

HYPO-HYPER-HAPTO-NEURO-MYSTICISM

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Hypo-hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism: this awful portmanteau word, in all its ungainly confusion, captures something crucial about the present.¹ In the essay that follows I want to use this fractured single word to indicate an event. Perhaps the word event is not quite right, but I want to avoid words such as “mindset” or ideology, simply because what I am referring to is a way of speaking, imagining, or figuring that does not occur completely at the level of thinking. In fact, one of the features of “hypo-hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism” is that it is (to refer to Deleuze’s terminology) an “image of thought”: the assumption of a certain orthography that delimits the questions and problems posed, and allows for a certain potential for disturbance to be lulled in advance.² Indeed, hypo-hapto-neuro-mysticism is an alluring inertia that operates by situating itself, resentfully, against what might count as thinking. In a recent special issue of *differences* focused on new directions in science studies, Karen Barad reiterated what has now become an almost unquestioned attack on the detached and disembodied nature of “theory,” in favor of theorizing that would take the form of touch:

Theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings. Doing theory requires being open to the world’s aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder. Theories are not mere metaphysical pronouncements on the world from some presumed position of exteriority. Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world. The world theorizes as well as experiments with itself.³

My claim, in opposition to the careful work of Barad and the far less careful work of others, is that theory is *not theory* (and philosophy is not philosophy) if it is grounded in the tactility of the body. The idea of theory opens a necessarily critical distance of philosophy, even if that distance is contaminated, impossible and never as inhuman as it might strive to be.⁴ If (following a certain Heideggerian tradition) thinking is taken to be a comportment to the world that is without home, solace, identity or body—or at least where embodiment and dwelling offer almost nothing—then hypo-hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism—by contrast—indulges in the

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easy comfort that all so-called thinking is always connected, in touch, and oriented towards a world that is necessarily one's own. What I am going to try to describe as hypo-hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism, is *not* a mode of thinking precisely because it operates less by way of statements, assumptions and values, and instead comes to a halt before a complex of mesmerizing images and barely thought-out figures. This orientation of pseudo-“thinking” is one in which a certain notion of the intellect as detached calculation is resented or accused in the name of a supposedly more primordial and proximate living ownness. We might refer to this lure of the counter-intellect as an inversion of the cave allegory: rather than turn away from the things that are directly before us to consider the source of light that makes our world possible, we turn away from the problems of visibility and the disenchanting, disconnected and distanced force of *theoria*, and immerse ourselves in a world that is deemed to be irreducibly proximate. Indeed, rather than call this neuro-mysticism or faith in connectedness a way of thinking, we might argue that there has come to be a type of “thinking 2.0” that recognizes the damage thinking can do to itself, and decides *not* to think, or at least to think in such a way that thinking proclaims its irredeemable weakness in favor of more profound, living and human powers.

If we define thinking more broadly to include images and figures that are not fully thought through, then hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism might help us to confront a problem of thought, or a complex—a tension that is in part a symptom (suggesting something that needs to be worked through), and a reaction formation: a tendency to consider thought's weakness and timidity (its containment within itself) as a *proper* state of affairs. Far from confronting and working through a problem, thought declares the problem to be more than solved. It screams ever more shrilly that the very features that might appear to be wounds, breaks or paralyses are in fact expressive of joyous life itself. The fact that we are increasingly abandoning thought (as intellection) is proclaimed as a redemption from Cartesianism, logic, disembodied abstraction and the delusion of mind. Just as thinking ought to confront its destructive and *dichotomous* relation to the earth, theories of embodied, embedded and affective mindfulness proliferate.

In order to anticipate and give some sense to what follows I will cite James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar*, recently consecrated by Bruno Latour's compositionist manifesto.⁵ In *Avatar* the land of Pandora is the bearer of a substance desired by the rapacious, war-mongering and instrumental American forces; the Pandoran natives are literally connected to their ecosystem by touch; they travel—not by harnessing horse power through central command—but by attaching their pony-tails to the animal's tail. Unlike the technologically domineering invaders who use tanks and surveillance to command the scene from without, the Pandoran natives are connected to a land that is one grand, thinking, complex, proximate, and auto-poetic whole. Knowing does not take the form of abstract thinking, but feeling and doing in a manner that is collective. Here, we approach a first definition of the complex I want to explore today: theory today is tending towards a form of mysticism insofar as it appeals to direct intuition or immediate contact and literal proximity; there is a privilege accorded to the felt rather than stated (to affect and touch over concept and system).

