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Haptic Contagion: The MateReal of Touch in a (Post-)Pandemic World

Keywords

idealism, materialism, haptic studies, psychoanalysis

Abstract

During the pandemic there were many ways of handling the contagious SARS-CoV-2 virus, most of them in haptic terms, or in terms of touch: masks, hand disinfection, social distancing, quarantines, (self)isolations. Touch thus became not only the privileged object of the new bio-politics, striving to preserve life at all costs, but also what was lost during the pandemic. To be sure, a loss of something we never had that even the vaccine, which promised a return to normal, but actually paved the way for a “brave new post-pandemic world,” could not rehabilitate. In short, one of the elements that radically changed with and in the (post-)pandemic world is precisely the elusive object of touch, which we propose to conceptually grasp through the coinage of the concept of its “mateReal hapticity.”

Haptična okužba: mateRealno dotika v (post-)pandemskem svetu

Ključne besede

idealizem, materializem, haptične študije, psihoanaliza

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Povzetek

V času pandemije so bili v veljavi številni načini obvladovanja kužnega virusa SARS-CoV-2, večinoma navezani na haptično, na dotik: maske, razkuževanje rok, socialno distanciranje, karantene, (samo)izolacije. Dotik tako ni postal le privilegirani objekt nove biopolitike, ki si je prizadevala za ohranitev življenja za vsako ceno, temveč tudi tisto,

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kar je bilo med pandemijo izgubljeno. Šlo je, seveda, za izgubo nečesa, česar nikoli nismo imeli; tega ni moglo povrniti niti cepivo, ki je obljubilo vrnitev v normalnost, a je dejansko utrlo pot »krasnemu novemu post-pandemskemu svetu«. Skratka, eden od elementov, ki so doživeli radikalno spremembo med in v (post-)pandemskem svetu, je natanko izmuzljivi objekt dotika, ki ga skušamo konceptualno zajeti s pojmom »mate-Realne haptičnosti«.



Introduction

In the *intermezzo* between the first and second wave of the pandemic of 2020, I managed somehow to get to Venice. *La Serenissima* was flooded. Not with tourists, but rather quite literary with water, for the MOSE was not yet operational. Movement was at the same time limited by the *acqua alta*, but also facilitated due to the lack of masses that usually overflow the city. Despite the waters and thanks to the emptiness, I could enjoy not only the architecture, but also—and especially—the museums and galleries, which were almost empty. It was an experience like something from a long gone age, when the world was not yet overflowing with people, and one could enjoy the classic arts in solitary, silent contemplation, which seems like an unbelievable privilege nowadays. Art, so it seemed at that moment, could touch us once again, and we were willing to bend the knee in front of the sublime—but at what cost? The answer, in the form of another question, came right away, on our way back from the museum to the hotel: a street artist, dressed in hippie style, was standing alone on a small *piazza*, with an elaborate and decorative panel, on which it was written: *Può una poesia sostituire un abbraccio?*

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“Can a poem replace a hug?” I think this question goes directly to the kernel of the problem we are facing nowadays in the post-pandemic era, namely, a mutually connected, two-fold phenomena that has one negative and one positive moment: on the one hand we have lost touch with each other, we have experienced an “absence of hugs,” so to speak, an absence of “human touch” if I may generalize—but on the other hand, we have (re)gained the ability to touch upon and be touched by art, enjoy it once again, as it was meant to be. It seems as if the loss of the one allowed for a (re)emergence of the other, without being

able, however, to completely fill the gap that was left in its stead, and, moreover, producing a gap of its own. A gap between hugs and poems, or, again generally speaking, between touch and the art of language.

A “poem” and a “hug,” at least at first glance, appear to be two very different things, one opposed to the other in an almost perfectly symmetrical way, as if everything that pertains to one is lacking in the other, and vice versa: a poem is a musical being made of words, thoughts, sounds and soundings-together—while a hug, on the other hand, is something worldly, bodily, physical, which has apparently nothing to do with language or sounds or thoughts, but rather pertains to the domain of the haptic. And conversely, if a hug is at home in the realm of the senses, more precisely that of the haptic—then poetry resides in the same residence, but in two different apartments, namely: in senses of hearing, and of seeing. Poetry pertains to the activities of writing and reading (be it reading in the quiet of one’s own mind, or an inter-subjective reading aloud that aims at the other as listener). However, in both instances we find elements that seem to mirror each other, thus allowing a translation, as it were, of a hug into a poem and a poem into a hug, or more conceptually speaking, of language into touch and touch into a language: do not we speak of a certain language of the body, which is learned as a “mother’s touch” in the same vein as one learns one’s “mother tongue”? And don’t we say of a poem, if it managed to move us, that it “touched” us?

In what follows, what I will be interested in will be a translation of one realm into the other by way of analogy with the contagious nature of a virus, all in order to extrapolate what both poetry and a hug have in common, namely: something that pertains to the realm of language as well as to the realm of the haptic, and that I propose to name the *mateReal of touch*, in order to define its material, contagious character, as well as its ideal (in)tangibility.

