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## **BETWEEN CULTURE AND CONTINGENCY:**

### **A PLACE FOR TOUCH AND TACT**

**BY GIANCARLO GALEAZZI**

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# BETWEEN CULTURE AND CONTINGENCY: A PLACE FOR TOUCH AND TACT

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## Touch as a Relational Paradigm

There exist – both literally and metaphorically – cognitive and relational “paradigms”. In the cognitive field, at least three paradigms come to mind: the “visual” one is prevalent in the field of philosophy (the eye of reason to see ideas or through ideas: teoria, teoresi); the “auditory” one is prevalent in the field of religion (the ears of faith to attend to the Word: ob-audire); and the “tactile” one, prevalent in the field of science (the hands of the mind which allow us to have sensate experiences). Besides the cognitive, there are also relational paradigms, including the tactile sort.

Like every other sense organ, touch relates us to people and objects, but the relation achieved by touch is different from that established by the other sensory organs in that it involves the subject in his or her corporeal-spiritual unity: in other words, as a “spirit in the condition of incarnation” (as Jacques Maritain would say), or “an incarnate spirit” (in the words of Emmanuel Mounier), making the point that the distinctive characteristic of the sense of touch is the unity of the person – intellectual, emotional, affective, spiritual – a unity which has repercussions in various spheres, from the interpersonal to the aesthetic and from the social to the religious.

Over and above the extent of its use, the **tactile faculty** is to be considered a **relational paradigm**, both literally and metaphorically; and to reflect on the sense of touch today could hardly be more timely, now that it has been called into question by the coronavirus and, before that, by the proliferation of technological innovations (e.g. social networks). So

we shall consider this relational paradigm of touch a propos of a number of questions: one to do with art, the others to do with society, with reference to political, religious and health aspects which will be dealt with severally.

## Touch and Art

A work of art can be viewed from at least two standpoints: that of the artist who produces it and the individual who enjoys it. Both roles may involve all five organs of sense: in the creativity of the artist (which favours one sense rather than another according to the specific conditions) and in the perceptions of the onlookers. As regards **the visual arts**, it used to seem that one organ of sense – touch – could not be brought into play by the visually impaired in their appreciation of the artwork; but today that is no longer the case because the “look but don't touch” rule has been challenged, greatly to the credit of those who have shown that touch, too, provides means of drawing close to works of art.

This approach has offered the blind and partially sighted a “tactile encounter” with the artwork, enabling them to touch the original or a reproduction or a copy to scale. It is an opportunity which turned out to be of even greater significance when it was shown that exploring artworks through touch is also a rewarding experience for the normally sighted, allowing them to approach the work in a different way and enriching their merely visual appreciation. So, placing art “at our fingertips” allows us to “discover the values of tactility” and to formulate “an aesthetic of tactility”, to draw on the language of Aldo Frassini, used in the titles of various publications by the Museo Tattile Statale “Omero”. It is a way of insisting that, in the enjoyment of art, “tactility” offers opportunities to everyone – sighted and non-sighted alike – and has implications not just at an aesthetic level but at one that can properly be called existential.

## Three Modes of Tactile Relation

It is precisely at an existential level that the sense of touch affords food for thought, so much so that from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Hans G. Gadamer, from Jacques Derrida to Jean-Luc Nancy, and from Luce Irigaray to Umberto Galimberti and Aldo Masullo (\*), contemporary thinking (especially in phenomenological and analytical philosophy) has devoted ever greater attention to touch “as the sense organ which orientates us in social relations”. But we are going to consider it here not as “a basic anthropological concept developed within the phenomenological movement” (or analytical movement), but as a

category which can help us to understand the present situation. This means that we shall be thinking about touch in its threefold configuration: **contact, contamination, contagion**, considered as typical expressions of interpersonal and social life, as well as artistic. In any case, the three modes have an ambivalent character in the sense that they are attributed with a negative and a positive meaning: the negative meaning was prevalent in the past and is even stronger today with the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic; the positive meaning has struggled to make headway but has finally gained recognition, both literally and metaphorically. Let's consider the three modes.