But the paradigm is primarily neural, for what “the brain” has come to figure, after the “decade of the brain,” is not a command centre or ghost in the machine but a plastic, evolving network that comes into being not by imposing code but by being ever more responsive, more connected and more dynamic. This neuro-mania is a form of *hyper*-haptocentrism precisely because it is touch—body to body and from the body to itself—that overcomes the distance and difficulty of thinking. At the same time this complex is also a *hypo*-haptocentrism precisely because touch is best thought of (as in the neural network) *not* as one part to another part, or one thing to another thing, but as a mutually proliferating and multiply connected whole, in which there are not so much parts that touch, but a web of touch from which one might discern relatively stable tendencies. Even though the single term, “hyper-hapto-neuro-mysticism,” identifies a complex, I will begin by breaking down the inter-related forces that make up this field.

HAPTOCENTRISM

This term, coined by Jacques Derrida, might at first seem counter-intuitive. How could *touch* be a privileged motif when Western thought has been dominated by disembodied calculation, individual autonomy, reason and universal truths that are not mired in the physical and contingent particulars of the body? Indeed, much of the work today on touch and affect (inspired, in part, by Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of affect) makes a claim for a directly revolutionary force of affect precisely because the connectivity of affect bypasses the universalizing and formal demands of reason. For Derrida, however, touch, proximity and affect have been mobilized as figures that enable a tradition of the metaphysics of presence. Indeed, the very reason or logocentrism that would supposedly be circumvented by embodiment and haptics, establishes itself as a form of self-contact without distance or mediation:

What remains, as I suggested earlier—*against* Heidegger, in a way—is that one might have to go in for a structure of experience in which this “privilege” or “priority” (*Vorrang*) of sight or touch (whether “exorbitant” or not) no longer means much, if the said “tradition” (“since the beginnings of Greek ontology”!) never shows any privilege for the gaze (no optical theoretism) without an invincible intuitionism that is accomplished, fulfilled, fully effectuated, starting from a haptical origin or *telos*; if there is no optical intuitionism without haptocentrism; and if furthermore (in regard to this intuitionism, which is finally homogeneous, undifferentiating, absolute, stubborn, absurd, and in the final account insensible or “smooth”—i.e., deaf, blind, and impassive) the fate of this intersensibility (henceforth irreducibly tropological, figural, and metonymic) allows one to see and hear and feel and taste a bit of touching everywhere: indeed, who would deny that we can touch with our voice—close or far away, naturally or technically, if we could still rely on this distinction, in the open air or on the phone—and thus, even to touch the heart.⁶

One can use the term “metaphysics of presence” to indicate that across a series of competing claims and traditions a certain ideal of knowing and truth promises to overcome the risks and contingencies of irreducible gaps by some means of a self in touch with itself. Knowledge and experience more generally are properly and normatively defined in terms of the value of proximity (a value that is not one value among others, but the axiom through which all value can be thought). If there is such a thing as reason it is because the thinking subject can intuit directly, without distance or disturbance that which would remain the same through time, and also be true for any subject whatever. That which is true and good is that which remains present, proximate, intuitable, without distance. It follows that the self is considered primarily and properly as auto-affective: for the self experiences itself without distance, delay or difference. The subject is that which precedes and grounds all further experience, and becomes the Cartesian subject when grounding is no longer that of a substance that requires nothing else in order to be but becomes the self-present cogito.⁷ Ideally, as in the ethics of Levinas, one might also experience the other—not at a distance as an object to be grasped, but as pure singularity and alterity, without the mediation of concepts or general rules.⁸ And we might even say that today the immediate appeal of some tendencies of object-oriented ontology lies in a claim to immediacy: we are not separated from the world by subjective conditions of givenness but can and should make direct contact with a world of things of which we are part, not ground; if there is a gap between ourselves and the world it is no different in principle from the gaps that separate (and tie) all things to each other.⁹ When phenomenology revolutionizes philosophy, and criticizes the supposition of a pure disembodied and given reason, it returns explicitly to touch—no longer the light of reason affecting itself, but a literal, embodied and actual touch. On phenomenology's own reading, this is a fulfillment of philosophy's *telos*—for the thesis of the lived body that constitutes itself and its world through living praxis accounts for the genesis of reason. Reason can be truly justified and grounded upon the lived; at the same time, touch will increasingly radicalize philosophy. For touch is not the self-presence of reason, but—as in Merleau-Ponty's flesh, or Jean-Luc Nancy's sense, or Deleuze's affect—what is posited as the generative givenness from which all logics emerge and which cannot be fully known, mastered or rendered present to thought. It seems as though thought abandons its claim to be able to coincide with itself in a presence of self-touch. And yet, for Derrida, this is when haptocentrism becomes hyper-haptocentrism. For