The original meaning of the word “contagion” as *contagium* directly links touch and a virus on their immediate material basis, since a virus contagiously spreads through touch and all its more abstract, elusive derivatives of “coming into contact.”¹ So it probably comes as no surprise to learn that in its origin the word

¹ *Contagium* comes from *con* + *tagium*, where the basis is *tango* (“I touch”), and therefore means “contact” or “touching” as well as “contagion.”

“virus” as *virus* meant “poison,”² but that since 1728 it came to define the “*agens* that causes contagious diseases,” originally meaning especially venereal, sexual diseases.³ A virus thus denotes an excess of pleasure, an excessive touch dedicated to pleasure, itself “contagious” in terms of both materiality and mimesis (it is grounded in the realm of the body, always wants “more” of it, and supposedly gives a “bad” example). In this context, is also noteworthy that materialism and virology share the same historical birthmark: in the year 1726 J. G. Walch in his *Philosophiche Lexikon* coined the term “materialism” in order to name the new philosophy that was contagiously spreading through Europe, moralistically denouncing its blasphemous reduction of everything spiritual to mere “mechanical” materialism, the main target of this misguided attack supposedly being Descartes, but in fact it was La Mettrie with his infamous *Le Homme Machine*.

Materiality therefore functioned not only as the haptic basis for the contagion of a virus, but was also itself, as a philosophical doctrine, articulated, promoted, and circulated through language, understood as a contagion that spreads on a spiritual level:⁴ ideality and materiality are thus set on collision course—where the mind is ideally always already *affecting* the body, as is the body *infecting* the mind—and this course of action of course unsubtly leads us back to the age old philosophical problem of the “spiritual” mind vs. “material” body, as first best articulated by Plato and Aristotle.

Hugging the Mind

Plato spoke about something akin to the “touch of the soul” sporadically in his dialogues, most notably in his *Phaedo*, which deals with the “immortality of the soul.”⁵ At a certain point, Socrates asks the question: “When then [. . .] does the soul grasp the truth? For whenever it attempts to examine anything with

² *Virus* has the Indo-European core of **ueis-*, which in Sanskrit becomes *viśa*, “poison,” from where also the various Slavic terms of “*višnja*” for cherry (the hard core of which is full of cyanide).

³ *Venus* as theonym derives from the noun *venus* (“love”), both stem from a form reconstructed as **wenos-*, itself from Proto-Indo-European **wenh-* (both meaning “desire”).

⁴ One cannot but think, in this regard, about the Laurie Anderson song *Language Is a Virus*.

⁵ For all the quotes from Plato, the standard reference system of the Stephanus pagination is used, while the English translations are taken from Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

the body, it is clearly deceived by it.” (65b) The Greek text says explicitly “to touch the truth”: πότε οὖν, ἢ δ’ ὅς, ἡ ψυχὴ τῆς ἀληθείας ἅπτεται. And the answer is: when the soul gets out of touch with the body: “And indeed the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality.” (65c) The soul can “reach out” or “touch reality”—ἀπτομένη ὁρέγεται τοῦ ὄντος—only on the condition that it forfeits its contact with the tangible body, or the soul can benefit from this ideal touch only on the condition that it relinquishes its bodily touch. Does Plato use the bodily touch in order to metaphorically describe what is going on within the soul when it reaches out towards the otherwise untouchable realm of ideas?⁶

However, I would like to argue that the “touch of the soul” is not a metaphor at all, but rather that touch—the *mateReal touch*—is something common to both instances, to the soul as well as the body, for it is that element that enables the contact between these two different substances: it is, in short and speaking Spinozistically, the medium of their consubstantiality.

Aristotle developed a more down-to-earth theory of the soul in his *De anima*, where the soul is understood as part of the body.⁷ Even the more theoretical senses of seeing and hearing are defined as forms of tactility, thus developing the theory of a “common sense” based precisely on touch (425a30). Another similar and also most influential reference comes from *De generatione et corruptione*, wherein Aristotle assumes that the “first mover” is in itself not only “unmovable,” but also “untouchable” (322b–323b), thus articulating something like an untouchable touch of the “first mover.” The “first mover” or “God,” if you will—

⁶ In Homer one also finds similar passages where the inner life of the soul is described by metaphors that pertain to the realm of the senses—for instance, when he compares Agamemnon’s troubled soul with Zeus’s “lightning in token of great rain or hail or snow” (Homer, *Ilias*, trans. Panagiotēs E. Giannakopoulos (Athens: Kaktos, 1992), bk. 10, v. 1–5)—while the opposite, interestingly enough, does not work, for the poet never describes the physical phenomena using the language of the inner life of the soul, as if their relation is neither symmetrical nor reversible.