**Contact** has two accepted meanings: the negative one obviously refers to infectious contacts, as well as those that are vexatious, intrusive or manipulative; the positive meaning points to normal daily intercourse and contacts which are respectful, empathetic and fruitful. Specifically, tactility is positive when touching enacts a convergence, not a grasping. So we can say that contact is negative when it presumes to grasp and positive when it results in moving forward together. Just to give one or two expressions which refer to the "hand", think of the positive meaning we give to gestures like "giving someone your hand", "shaking hands", "taking someone by the hand", "holding hands": thus this ethic of the hand (as I like to call it) constitutes a fundamental relational paradigm for community life. But it may happen that we are forced to do without it, as in the case of Covid-19, because it is precisely the hand that can prove infectious; in which case, not only do we avoid a whole range of physical gestures, but we also deny ourselves the symbolic meanings they convey and which (referring back to our "hand" expressions) are welcome, agreement, guidance, friendship and affection, and there is no need to stress the importance of symbolism for man and his social life (civil and ecclesiastical).

**Contamination**, too, has a dual and antithetical meaning: the negative one which is already there in the everyday use of the word points to an improper mingling, a polluting mixture, something in short that compromises purity and leads us to shun whatever is contaminated. (Ethnically it is a short step to racism). But alongside the negative sense, contamination has recently been acquiring a positive sense as a result of pluralism in ethnic, ethical, cultural and religious matters, reinforced by globalization which promotes awareness not just of the inevitability of contamination but of its axiological significance. Thus "hybridization" comes to be seen as a process at once inevitable and desirable, and thus words like "cross-breeding" and "creolization" normally no longer carry pejorative

overtones: having lost their literal meaning which was linked to colonialism (at least, a certain outdated form of colonialism), the terms are commonly used to indicate fruitful forms of contemporary cultural complexity, often deemed worth nurturing.

**Contagion**, likewise, has a dual meaning - one negative, one positive. Its primary and most widespread meaning is literally negative in referring to infection in the form of illness, epidemics and pandemics. It might, though, be acknowledged to have a positive meaning if – from an educational, moral and spiritual standpoint – it brings about improvement, stimulates growth, or even proves to be at the root of valid life decisions. If the example does not become a model, if the testimony does not become proselytism, what we see are forms of positive contagion. The behaviour and lifestyles of saints and heroes are contagious in a positive sense; and when we talk about saints and heroes, we are not thinking only of those who feature in books of history and hagiography, but also (and mainly) of those who remain anonymous: the heroes of everyday life, the saint from next door. Turning now to the current “Covid-19” emergency, it has to be said that the hygiene measures that we have had to adopt deprive interpersonal relations of what is personal, even identifying. On health grounds, the measures are certainly justified because they protect us from contagion; the fact remains, however, that we are fully aware of their invasiveness and hanker for contact, to the extent that all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have discovered the need for contact - which is undoubtedly physical, but not only.

Notwithstanding the regulations to prevent and protect from infection, the point needs to be made that we must avoid making the unwarranted equation contact=contagion, and that we must insist on the fact that interpersonal contact is quintessential to human relations, even when we are forced to suspend it for risk of contagion. The restrictions imposed by the authorities appear to have penalized touch more than the other senses, beginning with so-called “social distancing” (which it would be better to call “physical distancing” or “safety distance”), a precautionary measure designed to prevent bodily contact - from the handshake to the hug, from the kiss to the caress. By limiting contact, or even depriving us of it, the present pandemic is a reminder of just how essential it is for a human being. It occurs to us that something similar happens (and the example is no coincidence) with freedom: restricting or removing it makes us aware of a lack and rekindles a sense of need.

## Obstacles to Contact Culture

It is on the strength of this renewed awareness that we must start to rebuild – without jeopardizing our health – those relations which are grounded on contact, and to specify (as mentioned) their correct conformation. However, it needs stressing that latterly the culture of contact has been called into question, both by the coronavirus pandemic and by an alternative culture, that of the so-called “contactless” technologies.

