

For the 4th METABODY Conference ‘*History and Ontologies of Movement-Gesture*’

11. July 2014, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; Ciudad Universitaria de Cantoblanco, Auditorio

Filosofía y Letras, Madrid, Spain / Monika Jaeckel, *memacism* project

Touch, absconding into gesture

- or how to become intentionally attuned with distancing (dis-dancing¹) touch devices

Intro

In the beginning of her book ‘*Migrations of Gestures*’ Carrie Noland cites T. Adorno’s² concerns brought forward about 60 years ago: “What does it mean for the subject that there are no more casement windows to open, but only sliding frames to shove,” no portals to close “discreetly,” but only doors to be “slammed”? Noland continues referring to Adorno’s thought in respect of what would it mean if modern subjects learn to slam and shove, rather than latch and release, how will their general experience of movement be transformed? Asking “[w]hat does it mean for the subject” if, under the sway of advanced technology, only gestures “precise” and “brutal” may be executed within the modernist regime, Noland points out Adorno’s insight that *both instrumental and communicative gestures encode, express, and perpetuate the values of specific historical and cultural formations*³.

Coming across this only after having sent my proposal I felt a certain increase of my already present unease that surrounded my thinking about touch ‘as absconding into gesture’. It seemed a demanding task involving questions of what touch is, what is a gesture and how do these relate to each other and to movement? Adorno’s position appeared not too far from my own conception just that the questioning now concerns the situation of the postmodern, if not posthuman subject, and it is not so much the slamming of traditional doors, but the wiping gestures on glass or plastic screens or even muscular prosthesis as gestural devices.

Another difficulty arose from how to address the theme critically without sounding rather nostalgic, but meanwhile in fact it is the quite popular field of cognitive neuroscience itself that emphasizes the *role of the acting body and of sensory-motor systems in constituting the way our mind represent reality, by shaping our cognitive schemas*⁴. Furthermore authors like K.Barad whose work addresses the intersections of matter/ing and meaning or the concept of plasticity that C.Malabou, who attempts to define that *plasticity “takes over” and “becomes the resistance of difference to its textual reduction*⁵ [i.e. as *schemas of text and the trace*]⁶, provide new access points to the theme. But let’s depart from my initial inquiry:

What do we touch, when we touch a touchscreen?

This question leads to the point in which way does it matter when *touch* becomes a gestured instructional language⁷, as this is how our computer oriented movements seem to be developing into. What exactly happens when *touch*, which is generally defined as motion related, first becomes gestural and then further absconds into gestures to be read out by digital prosthetic devices, which then re-direct or provide a kind of responsiveness through the initiated process?

Touching, in the sense of moving the other, or the self in the other, by touching on environmental outlets and boundaries, is bound to a certain ‘response’, which is not only expected but certainly needed to recognize the self. Reciprocity of recognition is crucial for interaction, a statement by Merleau-Ponty, to which Vasudevi Reddy refers in her article “Moving others matters” (2012: 158). Although as J. Reynolds has pointed out characterizing *this reversibility as immanent* (as I did in my abstract) *is simply incorrect, as the world and others are conceived of as always already encroaching on the body*⁸. This describes that the experience of touching is dependent on the recognition of simultaneous tangibility which establish our embodied subjectivity at the intersection of two lines that in a *chiasmic structure of overlapping and encroachment [...] nevertheless retains a divergence*⁹. Based on these insights and congruently due to the necessary difference Derrida has pointed out, Barad

speaks of an infinite alterity, that all touching entails. ... ('touching the Other is touching all Others, including the "self," and touching the "self" entails touching the strangers within")¹⁰.

So then what or who do we touch when we touch the surface of a smart device? Do we already touch an in/human Other or is it simply a tool, an extension that allows us 'to get in touch' with one another? Under the premise that our touch needs the sensing, the tactility that is the response of matter or else constituting mattering, what exactly is the response we get when touching the screen? Which density or structure do we sense, which implications and connotations come with it?