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the seeming circumvention of the calculating distance of reason is overcome in what—referring to Nancy—Derrida describes as an absolute realism.¹⁰ All of Derrida's work can be considered as a deconstruction of proximity: the condition for something being near to itself and touching itself is that there be distance.¹¹

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Derrida uses this phrase specifically in his book concerned with touch and Jean-Luc Nancy, but it flows from the logic of deconstruction. That is, phenomenology regarded itself as revolutionary in *not* relying on any transcendence—any already assumed term such as cogito, being or substance—that would account for the appearing of the world. In so doing it would be a radical thought of genesis: returning to things themselves and the givenness of the given, phenomenology would purify the question of appearing from any presupposed ground. It would eventually be the lived body or flesh that ultimately came to function as the site of fecund generation, in which there would be no intrusion of the distanced commands of reason or cognition. Here, Derrida situates phenomenology's supposed radicalism, *and* Nancy's seeming departure from a metaphysics of self-commanding reason, within haptocentrism. It is now not reason that bypasses the body in order to be self-affecting, for the body possesses its own self-sensing awareness. This self-touching also—attractively—never reifies into a formalized system but becomes nothing more than ongoing self-revelation. Philosophy's autonomy and self-coinciding principle of logocentrism is at once displaced by modes of affection that occur beyond consciousness in the narrow sense, and yet it is this self-sensing, affective, touching power of flesh, life and world that yields a hyper-haptocentrism. The world now senses itself: this is at once a displacement of the *human* privilege of auto-affection, but it is also a continued valorization of proximity. Nothing is left untouched. The world touches itself, senses itself, and is brought to its own presence, in a phrase that is summed up by Derrida as not only hypo-haptocentrism but “absolute realism”: “Touch remains for Nancy the motif of a kind of absolute realism, irredentist and postdeconstructive.”¹² Philosophy that had always elevated its own reason through an axiology of proximity, has now been subjected to critique for having been too distanced from the life, flesh and world that is its origin and unthought condition; the turn to affect, flesh, life and sense is a turn away from the self-constitution of reason (where one aspect of life commands the whole) towards a *total self-sensing*, in which self and other, mind and world, touch and touched are mutually constitutive. I want to leave Derrida and his argument with philosophy and metaphysics (and Nancy's supposed absolute realism) aside for now, and ask whether the notion of hyper-haptocentrism has any purchase for the present, beyond philosophy strictly speaking.

I want to begin by going back to haptocentrism as one of the ways in which a normative conception of touch goes beyond logocentrism and ontotheology. It is the concept of touch that provides a norm for philosophical reason and life; reason, it is assumed, may always return to itself and touch itself, just as life always remains proximate to its proper origin. I would suggest that the motif of *proper touch* or proximity has a more general ethical value, evidenced in the privilege of face to face encounters, of genuine feeling, and of sympathy, empathy and affect more generally over various forms of non-life (whether that be modern disenchantment, technology, isolation, rigid rule following or disengaged intellection). Touch has this genuinely ethical value *not* when it is one body or thing making contact with another body or thing, but when contact is communal, mutual, and disclosive of a certain pre-given ground of life, love, spirit or feeling from which our individual bodies are only temporarily (if at all) detached. Consider the following quotation from disgraced Penn State football coach Jerry Sandusky's auto-hagiography:

When we dare to care; when we reach out and touch someone's hand, trying to make the world a better place, we get back so much more than we give. To see the gleam in a child's eye when he or she succeeds. To see happiness come across the face of a lonely person sets off a very warm feeling. I have walked with some of society's so-called best, but I've also been hugged by some of society's least. I know I cherish the latter a lot more. In this plan we are but one little candle, but when you dare to care it does make for a better world.

