In the TV series “Pushing Daisies” (Bryan Fuller, 2007–2008), a gentle touch is all it takes to bring the dead back to life and send the living to their graves. The show’s protagonist, a pie-maker named Ned, has the gift of reanimating the dead by touching them. Once revived, he or she will die again, and this time for good, at another tap from Ned. To complicate matters, the reanimation must not last for more than a minute, or death, to make up for the loss, snatches a substitute: someone – or, in some instances, an animal – nearby drops dead. Ned uses his special talent to help solve murder cases: he briefly brings victims back to life, finds out the murderer’s name, and then sends them back to the netherworld with a touch of his finger. His own girlfriend, Chuck, has benefited from permanent reanimation, which makes for a complicated relationship: they kiss with a sheet of thin plastic wrap between their lips, and their life together is an over the top choreography of closeness without physical contact, a rich source of slapstick comedy that the show exploits to great effect.

The garishly colorful imagery of “Pushing Daisies” reflects a constellation of motifs that is central to the study of the sense of touch as a medium and boundary, and hence also to the question of touch as a figure of reflection on mediation and sociality: the dangerous affinity linking tactile perception to eroticism; the prohibition against touching that, in delaying contact, only serves to stoke the subject’s desire; and the logic of noli me tangere (touch me not) as explicated by Jean-Luc Nancy. The biblical noli me tangere, Nancy argues, is not an interdiction of touch in the sense of a negation of sensual corporeality: rather, the dead Jesus rejects those who would cling to him, trying to stop him on his journey into the hereafter and shackle him to this world, and its laws of communal life. Also topical in this regard is the gesture of pointing as an identity mechanism: the act of pointing out an “I” or a “you”. As Derrida has helped us see, the widely shared notion that Western subject formation and episteme suffer from ocularcentrism – a slightly exhausted critique, which downplays the near senses in favor of those more remote – needs to be modified. The sense of vision may be privileged, Derrida has argued, but there is a skin side to that ostensible prerogative. In a structure resembling a Moebius strip, the Platonism of the simulacra is bound up with a “hapto-metaphysics.” Physical versus intellectual touch – a broad concept that, for Derrida, encompasses phenomena such as
intuition – has functioned since antiquity as a guarantor of truth and reality. The preference for vision is inconceivable without the suspicion that contact harbors a deeper truth, and even when seeing is superordinated to touching, the (painful) truth of the latter insists. In the following exploration of the qualities of touch as a medium, I am not proposing that it will save us from the occidental distress caused by the cognitive exorcism of the concrete, the proximate, the sensual, and physical that finds expression in debates over the hegemony of abstractions or the privileging of visuality. I am interested in the capacity of touch to build relations: to connect what it sets apart, to generate references to other and self, to modulate affects and transform perceptions, and to reorganize regions of inside and outside. To conceive of the sense of touch as a medium is to use it as a probe for a historicization and differentiation of central concepts of media theory as it is conducted today. It can shed light on the ongoing debate over the aesthetic definition and epistemological locus of sensory qualities in the tradition of Marshall McLuhan, as well as the periodic anxiety over the emergence of body-technology hybridizations, or the question of regulation and control in social and affective media.

As Daniel Heller-Roazen has persuasively shown, tactility was fundamental to the episteme of antiquity, and in Aristotle in particular. Yet the echoes of this thinking extend much further; it resonates in medieval mysticism and underlies the early modern theory of cognition. It subsequently migrates into the field of physiology and, via psychology and gestalt theory, returns to philosophy as a central element in theories of media and in the form of media-reflective art.

Aristotle found it difficult to fit the sense of touch into his analytical schema of sensory qualities and perception. By receiving sensations as varied as pressure, roughness, and temperature simultaneously and by differentiating between them, he argued, tactition demonstrates to the senses that they are sentient. Heller-Roazen links this sensation, called koine aisthesis – later known as common sense – to the idea of an “inner touch,” a sensory self-reference that occupies the same systematic position in ancient thought that will later be supplied by a more cognitivist concept: consciousness. Touch, in Aristotle’s view, is set apart from the other senses by the fact that, in touching, no clear distinction can be drawn between the medium and organ of perception. We see the visible object through the transparent medium using the eye; the object of hearing is conveyed by the movement of air to the ear: the medium affects the organ, the organ suffers the medium’s actions. In the case of touching, by contrast, it is less clear in which direction the affection proceeds. The object of tactition immediately touches the skin, but the organ does not suffer the medium’s action; it is affected “along with the medium, like a man who is struck through his shield.” As the metaphor of the sword suggests, tactition also stands out for the peculiar vulnerability of the perceiving being it implies. These reflections lead Aristotle to describe the flesh and skin not as the organ of perception, but as the intermediary agent or medium of tactition; the actual organ perceiving touch, he concludes, must be located somewhere inside the body. What is touched through the medium of skin and flesh is the soul itself. By intermingling and unmingling the sensory perceptions, the sense of touch allows them to be distinguished in the first place, and it underwrites the perceiving being’s self-reference by way of inner touch. Tactition is thus unique among the senses in that it is many senses at once, and simultaneously the central organ of (self-)perception. It merits its special position among the senses – its privileged status as the common sense – because it sets cognition and judgment in motion. The sense of touch is conceived as the sense that gives rise to the perception that perception is taking place. Aisthesis, then, is already reflective in and of itself, and not only by virtue of subsequent or superordinate cognitive processes.