It is certainly at least twofold information we receive: we touch a surface; nevertheless we expect and accept a very different reaction. One that ignores the sensual affectivity and follows a coded 'redirect' to create the desired effect transmitting into a cognitive affect, that is initiated outside our own cognitive processing. While the activity still seems to almost adhere to a literal translation of the statement that *touch moves and affects what it affects*¹¹, it might be questioned, whether this way of touching can still be accounted for the way of fundamental sensual experience of world recognition, which touch has been described as.

P. Dourish defines the interaction with a digital device (HCI¹²) [...] *as a form of mediated communication between the end user and the system designer*, [...] Thus he concludes that *even the most isolated and individual interaction with a computer system is still fundamentally a social activity taking place against a backdrop of commonly held social understandings*.¹³

... not touched, though why these practices keep us intentionally attuned?

Touching has an intimacy and interestingly the statement "It is so much more intimate (than a laptop)!" was one of Steve Jobs' first sentences when he sat down with an iPad during its first public presentation. Did he mean the intimacy implied by the touchscreen/tablet of a personal space that connects to a remote outside suggesting certain allowances that certainly are also induced by the proprietorial portability of the device? It indicates a shared space

which fosters a sense of intimacy of agency¹⁴. Though L. Suchman early on stated¹⁵ that *mutualities are not necessarily symmetries, [...] humans and artifacts do not appear to constitute each other in the same way.*

Already in the same paper from 2000 Suchman refers to Barad's definition of responsibility and situatedness as not to be *an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because it is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping*¹⁶ our world. This means also that if we are not aware of our practices, but mistake a device for the enacted activity it forms in an *apparatus* like engagement with us, as expressed in Barad's definition of *agential realism*, the inherent response and responsibility stays unacknowledged.

Barad's term of *spacetime mattering* defines *worlding* as the experience out of a situated 'action'. And J. Butler adds that all action requires 'support'.¹⁷ *Indeed actions are always situated in particular social and physical circumstances, therefore the situation is crucial to action's interpretation*¹⁸, emphasizes Suchman focusing on the interaction with technological devices. It is thus not the touching of a touchscreen, but the social and material constitutions surrounding it, which we relate to. Consequently our touch is a directed or *supported* one, which brings it close to gesture. The action though is barely reciprocated, not touched upon in any implied connotation. Nevertheless the device itself acts as an augmentation of action that partly occurs outside our own *cognition and perhaps other mental processes*, as M. Rowlands suggests for a vision of cognition [...] *as something that organisms achieve, in part, because of what they do in and to the world that is outside their brains- whether their bodies or the wider environment*¹⁹.

The problematic though lies in the inherent coded 'redirect' that due to the circumstances of the device's 'fabrication' entails and transports further definitions of information/action, which we get in touch with as simulated 'responsiveness'²⁰. In his book '*The Tacit Dimension*' M. Polanyi has described the semantic shift from the 'proximal' (the close) to the 'distal' (distant) in our *tacit knowing* when we allocate *the meaning of* [a tool's]

*impact on our hands in terms of its effect on the things to which we are applying it*²¹. The redirected touch also becomes ‘distal’ on the basis of this imminent *semantic shift* and might be considered as becoming ‘strictly gestural’.

Direct touch though can entail gestural motion, but generally gesture has to be seen as a component of human utterance²² that as A. Kendon states has to be regarded as embedded and [...] *part of the action systems by which the environment and objects within it are manipulated, modified, organized and created*²³. Thus defining our gestures, with which we seem to activate the tactile devices, as a gestural language of instructions, in the sense of a system of abstract symbols, fails to understand the intentional attunement with which the distal effectuations of digital technology affect us.

So then what in fact is a gesture?

D. McNeill defines gesture and language as interdependent and coexistent. Gesture and speech are according to him *a way of cognitively existing, of cognitively being, at the moment of speaking*, [...] both are *the thought coming into being at that instant*.²⁴ McNeill implies here that, *"the actual motion of the gesture itself", is a dimension of meaning* [...] not an ‘expression’ or ‘representation’ of it, but is *it*.²⁵ This contention references Merleau-Ponty’s point that language rather than presenting *“is the subject’s taking up of a position in the world of his meanings.”* A position quite similar to Wittgenstein’s assertion that *“the meaning of a word is its use in the language”*²⁶.