We are given many talents, and God creates hope for us all. He lifts us to great heights. We have conquered parts of outer space, yet He is always there to humble us by exposing us to great suffering and hurt. God reveals himself in the outstretched hands of a loved one; in the outstretched hands of a child in need. He reveals himself through those who are handicapped; those who have the least. He brings love, hope and happiness to those of us who already appear to have so much more. He touches us after a tough loss, but no matter how bad we've done that day, friends and family will still be there. ... Nobody has touched more lives than God....¹³

For all its clichéd banality Sandusky's ongoing self-justification nevertheless draws upon and articulates a certain ethos and mythos of touch. To touch another is *not* the taking of a pleasure, although it might initially seem to require a sacrificial abandonment of one's safe self-enclosure ("when we dare to care"). To offer touch is to give oneself more than one had, by giving away. Touch might appear, at least metaphorically, as the ethical concept par excellence: the power of touch signals both the capacity to reach towards what is not oneself, and to be open to what is not oneself (to be touched).

And yet there is a problem with this ethos of touch, which (with the benefit of hindsight) lies in its knowing and self-aggrandizing paternalism. If there has been a move away from haptocentrism towards hypo-haptocentrism, both in philosophy and beyond, it might be for the same reasons. Both philosophy and popular culture more generally have become wary of the ethical problem of expertise and paternalism. The Sandusky quotation is a "top down" or centred model of touch. There is a toucher who bestows life and spirit upon a body that requires the touch of life. (Think of spirit animating matter, God breathing life into Adam, or the general promise that lies in being anointed.) God is the locus of the good, and when I reach out and touch another (when I "dare to care") it is ultimately the hand of God that acts through us all. Touch is an unquestioned good precisely because the isolated, damaged, lost individual is so abandoned that they do not have the wherewithal or sense to redeem themselves; they require the caring and intervening touch of a higher power. This centred model, where touch is properly and primarily located in a higher benevolent power (and which might be read as the *locus classicus* of colonial and other enlightening paternalisms) has been displaced by a dispersed touch, where there is no distinction between toucher and touched, and there is no God's eye view or elevated good reason that might validate or sanctify touch.

Deconstruction, as already noted, rejected the privilege of reason as a mode of self-presence that might ground and legitimate ethical claims: the valorization of proximity was displaced by deconstruction's attention to the ways in which reason would always need to take place through the deferrals and distance of time and space. The figure of a thought that feels itself, is present to itself, and coincides with itself represses the diffuse and never presentable geneses through which it comes into being. But if there are philosophical grounds for rejecting the supreme self-governance of reason, there are also everyday ethical reasons: post-Kantian ethical theory begins from the idea that there is no privileged self-knowing, self-grasping foundation, and so in the absence of foundations one can never speak or act with supreme authority.¹⁴ Centred and transcendent models of the good enabled paternalistic justifications: I could reach out and touch you, act for you, because I am closer to a divinity or reason that is really your proper being. On such a paternalistic or "specialist" understanding, there is a good that can be approached, approximated and that can act as the ground for decisions. From Kant to Derrida the emphasis on a necessary gap or distance between the self-presence of the ground and the discursive differences of reason has precluded any notion of moral experts or foundations. We begin, in media res, at a necessary distance from any supposed origin. But in addition to philosophical reasons for questioning haptocentrism or the notion of some proximate good that might provide a foundation for ethics and morality if only it could be grasped, there are—as I have already suggested—practical and cultural reasons.