⁷ For all the quotes from Aristotle, the standard reference system of the Bekker pagination is used, while the English translations are taken from Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

or rather, if God himself wills it—moves other things by touching them, but is himself untouchable, is something much in tune with the later Christian tradition that stretches from Augustine to Malebranche, among others, and as best illustrated by Michelangelo in his famous fresco *La Creazione di Adamo*. A similar discussion on the “first cause” is of course also found in the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle argues for a certain touch that is peculiar to the mind—mind you: not the *psycé* but rather the *nous*—when he states that thinking relates to itself by apprehending thought itself as the object of thought, and that this is the way in which the mind apprehends itself through its other:

And thought in itself deals with that which is best in itself, and that which is thought in the fullest sense with that which is best in the fullest sense. And thought thinks itself because it shares the nature of the object of thought; for it becomes an object of thought in coming into contact with and thinking its objects, so that thought and object of thought are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the object of thought, i.e. the substance, is thought. (1072b)

The haptic element is not explicitly stated, but is, however, implicit in the way in which thinking thinks itself. As Aristotle implies, thought thinks itself through *participation* (μετάληψιν) in the object of thought, for it becomes an object of thought by the act of apprehension—θιγγάνω(ν)—from the verb which means “touch,” “handle,” and most importantly, also “hug.”

And once again I want to point out that this specific “touch of the mind,” the way that thought “hugs itself” through thinking and taking—or rather quite literally: “apprehending”—itself as the object of thought, is, again, not a metaphor at all: it is not as if we first have a physical, bodily hug . . . and then the metaphorical transposition to the level of the mind that hugs itself through thinking, but rather that the one and the same *mateReal of touch* is at work in both instances.

And the same goes for the contagious virus, for if we take just one example from Plato, that of *mimesis*, we can see how registers of both the soul and the body mutually “infect” each other precisely at the point of touch: in the famous passage from his *Politeia* where he banishes all art from the polis (except the art of philosophy, of course), Plato states that the guardians of the state must not imitate anything unworthy of free men, for “imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought.” (395d)

The problem of art in general, and especially theatre, lies in the paradox that art and its imitation affects—and infects—the mind through the body: “Touch possesses a secret power that infects the untouchable,” as Mladen Dolar elegantly puts it in a slightly different context.⁸ Even if art works at a distance—by affecting our eyes and ears—it materially infects us via the mateReality of touch, which transforms, or rather translates, a bodily phenomenon into a soul-like effect. And Plato’s solution to the problem—the banishment of arts in general and the affirmation of philosophy—does operate within the same *millieu*, for he merely replaces one type of mimesis with another while promoting the imitation of “what is appropriate to them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions.” (395c)

The philosophical *logos*, despite apparently being on the other side of the arts, nevertheless operates through the same viral process of mimesis, itself dependent on the mateReal of touch, and this logic can be easily applied to one of the problems that arose during the second, post-vaccine phase of the Covid-19 pandemic: in order to counter the negative effects of “bad examples” (public scepticism at best, and “anti-vax” conspiracy theories at worst), science, fighting on the side of *logos*, promoted the vaccine through “good examples”—by publishing its research and reports, but also by showing statesmen and stars being vaccinated—thus relying on essentially the same contagious mimesis.

The *Begreifen* of Touch

Hegel, by modernizing the ancient dialectics of soul and body in tune with the *Zeitgeist* of the Enlightenment movement, which philosophically began with Descartes’s thinking subject and was further developed by Spinoza’s conception of subject and substance, *volens nolens* also offers us such a conception of touch that we are interested in—albeit if only as a collateral or bonus.

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In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, touching is first encountered as a bodily experience, and is discarded at the very beginning as something inherent to mere consciousness in the form of “perception and sense certainty,” and only later on, in the “self-consciousness” part, where the notion of subject is introduced via an inter-subjective relation with the other, most notably demonstrated in his

⁸ Mladen Dolar, “Virus, ideja in -ek,” *Problemi* 60, no. 5–6 (2022): 161.

famous master-and-slave dialectics, does touching become an intersubjective experience.⁹ Thus, one could say that a hug given to the other is always already a narcissistic self-hugging-of-oneself, and conversely, there is no self-hug that is not always already alienated, for a self-hug is a hugging-of-the-other (as we have seen also with Aristotle when the mind hugs itself by apprehending thinking as its best and most appropriate object). A hug is therefore a modus of touch through which the subject apprehends itself through its own alienating othering, thus implying an active subject of thinking that apprehends itself as a passive object, the mind thus touching itself through a self-touch, a touch of the self that is, however, its own otherness.¹⁰

However, and almost as a Platonic echo, one cannot miss the repression of physical touch in its sublimated metaphysical counterpart, since we can find it incorporated into one of Hegel's pivotal concepts, the very concept of *begreifen*, meaning "conception" or "naming," but at the same time also "perception," and even "handling" or "grasping."

Hegel himself, in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, makes the connection through a singular reflection on the origin and nature of metaphors, which developed out of ordinary words that denote something sensuous, and paved the way to the most abstract concepts of pure meaning: "If, for example, we are to take *begreifen* in a spiritual sense, then it does not occur to us at all to think of a perceptible grasping by the hand."¹¹ Language as such, not only the metaphysical one, is supposed to have an inherently dialectical tendency towards pure meaning, while in order to purify itself of any physical residuum it needs metaphors as an

⁹ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), § 178–96, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/phindex.htm>.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty gives a brilliant practical example of this in his *Phenomenology of Perception* while trying to deconstruct the traditional division between subject and object precisely through one of the many peculiarities of the sense of touch: "I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles, and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place. In so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can therefore be neither seen nor touched." See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 105.

