (optical) forms on the other side (Lee, 2004).

### **Avant-garde movements as bodies against war**

If the approaches to art and religious practices described in previous paragraphs disregard touch and gestate it as a remnant of the irrational animalism, which the human is to leave behind in order to fully exercise the potential of their intellect, then the horrors of World War I and II highlighted touch and the bodily in all their vulnerability. The corporeal was dragged onto the very stage of war brutality: to the battlefields, concentration camps, woods, hospitals, in front of military machines and other bodies. The body, treated as ever only one of the two extreme endpoints on the life-death continuum, became an inorganic formation, one in the series of machines that are coordinated to serve the tendencies of territory claims and necropolitics<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the body became the ultimate totality: reason as the driving force of human individuals dissolved in front of the absolute mortality of the body that, in spite of being treated and functioning as a machine, drowned out the idea of complete separation and hierarchical relationship between the body and the mind. The body was metamorphosed into a center of action and meaning; as the primary unit of the warring zones it exposed both its vulnerable as

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<sup>2</sup> Necropolitics is a concept adopted by the Cameroonian theoretician Achille Mbembe. Re-thinking Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics, he follows Foucault's thinking about the structures of power enabled via subtle control of citizens' lives exercised through normative discursive schemes. Mbembe's central premise concerns the ruling authority's sovereign decision-making regarding questions of who shall live and who shall die (Gržinić, 2021).

well as its murderous facets. Along with the body, the touch, once again, and in an even more explicit manner, became a subject of political manipulation. What can be said about war crimes and war rape if not that they represent a (politically) usurped, skewed, one-sided and utterly excessive touch?

In Europe, the period that stretches between the two world wars marked the origin of avant-garde movements not only as artistic, but also as wholesome socio-cultural phenomena<sup>3</sup>. In terms of the extreme accentuation of the body and its appropriation for nationalist and political agendas representative of war's barbarity, the expansion and growing impact of such movements, once viewed through a retrospective lens, most likely do not come as a surprise. Namely, artistic practices and works normally placed under the umbrella term "avant-garde" movements are frequently designated as the "tactile turn in art". One may consider the painter Yves Tanguy who operates with unusual spatial representations to impact the viewer's feeling of their own body in space or the work of the sensual photographer Man Ray. What the two authors have in common is a proclivity to make their – although visual – oeuvre function in terms of reproducing a bodily effect. Furthermore, avant-garde artists were concerned with the impact of the ephemeral presence of their own bodies among the public, with sonic babbling, and with expressive dance, none of which swore by the previously understood "artwork" as produced artifact (Jolles, 2006). Their activity was based on a "shock effect" and thus on the intended stoppage of everyday practice of bodies, with which they called into question what or who "the body" even is. The described endeavor was meant not only to touch the viewer. Instead, the tactile turn offered a space for reappropriation of corporeality that was violently subjugated during the war. Furthermore, the shock as the movements' main principle acted as an appeal to the viewer, to respond to the touch of shock and reappropriate it from the war ideology, which locked the touch into two extremes: the untouchable, dirty, and alienated on the one, and the excessive, violent, and murderous on the other side.

The Austrian painter Maria Lassnig placed the motive of the body at the pure kernel of her aesthetic idiolect. Expressive self-portraits that most often show only one part of the artist's organism, but twisting, minimizing or enlarging it, can be understood as visual representations of touch *par excellence*. As commented by Lettmann (2017), Lassnig's distinctive style, which she named "*Körpergefühlmalerei*" in the 1940s and can be translated as something similar to

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<sup>3</sup> The term avant-garde was already used in the 19th century, but had not yet been understood in its social critical role.