It is this performativity of speech – and gesture (my insert) - that Judith Butler expressed in her recent talk “When gesture becomes event” in the remark that not only *we act on speech, but speech acts also on us*²⁷. Though certainly Butler addressed with this insight a wider frame, nevertheless it allows returning to the observation of neuroscientific research. V. Gallese states that due to the workings of the mirror neurons an interactive encounter is not about unaffectedly seeing an action, an emotion, or a sensation, but that *observed social*

*stimuli, internal representations of the body states associated with these actions, emotions, and sensations are evoked in the observer*²⁸ and thus create a space of intersubjectivity.

The studies Gallese refers to *show that speech and symbolic gesture share the same brain mechanism of sensorimotor control* [...] thus creating a *relationship between hand, expressive gesture and language*. Both now regarded as cognitive tools and *employed to organize, elaborate, and self-consciously structure our own social experiences* under the same aspects *in the domain of inter-subjectivity*²⁹. The shift from the metaphor of the ‘window’ of desktop computers towards a sense of intimate space, that through sliding and wiping is moved³⁰ hence occurs in seeming consequence and congruence with the neuroscientific insights. The gestures of touching and holding touchscreens obviously enhance the idea that it is a personal space, as the sense of tactile or haptic intimacy links to cognitive models where the whole self is explored. In Gallese words: *The same systems running our body in the world not only provide structure to conceptual content, but also contribute to the characterization of the semantic content of concepts in terms of the way we function with our bodies in the world*³¹.

Conclusion

So while empathy is based on intentional attunement, that collapses *the others’ intentions into the observer’s ones*, producing *the peculiar quality of familiarity we entertain with other individuals*, it is the *shareability of the phenomenal content of the intentional relations of others, by means of their shared neural underpinnings*³², from which our intentional attunement evolves. The initial question thus morphed into the one ‘what happens when touch becomes a gesture’, now a wiping move that blurs the actual situatedness into ‘distal’ knowing, which is in fact an ‘inward’ turn.

A small study on strictly gestural device instruction (though it is too small to be relevant, but still shows some interesting points) as that when *communicating with technology, participants on average used less taut hand shapes. This decreased tautness may*

*be the result of the egocentric manner (inward focus) of gesturing as reported by some participants*³³. An outcome adherent to the instrumentalization of gesture that recalls Agamben's statement "the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable"³⁴. Agamben describes the inward turn of the Western bourgeoisie at the end of the 19th century, as a consequence of the irretrievably loss of the gestures, which relates to an understanding of gesture in which *potential and action, nature and artifice, contingency and necessity, become indiscernible* ..³⁵

It is the general incalculability of responsiveness that attunes us intentionally even in its calculable machinic performance, which kids so intuitively are able to grasp. Children seem instinctively to understand the potential of tactile devices, but also its limits of response-ability: "... you can't make it come alive."³⁶, is how the Journalist Paula Coccozza cites a six year old *digital native*.

Barad defines the incalculable responsibility of *the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming* [...] *an enabling* [...] *through the iterative reworking of im/possibility*³⁷ [...] *as this infinite alterity that lives in, around and through us*³⁸. This also concerns the body in its affective cognitivity that *not only structures the experiential aspects of intersubjectivity, but also their linguistic representations*³⁹ and our gestures.

For Agamben a gesture neither represents solely *a sphere of means as addressing a goal* nor a *superior sphere of* [...] *movement that has its end in itself*⁴⁰. The mediality a gesture exhibits, he states, *is the process of making means visible as such*. The gesture thus interrupts the very being-means (of being in language) and shows just the very fact of it, thereby transforming a *res* into a *res gesta*. So if *endured and supported*⁴¹ allowing the emergence of this exact being-in-a-medium to open an ethical dimension that is also an option entailed in Barad's term of response-ability⁴² evoked by touching.