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 404.

intermediate step from sensorial towards spiritual: first we have a word in its literal meaning, “for instance, *fassen* or *begreifen*,” denoting the physical act of “grasping”; then we have its metaphorical use, for instance when we say that “a poem touched our hearts”; and finally, we have the pure metaphysical meaning of “grasping” in the sense of “conceiving.” Speaking in these Hegelian terms, one could say that touch is here *aufgehoben*: first dismissed on a physical level as mere sensorial *begreifen*, then metaphorically transposed into the realm of poetics, where it functions as a metaphor, and finally spiritually purified into the metaphysical concept, *Begriff*.¹²

Armed with such dialectics of touch, one could answer the Venetian question we posed at the very beginning—*Può una poesia sostituire un abbraccio?*—simply by stating: “Of course a poem can replace a hug!” For it is, in last analysis, the mateReal of touch that is moving underneath this dialectical process of the purification of meaning, a certain residuum of a real touch, which is simply not “sublatable,” a residuum of the sensorial insisting even in the realm of pure metaphysics precisely because it is mediated by its metaphorical transposition (the old Greek word μεταφορά comes from μεταφέρω, “to transfer” or “carry over”).

However, there is at least one problem here, a problem that Jean-Luc Nancy does not fail to address in his book dedicated to Hegel’s dialectics under the title of *The Speculative Remark*, where he deals with the concept of *Aufhebung* that marks the crucial centre of Hegel’s philosophical system, understood as a mastodontic self-development of spirit in nature, religion, art, and philosophy, where each phase abolishes the previous one by way of incorporating it in its own sphere, until we reach the “Absolute Spirit,” which in turn incorporates all the previous stages, all their concepts and contradictions. Except for one, of course, namely, the concept and contradiction of *Aufhebung*: everything proceeds as if everything can be dialectically *aufgehoben* but the dialectics of *Aufhebung* itself: “*Aufheben* does not capture itself, it does not close in itself and thus avoids its own identification; *aufheben* insists, persists, moves beyond itself, goes out of itself, slides through the text, untouched, so to speak, not preserved nor eliminated.”¹³ Thus, *Aufhebung* functions, at the same time, as a syn-

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¹² Hegel, 404–5.

¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le remarque spéculatif* (Paris: Galimard, 1973), 58. All translations from Nancy’s works are my own.

onym for Hegel's dialectics, and at the same time the name for Hegel's error that shows, paradoxically, an exit from Hegel's system—an opening at the very point of foreclosure, the explosive in the middle of the cement that holds the system together, and the outer border of conceptuality itself that cannot be conceptualized from the outside, but only from the very inside.¹⁴

And it is in this sense that one can understand the logic behind Nancy's conception of the body from perhaps his greatest book, entitled *Corpus*:¹⁵ the self-realization of the body through the other—and its own otherness—has no way of abolishing the outerness of its own experience, no *Aufhebung* of the body into the concept is possible, so that the body is, structurally speaking, nothing less than the same as *Aufhebung* itself. *Corpus* is the embodiment of *Aufhebung*, and that is why at the end of the process of sublating the sensorial into the conceptual as exemplified by the example of *begreifen*, we encountered a certain residuum of haptic materiality, the *mateReal touch*, since touching, as a sensory experience, must not only be discarded as a supposed source of perpetual falsehood, but also preserved as the truth inherent in the very “conception of the concept,” or the *begreifen* of *Begriff* itself.

Thus, as we can see, the process of sublating *begreifen* into *Begriff*, touching into concept, implies a certain tactile quality of language, especially metaphorical language—as our answer to the “Can a poem replace a hug?” question demonstrates—since it is located mid-way between the common language of everyday usage and the spiritual conceptual one, where the *mateReal of touch* persists as its un-abolishable residuum of the Real.

¹⁴ This struggle to find an exit from the “Platonic Cave,” understood as metaphysics in general and Hegel's system in particular, coinciding with a search for an exit from the post-war capitalistic ideology of the period, is one of the distinctive hallmarks of structuralism. See Jean-Claude Millner, *Le periple structural: Figures et paradigme* (Paris: Seuil, 2002). Almost every author proposed his own exit: Althusser's *révolution*, Badiou's *événement*, Derrida's *déconstruction*, Lacan's *inconscient* . . . including Nancy, who at a certain point of his thought gambled everything on the concept of *corpus*.

¹⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Métailié, 1992).

The Extimity of Touch

But what is most other and at the same time most intimate—what is, in short, most *extime* (a concept coined by Lacan in order to denote a peculiar and paradoxical external intimacy and intimate externality at the same time)—to the mind if not precisely the body? This is the point that Nancy makes in his *Corpus* while trying to circumvent the dilemma of the age-old problem of soul vs. body: either we affirm the soul against the body (as Plato did), or reverse the relation by affirming the body against the soul (as Nietzsche did), but in both instances we miss the point . . . as we miss it if we simply affirm a plurality of meanings of the body against a meaning that is one, or vice-versa, by evoking *corpus christi* and the *hoc est enim corpus meum* as the meaning.