Pursuing the implications of this idea – the sense of touch as the foundation and coordinating agency for sensory experience, and nexus of the faculty of discrimination – we reach the territory of techniques of the self. With a view to medieval mysticism, Niklaus Largier has argued that it purposefully employed tactition, as a medium of the relational networking of affects, for purposes of affect modulation. In prayer and its operation...
with words and gestures – in the Ignatian exercises, but also in the writings of Thomas Aquinas – the “dangerous closeness” evoked by touch is part of transformative techniques of the self that draw no distinction between “natural” corporeality and virtuality, instead establishing a zone of contact both imaginative and physical, in which widely diverse borderline experiences become possible. It may well be that the equally social and tactile digital media of our era are contemporary extensions of such techniques – though stripped of their philosophical substance – and thus also inherit the menacing aspect of tactility. In the experimental contact zone of touch, relations of the self to its outside (conceived, in mysticism, as God, and subsequently as the social sphere or milieu/environment) are brought into being and sundered, instituted and negated. This liminal space is rife with possibilities; what makes it dangerous is that the possibility of the subject’s being wounded, of the reality of pain, can never be ruled out. Passage through this zone may end in destruction (of the body or the ego). A late reference to this mystical-experimental complex can be heard in Leibniz’s description of the “small perceptions” as thorns and pricks that agitate the perceptive faculty and spur it into action. And even today, a theory of the social that is attentive to sensuality and sexuality is familiar with the metaphor of the porcupine representing the need to balance between closeness and distance: too much of the latter and we may freeze to death, but come too close and we’ll be wounded by the other’s spines. Judith Butler captures this precariousness of touch in the social in the trenchant observation that violence is “a touch of the worst order.”

David Foster Wallace devised the neoliberal, self-optimizing, recursive, solipsistic variant of experimental self-touch in his posthumously published novel “The Pale King.” One chapter is devoted to a boy who, at a young age, resolves to kiss every part of himself. To achieve this goal, he not only keeps meticulous records; he also adopts a rigorous training regimen that allows him to put his lips to ever more difficult-to-reach places on his body. This would be the flipside, as it were, of what Michel Serres described as the challenge to the conventionalized body image posed by tactile choreographies of enfolding and unfolding: the experiment of self-touching turns into a project of self-mastery that, not coincidentally, resembles the techniques of the mystics and yogis whose updated versions are so popular in today’s therapy and counseling industries.

To gauge the relative significance of tactility in contemporary media theory – by which I mean the media-aesthetic legacy of McLuhan and Kittler, but also feminist media studies with its focus on embodiments and affections – we need to take a detour into nineteenth-century experimental physiology, where the susceptibility of sense perceptions to objective representation came up as a methodological challenge. Of particular concern was the sense of touch with its questionable references to the self as well as to the outside, its multiple modalities, and the large number of organs involved. Two books from the mid-nineteenth century bear vivid witness to this hotspot of epistemological unrest: Ernst Heinrich Weber’s “Tastsinn und Gemeingefühl” (1846) and Rudolf Hermann Lotze’s “Mikrokosmus” (3 volumes, 1856–1864). Both authors use the term “Gemeingefühl” (in the nineteenth century used homologically to mean “Gemeinsinn”/common sense) in the Aristotelian tradition, to designate primarily a subjective rather than social fact: perceptions of pain and other sensations that cannot be located precisely.