Without positing some causality between cultural conditions and structures of feeling, or ideologies and cultural production, it might nevertheless be worth asking why we are making the much-proclaimed affective turn *now*? Why, today, are we insisting that it is not only reason that has the power to come close to the sense of the world, but that life as such—beyond humans—senses itself. The skin, the body, things, plants,

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animals: these are not isolated inert objects that are simply there for the sake of a self-present reason, but have their own sense. Further, and more importantly, everything touches. We must (so the story goes) go beyond valorising the hand of man that has been figured and privileged as not simply a body part or an organ oriented to survival, but as a capacity for touching and rendering a life-world (what Derrida refers to as “humanualism”); for all life from insects to things is part of this grand self-touching world. We might say that “man” (the figure of self-affecting, self-constituting and self-present reason) is no longer the privileged figure of presence that calls out to be displaced: for it is now life, the world, cosmos or Gaia that is always already in touch with itself. I would suggest that it is no longer resistant or counter-normative to privilege process, dynamism, interconnectedness, embodiment, affect and de-centered auto-poetic systems over distinct and logically oriented individuals. We have shifted from human or rational haptocentrism, in which knowledge and the good are grounded on a privileged locus of auto-affection—a reason that touches itself, or a subject that presents to itself—to hyperhaptocentrism, in which everything is in touch with everything else. There is one grand network of proximity and mutual, dynamic inter-affective touch.

Hyper-haptocentrism is at once a theoretical motif and a pop culture fetish. Hyper-haptocentrism’s manifest refusal of man might also be read as an ultrahumanism. That is, if man has been valorised and regarded as “the subject” it is because it was man who was not a being among beings, but the locus of reason and self-presence that enabled any world or thought of being emerge. Rather than reject the value of proximity and affective self-presence through which man appears to himself, this power to be affective is now attributed to all life, and all non-life beyond man. We can see this, as I have already suggested, both in popular culture (especially when it targets the logical subject of modernity) and in theory (also focused on the same target as “man.”) Consider, again, the highly dichotomous film *Avatar*, which sets itself against the managerialism of modern man. The military forces that are the villains of the narrative are oriented towards a single object—unobtainium—and use instrumental reason and technology to achieve their desired end, regardless of the means, and regardless of the more complex and distributed forces that they will need to encounter to secure unobtainium. Pandora’s Navi’I, by contrast, inhabit a world that is—in the words of the sympathetic character portrayed by Sigourney Weaver—structured like a “neural network.” The Navi’I communicate with the animals they ride and their surrounding fauna not by command, but by touch. The film is at once a post-humanist manifesto—targeting the man of technology and reason in favor of an affective, interconnected and communal whole—at the same time as it is an ultra-humanist reaction formation: the Navi’I are indeed avatars, images of a new ideal of humanity. What renders the Navi’I ultrahuman rather than inhuman is that they exemplify the values of responsive self-presence that have always defined man against the mere inertia of things. This is not a haptocentric world, in which a privileged being is elevated due to its capacity for self-presence, while all else is left out of touch. Rather, everything is proximate to everything else, in one grand self-communicating whole.

When Bruno Latour opened his compositionist manifesto by referring to *Avatar*, and linked the film to the Gaia hypothesis, he reinforced a widespread thesis of mindfulness: the world is not inert matter blessed with the capacity to be represented and known by subjects. The world itself possesses living and self-organising properties. More importantly, the world as it is known follows from its *capacity to affect*, just as our being—our identity—emerges from the various ways in which we are affected.¹⁵ The world of Pandora in *Avatar* is a post-human (ultra-human) eco-utopia, not simply because it is composed of affective relations, in which bodies relate not by way of externally imposed systems (logic, language) but by affective communication and proximity, but also because it is like a neural network. There has been a reaction against the isolated and distanced man of reason, who affects himself in order to be present to himself, along with a turn towards the neural paradigm. The brain, formerly and mistakenly perceived as a computer, is now—we are constantly reminded—not a central command centre, but a responsive, adaptive, distributed, dynamic, affective and embodied system.¹⁶ This new neural paradigm was articulated in the works of Maturana and Varela, who tellingly also referred to Buddhism’s model of an ego-less consciousness that is nothing other than its relation to the world.¹⁷ The legitimated and science-based theories of the brain as less like a computer and more like a coupled and responsive system intersect with a wide range of fictional and non-fictional genres, such as *Avatar* but also popular science, mysticism and contemporary cultural production. The brain is no longer the Cartesian

ghost in the machine, nor does talk of the brain threaten to reduce the rich complexity of life to biological determinism. On the contrary, the brain as an adaptive, responsive network that changes itself offers at once a way out of the horrors of the self-enclosed subject, and solves the ethical problem of touch.