Nancy's initial linguistic saturation of the various meanings pertaining to the body (a *corpus* of work, a military *corpus*, society as a *corpus*, etc.) has one primary purpose: to destitute the immediacy of the body, to show how the body matters, but not as mere matter, not as something biological or physiological, and especially not as something certain and assured, as opposed to soul, spirit, mind. A proper body, a foreign body, *étrange corps étrangers*, “strange foreign bodies,” as Nancy puts it, means that a body is not something given, clear, homely, but rather something strange and foreign, “*le corps’ est nôtre angoisse mise à nu*,” “the body is our naked anxiety.”¹⁶ And “how naked we are!”—he cries at a certain point—when we want to affirm our bodies against meaning, religion, ideology . . . by denuding ourselves, by making our bodies seen to the point where exhibitionism coincides with voyeurism, and both with pornoscopia. Do I really need to give the example of social networks such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *TikTok* . . . which functioned as a kind of surrogate for touching during the pandemic, a surrogate for all the contacts (in all its meanings) that we lost while in quarantine and self-isolation? Do I really need to remind readers of all the manic manual practices—like the washing of hands—that functioned as a kind of fetishistic denial during the anxious first waves of the pandemic in the sense of the “I know that . . . but just the same”?

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If we cannot get to the body through a mere opposition with the soul . . . how can we grasp what is bodily in the body? Nancy's solution: the body is always

¹⁶ Nancy, 10.

already outside itself, and the soul is the way the body goes beyond itself, out of itself, an out-of-itself-ness of the body—spirit not as an external “foreignness” or “strangeness,” but rather as an inner one where one can come back to oneself only through the experience of another body that goes through the same process of externalization.¹⁷ This is the point where sexuality comes into play, for when we say “sexuality” we speak about a body that is marked by sexual difference through the incision of the signifier, the latter the topic of Nancy’s book on Lacan entitled *La titre de la lettre* (*The Title of the Letter*),¹⁸ while the former is the title of a lecture he gave upon the centenary of Lacan’s birth: *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (*The “There Is” of the Sexual Relation*):

Sexual difference is not a difference between two or more things, where each would exist as “one” (one sex): it is neither a difference in species, nor a difference between individuals, nor a natural difference, nor a difference in grade, nor a cultural difference or a difference in gender. It is the difference of sex [*la différence du sexe*] inasmuch as it differs from itself. Sex is, for every living sexual being, and in all senses, a being that differs from itself: a differentiating as differentiating itself in concordance with all the plurality of elements and complex becomings denoted by “man/woman,” “homo/hetero,” “active/passive,” etc. And differentiating (itself) inasmuch as the species thus multiplies the singularity of its “representatives.”¹⁹

Nancy’s *différer* echoes the logic of Derrida’s *différance*: sex is at the same time that which is differed, and that which differs, a difference that anticipates its own parts, the principle of differentiating, the differentiation itself—before we arrive at its different entities. The problem being—and here Nancy apparently follows more Lacan rather than Derrida—that the very principle of differentiation is always already marked with sexual difference, it is always already sexualized,” inasmuch as “sexuality” is precisely the name of the difference par excellence: “Sexuality is not a special kind of species in relation to the genus of relation, but rather it is the relation that has its integral extension or exposi-

¹⁷ A case in point: Nancy’s *L’intrus*, a philosophical reflection about his own experience of heart-transplantation, also turned into a movie with the same title by Claire Denis: “Whose heart, whose heartbeat is beating in my chest?” See Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’intrus* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

¹⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Titre de la lettre: Une lecture de Lacan* (Paris: Galilée, 1973).

¹⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’“il y a” du rapport sexuel* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 30–31.

tion in sexuality,” or “sexuality relates to that which is at stake in the relation [*le sexuel rapporte ce qu’il en est du rapport*], but its relation—its balance and its story—does not totalize, and does not close.”²⁰ Again, as we can see, there is a structural equivalence between the body, which is the corpoReal embodiment of the impossibility of a conceptual sublation, and sexuality that marks the body with this impossibility (which is, in the final analysis, why the Lacanian *il y a du rapport sexuel* is supplemented and must be thought together with the more infamously scandalous *il n’y a pas du rapport sexuel*).

How can we, then, speak, or write, about such a sexualized body that cannot be sublated into the concept? That is precisely what is at stake in *Corpus* as a philosophical and linguistic experiment in thinking the body, or rather, as Nancy himself puts it, “writing the body”: “Writing not about the body, but rather writing the body. Not corpority, but rather the body. Not the signs, images, codes of the body, but rather, again, the body.”²¹ This is, or at least was, Nancy adds, the “programme of modernity,” whereupon nowadays there is no programme anymore, just television programmes, where one could see, especially during the pandemic, a “multitude of bodies”—and corpses—from where “a necessity, an urgency” emerges, demanding a “writing of the body.”²² And as the “body is on a limit, on an extremity,” so must “writing the body” be extreme: “writing: touching the extremity”—and Nancy’s question, and a challenge, is: “How therefore to touch the body, instead of signifying it or making it signify?”²³ The question is clear, critical, punctual—the answer not that much, at least at first, since instead of the Lacanian “letter” (*la lettre*) we are given the Derridaian “writing” (*écriture*) which, however, structurally holds the same place: “Writing isn’t signifying.” Furthermore: “We ask: How are we to touch upon the body? Perhaps we can’t answer this ‘How?’ as we’d answer a technical question.”²⁴ Meaning: the question of “touch” is not a technical question, it is not a question of touching understood as bodily technique, but something else. What? “Finally, it has to be said that touching upon the body, touching the body, touching happens in writing all the time,” which is something that takes place on “the border, on the limit, on the extreme,” so that “if anything at all happens to writing,

²⁰ Nancy, 26.