(Remark: Due to the limit of time, there is no space to elaborate on prosthesis-like devices which relate to our muscular firings – to interpret what to do, before we even are aware of it – like the MYO.)

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- WKV Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart, Germany; exhibition leaflet for 'Gesture'; 24.5.14 – 3.8.14

Footnotes:

¹ Referring to a word game A. Ronell at the 2014 TPP conference by splitting the German word for distance – Distanz into dis/Tanz, which translates to dis/dance

² Ardorno, 2006:Aphorism 19

³ Noland, 2008: IX

⁴ Gallese V. "Mirror neurons and intentional attunement: A commentary on David Olds." *J. American Psychoanalytic Association*, 2006, 54:46-57.

⁵ Anna Street, "Catherine Malabou and the Concept of Plasticity", Labo LAPS 2014. URL : <http://tpp2014.com/catherine-malabou-concept-plasticity/>

⁶ My insert

⁷ Examples: List of Mac Multi-Touch Gestures: <http://www.danrodney.com/mac/multitouch.html>; Gesture Markup Language (GML) Wiki: http://www.gestureml.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page

⁸ Reynolds, 2005: 134–135

⁹ Reynolds, 2005: 132: In other words, we can experience ourselves as touching only if we also have a recognition of our own tangibility and our capacity to be touched by others, and this means that our embodied subjectivity is never purely located in either our tangibility or in our touching, but at their intersection and where the two lines of a chiasm intertwine and cross. The chiasm then is simply an image to describe how this overlapping and encroachment can take place between a pair that nevertheless retains a divergence, in that touching and touched are obviously never exactly the same thing.

¹⁰ Barad, 2012: 214

¹¹ Barad, 2012: 208

¹² HCI – Human Computer Interaction

¹³ Dourish: 2004: 56

¹⁴ F. Armaly's very much appreciated corrections and suggestions

¹⁵ Suchman, 2007: 269

¹⁶ Barad, 1998: 16.

¹⁷ Conference TPP

¹⁸ Suchman, 1987, 2007

¹⁹ Rowlands, 2010: 49

²⁰ And I am not sure if this is the same as the responsibility of a traditional tool like a hammer.

²¹ Polyani, 1966:13 ... when we use a tool. We are attending to the meaning of its impact on our hands in terms of its effect on the things to which we are applying it. We may call this the *semantic aspect* of tacit knowing. All meaning tends to be displaced *away from ourselves*, and that is in fact my justification for using the terms "proximal" and "distal" to describe the first and second terms of tacit knowing.

²² Kendon. 2004: 355

²³ Kendon, 2004: 361

²⁴ McNeill: URL: <http://cup.linguistlist.org/academic-books/the-evolution-of-language/the-origin-of-language-in-gesture-speech-unity-4/>

²⁵ McNeill. 2005: 98

²⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §43, p.25

²⁷ Own notes; TPP conference Paris

²⁸ Gallese 2006: 10

²⁹ Gallese, 2006:10: In fact, conceptual content is also embodied, that is, it is mapped within our sensory-motor system (Gallese 2003c).

³⁰ F. Armaly

³¹ Gallese, 2006: 10

³² Gallese, 2006: 9

³³ Sureshini A. Grandhi, How We Gesture Towards Machines: An Exploratory Study of User Perceptions of Gestural Interaction, *CHI 2013 Extended Abstracts*, April 27–May 2, 2013, Paris, France.

³⁴ Agamben, 2000: 52.3

³⁵ Agamben, 2000: 53

³⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jan/08/are-tablet-computers-bad-young-children>

³⁷ Barad, 2010: 265: *Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed.*

³⁸ Barad, 2012: 217-218

³⁹ Gallese, 2006: 11

⁴⁰ Agamben, 2006: 58

⁴¹ Agamben, 2006: 57: *What characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced [facere] or acted [agere], but rather something is being endured and supported [gerere].*

⁴² Barad, 2012: 215: *In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is: matter is condensations of response-ability. Touching is a matter of response. Each of "us" is constituted in response-ability. Each of "us" is constituted as responsible for the other, as being in touch with the other.*