“painting of the body’s consciousness”, communicates the feelings and sensations of the author’s body during the process of painting. The substance of her work is thus not only about creating a place where a body speaks, translating the carnal into the language of the image, but also about capturing the body in a passing moment. This concept of a “moment” that can be detected in Lassnig’s paintings, molds the body into something utterly touchable and thus seizes the untouchable of the body: the touch itself. The structure of touch, as examined by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, has the form of an asymptote: the touching of touch is impossible, for this point where one might attempt to grasp touch always results in a split between the touched and the touching. A touch is itself an impossibility, an unstoppable, indiscernible shifting between the subject and the object, a symmetrical asymmetry as the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests. Lassnig defies the logic of the endlessly changing body whose porosity makes it an ultimate object – and subject – of touch. Thus, her invention lies in combining the instantaneousness of touch with a motionless past-presence: a paradox, a shock.

Such a touch-oriented explanation of her work may be better articulated with an argument Merleau-Ponty makes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, namely that the “past time is wholly collected up and grasped in the present” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, 80). Besides making the transient body of touch the foundation of her visual art, Lassnig transfers her own proprioception – the inner sensation of her own body – that is the most elusive to the eye precisely into the dominance of the latter: she visualizes the unseeable life of her interior. What Maria Lassnig and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have in common is the understanding of touch as a synesthetic experience that precedes any distinction between sensorial modalities and represents the backbone of sense-perception as such.

### **Merleau-Ponty and the structure of touch**

*Phenomenology of Perception*, which was first published in 1945, is congruent with the art of the same era’s gravitation towards addressing the corporeal and the tactile. Merleau-Ponty’s focal preoccupation in the book in question is the relationship between senses, the human subjects, their moving bodies, and space. The crucial postulation for the purposes of this essay is Merleau-Ponty’s (2005, 106) conceptualization of the general structure of touch, which he arrives at by examining the phenomenon of self-touch:

My body, it was said, is recognized by its power to give me ‘double sensations’: when I touch my right hand with my left, my right hand, as an object, has the strange property of being able to feel too. We have just seen that the two hands are never simultaneously in the relationship of touched and

touching to each other. When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the rôles of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched’.

Touch is thus structured as a continuous flowing between subject and object that is impossible to fixate. What is touched is always already what is being touched. From this postulation stems our previous delineation of touch as different from a skewed, violent touch. The touch we have been focusing on (a caress, a contact) connotes the positive aspects of touch.

For Merleau-Ponty, the dynamics he ascribes to touch represents the prototype for the subject’s being in the world, which is always a being through sense-perception. Touch, one can say, is thus proper to all of the senses, as long as neither side takes the place of the dominant, the active, the mastering: the place of subject. The touch as we understand it in our text therefore more often refers to “haptic” than to “tactile”. Haptic, namely, does not imply a separation between the sense organs, but suggests an involvement of the non-optical within the function of the eye (Ladewig and Schmidgen, 2022).

If art and certain philosophical directions during the previous century resorted to body and touch as their points of reference, then psychoanalysis’ genesis is one that goes away – and not towards – touch. At first, the founding father, Sigmund Freud, practiced psychoanalysis as a bricolage of hypnotherapy and several other techniques that were based on touch. In addition, to defeat the resistance of consciousness blocking the unconscious, Freud utilized a technique of touching his patients on the forehead. His touch served to redirect the attention of consciousness, thus causing a break that enabled Freud to bypass its defense (Anzieu, 2016). However, Freud soon abandoned touch (as well as the gaze), as a mere “trick”, insufficient to treat the ills of the psyche. Psychoanalytic treatment consequently became an exclusive technique of speech that was only possible through a prohibition of touch (Komel, 2008). Since psychoanalysis is based on the concept of the “subject”, and the touch represents something that, as it pours between the subject in the object of touch, dismantles the subject, such a development of psychoanalysis is of no surprise.

One must still, nevertheless, acknowledge the fact that psychoanalysis, too, hinges on the medium of touch in analyzing how subjectivity comes about. Namely, the sensual surface of the body is the one to inaugurate the relation between the inner and the other, the bond between the subject and the rest of the worlds, which is (the bond) the foundation for the distribution of the drives (Grosz, 2008). The distinction between touch and non-touch (the absence of touch)

is a necessary precondition for the establishment of subjectivity and for the self-recognition of the unique existence of their body. Furthermore, even psychoanalysis and several psychotherapeutic approaches place touch, although touch as prohibited and absent, in the nucleus of their practice.