²¹ Nancy, *Corpus*, 12.

²² Nancy, 12.

²³ Nancy, 12.

²⁴ Nancy, 12.

nothing happens to it but touching.”²⁵ And the final point is of the utmost importance: “More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) with the *incorporeality of ‘sense.’* And consequently, to make the incorporeal a touching, to make a touch out of meaning.”²⁶ As we can see, “touch” is Nancy’s answer to both Derrida and Lacan as far as the relation between language and the body is concerned, and that is why he returns to it in his further “writing the body” by playing on the double meaning of the French *sens*: sense pertains to the “senses,” and sense also means “meaning”—and where touch touches this extremity where both senses of sense make sense of the body . . . and language.

The opposition here runs between the untouchable and the touchable, the realm of the intangible and the realm of the tangible, with touch itself marking the dividing line, and that is why Nancy can say, in his book on touch entitled *Noli me tangere*, that the μή μου ἅπτου with which Jesus Christ addresses Maria of Magdala’s attempt at a touch, in any variant or language we take it—from the latin “*Noli me tangere!*” to the English “Do not touch me!”—not only addresses or represents the issue of touch here at stake, but also embodies touch itself: “To say it in one word and to make a word-play out of it—difficult to avoid” (Pour le dire d’un mot et en faisant un mot—difficile à éviter), the phrase “Do not touch me” touches, cannot not touch, even out of any context,” “It announces something of touching in general where it touches at the sensible point of touching,” the phrase points at “a point that it constitutes par excellence (it is the point of sensibility) and that is constituted in it as the sensible point.” And this point is precisely the point where “touch does not touch, must not touch in order to exercise its touch, its art, its tact, its grace,” the point where touch becomes “the space without dimension that separates that which touch brings together, the line that divides touch from the touched and therefore touch from itself.”²⁷ Sensibility from the regime of the touchable, corporeal, bodily, and sense from the regime of the untouchable soul, spirit, mind, concept . . . both coincide in touch as the sense of sensibility. Sensibility can make sense only on the presupposition of a sense of tact, which is the condition *sine qua non* for a sensorial being—without touch no other sense is possible. Nancy’s sensible point of sensibility where touch must not touch in order to exercise “its art, its tact” is

²⁵ Nancy, 13.

²⁶ Nancy, 13.

²⁷ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere* (Paris: Galimard, 2003), 25.

why the sensibility of sense and the sense of sensibility—in one word: *sense*—is in linguistic and philosophical accord with itself: sense does not mean an “either/or” of the body and mind, but rather both together, namely, the bodily activity of making sense and the thinking activity of sensing.

What is the sense of this “sensual supra-sensorial” object of touch(ing) that Nancy is pointing towards if not Lacan’s object *a*, which is itself marked by its *eximity*? Dolar proposed a “partial concept” in order to define this “partial object” with which he tried to grasp the elusive “ideal materiality” or “material ideality” of a virus, starting from the etymology of *contagion* as *con-tango*: “Here we propose a new concept: -ek. Actually, not even a complete concept, but rather a partial concept, in tune with the partial object, one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.”²⁸ The concept of -ek, which works only in the Slovenian *lalangue*, could in this sense help us define the *mateReal* of touch precisely as such a partial object.²⁹

A Knot of Touch

Lacan’s seminar on the *sinthome*—another *lalanguistic* concept, this time denoting the linguistic character of bodily symptoms—is, as is well-known, dedicated to Joyce, but in it, and this is less known, one can also find Hegel’s concept of *Begriff* employed in such a way that it exploits a certain tactile quality of language.

One occasion where Lacan employs *Begriff* presents itself in the middle of the seminar during a lecture when he posed the question: *Was Joyce crazy?* While introducing the concept of *objet petit a*, a residuum of the real that cannot be comprehended in the register of the imaginary, Lacan explicitly states that it “is *ob*, it constitutes an obstacle to the expansion of the concentric imaginary, that is, the englobing imaginary. The object is conceivable, that is, graspable in one’s

²⁸ Dolar, “Virus, ideja in -ek,” 155.

²⁹ In Dolar’s text “Virus, ideja in -ek,” the third concept in the Slovenian title, “-ek” (present and connecting such disparate words as *prebitek*, *izvržek*, *izrodek*, *dodatek*, *presežek*, *izcedek*, *ostanek*, *odkrušek*, *odpadek*, *vrinek*, *spáček*, *izpljunek*, *nameček*, *izmeček* . . .) is understandably missing in the English version: Mladen Dolar, “Virus and Idea,” in *Ideas and Idealism in Philosophy*, ed. Jure Simoniti and Gregor Kroupa (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 269–82.

hand—this is the notion of *Begriff*—in the manner of a weapon,” and this weapon is “far from being an extension of the arm,” but rather “was a ranged weapon from the start. There was no need to wait for roundshot to lob a boomerang.”³⁰ Lacan is very well aware of the German meaning of *Begriff*, of conceiving and grasping at the same time, but the interesting thing is that he employs this touch-concept while discussing the object *a* as the border of the imaginary.