Why does Lotze matter, why is he more than a footnote in the history of physiology and psychology? In the twentieth century, his thought experiments underwent a revival in the disciplines of psychology, and especially in gestalt theory, phenomenology, and philosophical anthropology. His “Microcosmus” constitutes an undercurrent, which courses through the thinking of Sigmund Freud (whose library included several of Lotze’s books), William James, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen. The passages that prove especially influential in the subsequent history of theoretical thought concern two themes: the self-perception of the subject in space and the question of teletactility, or out-of-body tactition. On the former point, Lotze charts a hypothesis distinct both from the Kantian a priori and from the assumption that the perception
of space and time is all nurture (the “cultural constructivist” position), instead favoring a specific bodily reflectivity we would describe today as “praxeological” or pragmatic. He examines the question of how categories, conceptual organizations, and bodies of knowledge crystallize in the interplay between experience and recollection, between internal and external processes, and in the subject’s working on, playing with, and intervening into the world, and argues that they result from experiences and forms of knowledge that develop along the periphery of the body. In other words, Lotze conceptualizes knowledge and action as residing in the body and its relations.

Tactition functions as a builder of relations, matching earlier experiences to current ones. The correlation of eye and hand is of particular significance in this connection: “While the one hand is grasping the object, the other examining it and changing its position so as to examine it further, our experimental knowledge is coming into being.” In this regard, Lotze’s work prefigures contemporary research into subjects such as human-computer interfaces, as well as more recent studies on the corporeal dimensions of laboratory practices. A central passage in Ernst Heinrich Weber’s book on “the sense of touch and common sense” discusses the fact that tactile sensation extends into attachments that are not part of the sentient body. Weber investigated this phenomenon using fairly unglamorous “extensions”: little sticks he attached to fingers and teeth. Lotze complemented Weber’s experiments with observations that hewed more closely to ordinary life. A hand-held rod, he wrote, allows us to feel a remote object as though we touched it directly. He laid out a repertoire of figures of the prolongation of “our personal existence […] into the extremities and surfaces” of the foreign body that the literature continues to resort to: the blind man with his stick, the physician with his probe, the clerk with his pen, the painter with his brush. Sympathetic sensation, he argued, far from being always beneficial empathy, is also the basis of the use of violence: only a being capable of sensing what a stick feels like on the other person’s back will feel the urge to strike him.

In such instances, teletactility and eccentric projection gradually reveal themselves to be social, liminal phenomena and susceptible to technical manipulation (here we touch on the domain of prosthetics). In the 1910s and 1920s, Lotze’s reflections inspired practical (which is to say, technological and medical) research. Via gestalt theory, they also entered the field of computer science, and now surface in computer mice, surgical robots, and drone technology. Lotze’s more speculative ideas have left traces as well, for example, in Sigmund Freud’s description of the human being as a “prosthetic god” or, as mentioned already, in Marshall McLuhan’s conception of media as extensions of the senses.

This nexus might be the point of departure for a history of the theory of media and the arts in the twentieth century: both fields probe the interrelation between biologics and technologics; study forms of self and other; and seek to determine degrees of autonomy and heteronomy with regard to media environments. As a perspective on tactition, it would focus our attention on the precarious and dangerous aspects of media-based contact as well as its potential as a pathway for new relationships, especially ones that surpass the bounds of skin. By weighing the different aspects of tactility, we might try to map the thinking about media in all its variety—a field that is closely related to the discourse on tactition in that both emphasize the actively mediating quality of media.

In this perspective, Tehching Hsieh’s “Art / Life: One Year Performance 1983–1984 (Rope Piece),” for which he was tied to the artist Linda Montano by a rope for a full year, though utterly un-technological, is a piece of radical media art, showcasing several of the motifs that define touching as mediation: being connected by what separates us; the rope on the skin as a bond, a source of erotic pleasure as well as pain; the dangerous closeness of an other; touch as a promise; and distance as what makes shared experience possible. Much research and development today aims to make media invisible and impalpable (from clothes designed to be as much as possible like skin, to implanted technology and touchless payment systems), rendering processes of control and surveillance imperceptible.
as well. The affinity for the sense of touch in media theory and art can thus be an instrument of intervention – not because it insists on a “resistance of the material” (a notion that usually remains utterly vague anyway), but because it continually reminds us that processes of delimitation and undelimitation involve violence, and the possibility of injury. Perhaps it no longer pretends to act the doubting Thomas and thrust a finger into wounds in order to feel out a reality beyond the skin: but it may at least provoke a bit of itching.

Take, for example, Melanie Gilligan’s installation miniseries “The Common Sense” (2015), in which an implanted “Patch” lets people experience what others feel. It is a familiar sci-fi motif: this “common sense” is implemented by technology. Two scenarios come into view: one in which the Patch is employed to facilitate an even more efficient extraction of the subject’s cognitive and affective faculties, universalizing neoliberal market-oriented strategies. And one in which the intellectual touch fosters the emergence of new collectives of resistance. The dangerous closeness of koine aisthesis is still a prolific source of trouble, which is to say, it’s a good place to start.

Translation: Gerrit Jackson


REFERENCES