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Mysticism does not approach what is other than itself discursively but passes to direct contact, but this contact is not one in which the self has mastery. The self does not impose its logic on what is other for the sake of knowledge, but is transformed by the encounter. Latour's account of the affective and embodied nature of knowledge avoids mysticism by stressing the notion of articulation: the body becomes what it is by being affected, just as the world that affects the body takes on its layers of difference through the complex encounters it enables: the world is different, and differentiated, according to the multiple approaches it offers. But, as Cameron's *Avatar* indicates, the neural paradigm is not always so cautiously and multiply articulated. Latour (following James) refers to the multiverse, where the power to affect and be affected, cannot be exhausted in one mode or level of actualization. Latour's compositionist manifesto is however posed directly against a tradition of critique that would somehow establish a point outside the assumptions and practices through which the world is given; it is not surprising, then, that he would appeal to Cameron's *Avatar*, where the land of Pandora is likened to a neural network, in order to overcome the modern divorce between knowing and deciding mind, and a nature that would provide some stable ground for knowledge. Beyond Latour's work the notion of the neural network or global brain serves to unify in a manner that overcomes the ethical tension of touch. If bodies are always already connected, and always already attuned to a world of others then touch is at once life's proper mode, at the same time as one could determine clearly and in advance that certain styles of touch—those that were neither mutual nor attuned—could be distinguished as *improper*.

On the one hand there can be no ethics without touch: the isolated body that is sufficient unto itself, without relation, and without the tendency or capacity to be affected could not be said to be a living being. (This much is already explicit in Latour's work on the body and his insistence on the power to be affected.) But ethics is also, necessarily, a question of distance, and "letting be." Touch and relations in general are required precisely because the other person or other living being is different, and one cannot assume in advance any right or imperative to touch. The other to whom we reach out, or about whom we "dare to care," is also other only in a certain incapacity to be touched. We are presented with an ethical imperative to reach out and touch (and be touched), but we must also recognize a certain distance and alterity that cannot be reduced. This is the motif of Levinas's work on the necessary alterity of the other, an alterity that (according to Derrida) must at once resist the violence of any all-subsuming relation but that must, also necessarily, suffer the form of a lesser violence: "A Being without violence would be a Being which would occur outside the existent: nothing; nonhistory; nonoccurrence; nonphenomenality."¹⁸ There is always some subsumption and reduction of the other, and just as Derrida insists that there is no such thing as a non-violent relation—for all relations must to some extent reduce the pure distance of ethics—we can begin to conclude that *there is also no such thing as proper touch*. Recognizing the other *as other* reduces the other's absolute separation. And yet for all this supreme difficulty of touch, touch has come to be regarded not so much as cure but as the sign that there has never had been any problem at all. The idea that the world, others, knowledge, feeling and even one's own self might be different and untouchable has been diagnosed as a modern ill—a problem of the wrong way of thinking—that simply needs to be recognized as a false problem.

For some time a computational model of the brain has been criticized for continuing a tradition of Cartesian separation from the world. It is not the case that the brain, housed within the body, processes information and then directs the body to act. The brain is not a "ghost in the machine," nor is it some distinct organ located within a body that it commands. Rather, the brain is an embodied, adaptive, plastic, dynamic and—most importantly—distributed network. In the case of cognitive science two distinct claims are made. First, relations precede subjects: in the beginning is a connection to the world, *from which* something like a distinct and thinking subject is formed. It makes no sense to ask how selves come to know and represent the world,

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for in the beginning is the world—a “coupled” system of embodied brain and affecting world. There are not selves who touch, but a general realm of affect and interconnectedness from which distinct individuals are effected (effects of affect). Second, the brain does not stop at the borders of the skull, or the mind or the self, but is extended.¹⁹ The extended mind includes all those supplements, prostheses and technologies through which we think: the notes on our ipad, the smartphone’s auto-correct function that has adapted to our personal lexicon, and the shopping suggestions on one’s amazon homepage.²⁰ These devices don’t read your mind, as though your mind were some sort of container; the mind just is a series of inter-connected and adaptive tendencies. The mind is not a thing, and is not contained within any single body; it is itself a network and a node in broader networks. The mind is always already in touch with everything else in one grand “mindful” cosmos.²¹ This notion has not only taken hold of critical theory, cognitive science and crossover studies that shuttle between the two; it also has popular culture purchase and it is here that the neural paradigm becomes a form of mysticism, or positing of direct and unmediated contact.