Another occasion presents itself in the lecture entitled “Logical Usage of the Sinthome,” more precisely, while introducing the problem of the body in relation to the signifier: “*More geometrico*. Because of form, the form that was so dear to Plato, the individual presents himself just as he has been put together, as a body. And this body possesses such a power of captivation that up to a certain point one should be envious of the blind. How might a blind man, assuming he knows how to use braille, read Euclid?”³¹ To be sure, *braille* is a system of writing for the blind and visually impaired that already itself implies a certain tactile quality of language, distinct from its traditional linguistic definitions of sound and image, as embodied in the spoken and written form. However, what is central here is the concept of body, illustrated as a sack that inflates and deflates itself, moving in binary successions from 0 to 1, the 1 pertaining to the *S* index 1, the master-signifier, of which Lacan here says that “it does not form the unity of one, but it indicates that it is an empty bag, since it is able to contain nothing. It nonetheless remains that an empty bag is still a bag, namely the *one* that can be imagined only on the basis of the ex-sistence and the consistence that the body possesses,” both “to be held to be real,” since the real is “the fact of holding them together”; thus “the word *Begriff*, which means precisely that.”³² Despite not explicitly mentioning Hegel, we can clearly see how Lacan employs the same logic by redoubling the French *tenir*, used to translate *Begriff*: “*Cette existence et cette consistance, il faut les tenir pour réelles, puisque le réel, c’est de les tenir.*” The existence and consistence of the body should not be understood as anything bodily, but rather as a sack, imagined as skin in terms of existence and consistence, both held to be real because it is the real that holds them together.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 70.

³¹ Lacan, 9.

³² Lacan, 10.

The role of the Borromean knot is that it enables Lacan to illustrate the interdependence of the registers of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary (RSI): it expresses the interrelation of the three rings where a break in any one of them renders the two others free, thus geometrically demonstrating the general apprehension of the human experience, where, however, Lacan adds that “it is not the break between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real which defines perversion, it is that they already stand apart in such a way that a fourth term has to be supposed, which on this occasion is the *sinthome*.”³³ Perversion is therefore not the perverse desire to break the Borromean knot, but rather its very ontological “breakability,” the fact of it being distinguishable and therefore the very distinction between the three registers themselves. Perversion, which at first glance appears to be a specificity of the human being as sexual, is already inscribed in the theory of the RSI scheme itself, more precisely, in the very distinction between the three registers that implies a fourth, *sinthome*; sexuality and ontology go hand in hand.³⁴

Lacan calls this ontological perversion *pèrevision*, *la version vers le père*, which he connects first to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, by interpreting the very last sentence of the novel, “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead,” and then to *Ulysses* and the role Bloom plays as Stephen’s surrogate father: “Ulysses is the testimony of how Joyce remains deeply rooted in his father while still disowning him. That’s precisely what his symptom is. I said that Joyce is the symptom. His entire life’s work vouches for this at length.”³⁵ And among all of Joyce’s oeuvre there is this longest testimony that is *Finnegans Wake*, of which Vladimir Nabokov, among others, wrote that it is “one of the greatest failures in literature.”³⁶ Precisely as a failure it should be interesting for psychoanalysis, since it is fundamentally oriented towards the unconscious failures of consciousness, as emblematically embodied in the linguistic phenomena of *lapsus linguae*. And does not *Finnegans Wake* read exactly like an enormous compendium of lapsus? Let us take an example from the very beginning where the main character (if one may call him so) is introduced: “Mister Finn, you’re

³³ Lacan, 11.

³⁴ See Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

³⁵ Lacan, *Sinthome*, 55–56.

³⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harvest, 1980), 349.

going to be Mister Finnagain! Comeday morm and, O, you're vine! Sendday's eve and, ah, you're vinegar! Mister Funn, you're going to be fined again!"³⁷

In a similar humorous vein, Lacan says that despite the fact that Freud conceptualized all of human sexuality as perverse, psychoanalysis was never capable of inventing a new perversion: "Because after all if perversion is the essence of man, what infecundity in this practice. Well then, I think that, thanks to Joyce, we are touching on something that I had not dreamt of right away, but it came to me in time while considering Joyce's text, which is constructed altogether as a Borromean knot."³⁸ Lacan repeats many times that "Joyce is a writer," and that we are dealing with "Joyce's text" as a demonstration of the "power of writing." Consequently, we should say that if *Wake* is a lapsus, it is a *lapsus calami*, a "slip of the pen" and not of speech, where Lacan himself clarifies the relation in the following manner: "The *lapsus calami* is not primary in relation to the lapsus linguae, but it may be conceived as a touching upon the real,"³⁹ referring to an earlier statement where the difference between speaking and writing consists in their relation to truth and real: "When one writes, one may indeed touch on the real, but not the true."⁴⁰ Writing can touch the real, but it is through speech that one can touch the true and speak it out, if only half of it, as half-said, as *mi-dit*.