Artistic sphere in the 1960s produced a new radical move towards the corporeal as the vital force of artistic expression. The “performative turn” comes about in an era of a militant cold-war atmosphere, the placing of television into living rooms and the omni-presence and reproducibility of visual images (Paić, 2013).

In this new logic of reproduction and manipulation of the visual, performance as a new artistic practice opted for representing the vulnerability of the body and the transience of moments. Performance artists gave up a narrative structure that marked traditional performative forms and made their work an encounter between them and the audience (ibidem). Following our stance that conceives touch in terms of hapticism, which embodies all senses, then we might understand performance art as a specific exercise of touch between the artist and the viewer. The relationship between them is defined by ephemerality, discontinuity, and overcoming the distinction between the subject and the object.

In *Rhythm 0*, a 6-hour performance by Marina Abramović, the implicit interconnectedness of performative art and touch is overtly addressed. First, the artist put 72 objects on a table and then motionlessly stood in the center of the room. A hair comb, a rose, a knife, honey, a pistol, a scalpel, and other objects that alternate between violence and softness were placed there for the audience to use them on her in any way they would have liked. One potential interpretation of *Rhythm 0* finds that its disturbing artistic value lies within the performance’s radical blurring out of limits. Artists and audience, subject and object, friendly and violent touches became a matter of violent intermixing, producing questions such as “what even is a touch?” or “what even is a subject?”

Humanities and social sciences have been experiencing a radical rotation towards the somatic and the material since the threshold into the third millennium. “New materialism”, which encapsulates an inflow of the corporeal into the general focus on sign and language, functions in a post-constructivist, ontological, and material manner. It strives to shatter the idea of language, culture, and representation as the only valid fields of scientific social analysis (Treanor, 2015).



Although it seems that the body, and the sense of touch, have finally obtained a firm position within the discourse of the contemporary West, one cannot disregard the fact that it is precisely a form of untouchability, enabled through the virtual disembodiment and the reduction of people to numbers to be captured by statistical data, that is still at work in contemporary geopolitical and social strategies of exclusion. The shoving of the “Other” to the margins of cities and states (one can think of the refugee crisis in Europe that was especially prominent in 2015), and their aseptic exclusion on the edges of society, turns the “Other” into an untouchable category. Even though untouchable, the “Other” is at the same time touched by the excessive touch of a death threat that reduces him/her onto their pure existence. In such cases, we claim, the touch in question is a skewed, one-directional one, which does not acknowledge the subjectivity of the so-called Other. As noted by Aumiller (2021), the idea of community sustains itself through prohibition, regulation, and imperative of touch.

## **Conclusion**

In the present text, we tackled touch as a phenomenon with a very complex genealogy, which is always convoluted with wider social conditions. Touch is, as we have shown, a highly ambivalent concept: it distresses the categorical borders between inner and outer, intimate and political, and subject and object. However, there is also something brutally unambiguous in the direct, corporeal touch. To conclude, we present one final example of the ambiguous position of touch in society: if contemporary art and present-day humanities struggle to revive the focus on otherwise neglected meaning of touch in the human life, then the predominant audio-visuality of modern technology generates a general absence of touch from our everyday lives. The outlined fact was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemics, who produced a certain Brechtian “alienation effect” with regards to the human relationship with touch. It emphasized and widened an already existing cavity in the subject’s haptic engagement with the physical space. However, touch is of crucial importance for the emergence and constant reformulation of the subject. Touch is an important reservoir of memories as well as a fundamental way to experience otherness. By touching people, animals, or surfaces one learns about others’ as well as their own limits. The subject helps shape and is herself shaped by touching, by entering into contact with the world. A lack of touch, which is accompanied by a “quietness of touch” within humanities, a quietness that has only recently started to be addressed, is not without consequence precisely because of its constitutive role in the subject’s formation. Thus,

questions related to touch, as well those that are linked with its place within and in opposition to the digital, should be thoroughly confronted in humanities as well as in everyday life.

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