Indeed, it might be worthwhile to connect three works concerned with touch precisely because they articulate different economies of touch (and yet indicate—sometimes by avoiding it—a common problem). The first, that I have already quoted, is Jerry Sandusky’s *Touched*—a rather unremarkable reiteration of the ways in which paternalistic touch is sanctified by way of a prior assumption of haptocentric value: the touch from father to child is an extension of a divine touch that is grander than us all and that operates beyond our ken. The second text is Jacques Derrida’s *On Touching*, which accuses various strands of supposedly post-Cartesian phenomenology of a hyper-haptocentrism. The third “text” is the recent Fox television series *Touched* in which a young autistic boy is cared for by his father, his mother having died in the twin towers attacks of 9/11. The young autistic child, Jake, cannot be touched, and yet it is his physical untouchability and linguistic silence that renders him ultimately into a pure force of touch and communication. Each episode poses some problem (often political) of a gap or distance—siblings separated across nations, children given away into adoption, lovers who have missed encounters and lost touch, and a whole series of intertwining connections that are maintained mystically by way of the coupling of the young autistic boy Jake and technology. Jake collects mobile phones, numbers, sequences, patterns and all forms of digitalized data but uses these seemingly inhuman and formalized systems to discern and disseminate links among humans. He will continually write a number, only for that number to appear on an airline schedule, apartment door or birthdate, and this in turn will allow the father—the mystified but submissive conduit—to execute plans that will reunite lost souls. In one episode two musician siblings, one of whom has undergone gender reassignment, are reunited; the episode concludes with a montage of musicians and singers across the globe contributing to one unifying cross-cultural anthem. At the level of politics the Fox series offers a classic example of Fredric Jameson’s notion of ideology,²² where symbolic resolution is provided for political problems: the scars of 9/11—of an unbridgeable, unreadable and violent cultural war—are overcome in a cosy “love makes the world go around” anthem. Even 9/11 discloses a greater benevolence: the father, played by Kiefer Sutherland, has abandoned his job as a journalist to become a networker, executing, while not questioning, his son’s enigmatic “messages.”

But I would suggest that this political working-through is possible because of a deeper problem of touch, and a notion of hypo-haptocentrism. The young child, in his inability to touch, is liberated from the messy, concrete and sexually fraught networks of physical proximity. He then functions as (and articulates) a utopian figure for a touch that is everywhere and nowhere—freed from the determining systems of language and the located finitudes of the body. Like Cameron’s *Avatar*, the series opposes a “top-down” bureaucratic and manipulative corporate power (the bio-tech company that is harnessing the intuitive and empathetic neural networks of specially gifted individuals) to the silent communication of Jake, whose “voice” is heard only in each episode’s opening:

490000 babies will be born today... each of them unique... and each one of them a link in the greater human chain. And the moment their umbilical cord is severed they’ll become an individual, their own hopes, dreams and desires. And in fact each one of us is made up of a dozen systems which in turn comprise 60 trillion cells and those cells house countless proteins, DNA organelles; what appears to

be an individual is actually a network; each one of us is in fact a living breathing community but it doesn't stop there; why would it? Every individual hope you harbor; every dream you attain, every desire you fulfill has an impact far greater than you can imagine. At least that is how it looks from where I am sitting.²³