I am tempted to leave my *mi-dit* here as it is, in mid-sentence, but let me overcome the temptation by throwing another articulation regarding our issue of touch and language. The whole of Joyce's oeuvre, especially *Finnegans Wake*, is written in what Lacan called *lalangue*, in which one can quite literally grasp the haptic quality of language as such. This sensorial moment inside language, in tune with the rules of phonetics, was conceived by Lacan—following Jakobson's *Six Lectures of Sound and Sense*, themselves a constructive critique of Saussure's linguistics—through the concept of *lalangue* in order to demonstrate how language-based meaning arises from phonetic non-meaning, a poetic characteristic of language itself: "Language is, no doubt, made of lalanguage [*lalangue*]. It is knowledge's hare-brained lucubration (*élucubration*) about lalan-

³⁷ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Bloomsbury House, 1975), 5.

³⁸ Joyce, 127.

³⁹ Lacan, *Sinhome*, 132.

⁴⁰ Lacan, 64.

guage.”⁴¹ Lacan’s *lalangue* can be conceived as a demonstration of how “words touch each other,” and thus can also help us discern a certain tactile quality of language, previously unconceivable in linguistics.⁴²

The concept of *lalangue* enable us to see how the mateReal of touch can function as a contagion, only this time not as a proliferation of meaning, but rather as a proliferation of sounds that “touch each other.” A certain surplus of meaning is thus produced through this haptic quality of language as a collateral side-effect, as a meaning that is collateral to or contingent on the original one. Contingent, another strong “haptic concept,” for *contingere* derives from the same *con-tan-gere* as *contagio*, with which we started this discussion in order to pinpoint the mateReal of touch at work at the intersection between body and mind and the poetic (la)language in between.

Conclusion

Now, to return to our post-pandemic world, where it seems that everything is back in order only because the contingent character of the contagious virus was domesticated, thus becoming a necessity we are supposed to live with for the rest of our lives. However, what we are still dealing with is not so much the virus and its variants, but rather the effects of everything we did in order to prevent its proliferation in the name of preserving bare life, such as, for instance, forfeiting our ability to touch and be touched.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 139.

⁴² Saussure, as the founding father of modern linguistics, started from the axiom that the sign—composed of the signifier as a sound-image and the signified as a mental image—is linear, differential, and arbitrary. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959). Jakobson then demonstrated that signs neither do not hold meaning in themselves nor do they refer to any given reality, but rather, if linearly chained to each other, produce meaning by their contingent sounding together. See Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burson (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1990). Lacan based his theory of *lalangue* precisely on Jakobson’s theory of the sign as an essentially phonetic entity, and it was on this basis that a further elaboration of a certain haptic quality of language was finally put forward by a group of Lacanian researchers. See Mirt Komel, ed., *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2019).

Nancy, in one of his last public discussions, said that the virus “offers us a magnifying mirror of our planetary contagion.”⁴³ Meaning that the pandemic just amplified what was already present in the world before, including the volatile reshaping by social media of what it means “to be in contact with each other.” In short, we did not lose touch because of the pandemic, but rather we just realized touch was always already lost. If there is any chance of rehabilitating touching, then it is by way of touching upon the *mateReal* of touch that runs, as I have tried to demonstrate, underneath our own intersubjective, philosophical, linguistic, artistic, and bodily experiences. And if there is a proper illustration of such a *mateReal* of touch, then it is what one can find “finnagain” in the *Wake*:

He went without saying that the cull disliked anything anyway approaching a plain straightforward standup or knock down row and, as often as he was called in to umpire any octagonal argument among slangwhangers, the accomplished washout always used to rub shoulders with the last speaker and clasp shakers (The handtouch which is speech without words).⁴⁴

Since we are living in “perverted times” where the hand of God has been replaced by the “invisible hand of the market,” where modern biopolitics regulate even our everyday practices of touching, and where we forfeit our own ability to touch and be touched by uploading our haptic capacities online on social media . . . perhaps precisely such a Joycean perversion—or rather *pèrversion*—of touch is needed. Joyce’s *handtouch* may very well be “speech without words,” but, on the other *handtouch*, the *lalangue* in which this statement is written, demonstrates how words touch not only each other, but also upon us, and how the poetics of *lalangue* can therefore be “Joycefully” defined as a “touch without hands,” where both senses of *sense* combine in the *mateReal* of touch.

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Thus, instead of a straight answer to the initial question of *Puo una poesia sostituire un abbraccio?*, I can offer only a re-articulation: the real issue in our post-pandemic world is not “Can a poem replace a hug?” but rather “Can a hug ever replace a poem?”

⁴³ Nancy’s quote in Daniel Villegas Vélez, “Allegories of Contagion: Jean-Luc Nancy on (New) Fascism, Democracy, and Covid-19,” *Homo Mimeticus*, May 27, 2020, <http://www.homo-mimeticus.eu/2020/05/27/allegories-of-contagion-jean-lucnancy-on-newfascism-democracy-and-covid-19/>.

⁴⁴ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 174.

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