This paradisiacal condition of the untouchable yet always fully attuned child is heightened by the ongoing plotline of the series in which the father and son are at constant war with state child services, who appear to be in collusion with capitalist corporations to exploit the extraordinary evolved skills of the young Jake and his kind. Twenty-first century figurations of ethics at once fetishize touch and proximity—ranging from theories of affect to a whole series of pop culture appropriations of the neural paradigm (such as the television series *Perception* in which a professor of neurology is unable to achieve personal proximity and touch but nevertheless solves a series of crimes through his capacity to “read” the brain’s complex networks and messages). It is as though the individual, with his specific body and violability might be magically transported from the entire problem of the necessary violence of touch and given over to a virtual touch that is achieved by refusing and resenting cognition. Not only does this lure of hyper-hypo-hapto-neurocentrism intensify (while providing an alibi for) what Abigail Bray has referred to as “corporate paedophilia,” where the child is fetishized and yet also presented as the innocent potentiality that will save us from technocracy, it precludes a consideration of the ethics of touch at a cosmic level.²⁴

We should not, perhaps, be surprised that the deconstructive insistence on a certain necessary violence could not be heard. Touch, I would suggest, is—and should remain—an ethical problem. There can be no proper touch because all living is a form of contamination, where the condition of being a living being must be at once a relation of unthought touch and proximity, alongside a no less necessary refusal of unconditional touch. Both the hysteria that surrounds excessively violent touch, and the euphoria that surrounds the fantasy of pure touch mitigate rather than confront what ought to be the compelling problem of touch. We live by touch and yet can never—as living beings—either achieve or avoid the contamination of touch. Touch is required for any achievement of the proper, and yet there is no proper touch. It is symptomatic that precisely when the impossible question of touch ought to be posed—when we are dealing increasingly with the violence and intrusion of touch (both human to human, and human to non-human)—that we present touch as salvation and cure, rather than the impossible predicament that can never be silenced.

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HYPO-HYPER-HAPTO-NEURO-MYSTICISM

NOTES

1. Shortly after completing a draft of this paper Amia Srinivasan coined the term “neuro-evo-evangelism,” which captures in part what I am hoping to investigate in this paper. “In the Long Cool Hour. Review of *The Ethical Project* by Kitcher, P.” *London Review of Books* [Online] 34:23 (2012): 17-18. Available from <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n23/amia-srinivasan/in-the-long-cool-hour>, accessed 21 May 2013. I am also hoping to tie a redemptive ethics of touch to the neural evangelism that has intensified since the decade of the brain and that has allowed Colin Blakemore to speak of “neuro-everything.” “Neuro-Everything: Revealing the Secrets of the Human Brain.” (2013) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmB_OgZkbQo.
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia, 1994.
3. Karen Barad, “On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am.” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23:5 (2012): 206-223, 207.
4. I am grateful to Justin Clemens and Matheson Russell for raising this critical point: while I am concerned in this paper with diagnosing an unthinking appeal to redemptive touch, the positive outcome would be to maintain a form of affectless philosophical critique, at least in theory. In addition to the world’s “murmurings” and “patterings” (Barad) I would suggest that there is another world that is stony, white and silent.
5. Bruno Latour, “An Attempt at a “Compositionist Manifesto.” *New Literary History* 41:3 (Summer 2010): 471-490.
6. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 203-4.
7. Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* Trans. William B Barton, Vera Deutsch and Eugene T Gendlin. Chicago: H. Regnery, 1967, 166.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
9. Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*. Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2011.
10. Derrida, *On Touching*, 60.
11. *Ibid.*, 291.
12. *Ibid.*, 60.
13. Jerry Sandusky, *Touched: The Jerry Sandusky Story*. Champagne: Sports Publishing, 2000, 220.
14. Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 156.
15. Bruno Latour, “How to Talk About the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies.” *Body and Society* 10:2-3 (2004): 205-229.
16. Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
17. Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: the Biological Roots of Human Understanding*. Boston: New Science Library, 1987.
18. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, 147.
19. Richard Menary, ed., *The Extended Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.
20. Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs: Minds, Technologies, and the Future of Human Intelligence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
21. Michael Baime, “This is Your Brain on Mindfulness.” *Shambala Sun*, July 2011. http://www.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/~britta/SUN_July11_Baime.pdf.
22. Fredric Jameson, *The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981.
23. “Entanglement,” Episode 5 of Fox series “Touched,” Aired on 4.12.12.
24. Abigail Bray, “The Question of Intolerance: ‘Corporate Paedophilia’ and Child Sexual Abuse Moral Panics.” *Australian Feminist Studies* 23:7 (Summer 2008): 323-41.