To start with the pandemic, Covid-19 has obliged us to adopt health measures to contain and eradicate the virus, besides social measures (political and economic), enforced by emergency rulings, capable of impacting the democratic order, not so much at a formal level as in terms of mentality. Among those who were alert to this was the philosopher, **Massimo Cacciari**, in an article which appeared on 10 May 2020 in the weekly “L'Espresso”, entitled “**Pensiamoci**” (“Think about it”). An order, or an invitation? Or maybe just a heartfelt appeal? (It is worth suggesting in passing that this and other pieces by Cacciari form a body of editorials which deserve to be collected and published in book form since they transcend the specific circumstances that inspired them and offer what amount to fully-fledged anthropological and axiological reflections). Now, in this particular article, which undertakes much more than is usually found in magazine writing, Cacciari warns that “at this time we have accepted necessary restrictions to freedom and rights, but we need to be on our guard against them spreading”. He is warning us to beware of a culture that, in the name of health, ends up by binding contagion and contact so fast that in rejecting the one we reject the other, effectively debasing contact in ways that go well beyond the coronavirus emergency. Faced with certain measures passed by the government, it is difficult not to wonder whether the intention were not to insinuate the doubt, “do we really need physical contact?” To which the answer is a confirmed “we certainly do”, so we cannot pass off as “amazing preventive measures for any pandemic” legislation which devalues and marginalizes personal contact. “Think about it – writes Cacciari – now, not later.” Let's think about it at once and not wait until it is too late.

It is a warning also issued by a woman philosopher, **Donatella Di Cesare**, (there are outstanding female philosophers, besides male!) who has recently published a slim volume entitled **Virus sovrano? L'asfissia capitalistica** (Bollati Boringhieri, Milano 2020) in which she talks about “immunopolitics” to argue (as she briefly explained in a recent interview) that “politics and medicine, heterogeneous spheres, overlap and mingle”, giving

rise to a “medical-pastoral democracy” which raises serious questions about the exceptional measures which have been taken. She warns that “the emergency must not serve as a pretext for authoritarian experimentation”, and stresses the need to remain alert to the “repressive risks” attendant on what she calls “the bio-security measures”, especially since “total immunization is a mirage” and hence we need to live with (rather, learn to live with) viruses and bacteria, and with the knowledge of our own vulnerability. On the other hand, Di Cesare adds, “immune systems are a two-edged sword: in an effort to eliminate the other, the self ends up killing itself or exposing itself to autoimmune diseases. The identity self does not come off well here either. Not least because it assumes an integrity and an identity that do not exist”. As we hinted earlier, it is thus that contact, contagion and contamination intertwine.

Moving on to the spirit of the time, this “is blowing in the direction of the “contactless” technologies”, as the French thinker, **Patrick Goujon**, points out in his article, “**Touch: right relations and true words**”, adding that these technologies “in no way blameworthy, are symptoms of the tone we want to give ourselves. Effectiveness, speed, independence. The tendency of “contactless” is light, aerial: it fulfils the dream of a humanity freed from the heaviness of the body and from the risks of contact (...) Saturated with publicity-speak, images, technical feats, our imagination is constantly yearning for an existence different from the one which roots us in the most elementary experiences of our earthly condition.” “However,” the theologian warns, “let’s not be too eager to cast the first stone at this technical-commercial world which might well throw it back into the garden of our conceptions of the spiritual life and, more specifically, of the Christian life. Our life has weight and our contacts are the first to alert us to it. Now, it is precisely the tactile sense – let’s call it that – of existence that Christianity nurtures”. And which it can and must nurture. And it is a task which should not be left to the Church alone.

In fact, an education which uses touch in order to cultivate our sense of touch is vital for our all-round human development. From Maria Montessori to Bruno Munari, there has been no shortage of authoritative voices raised in support, but it is a question that still needs to be given due consideration by pedagogues and educators. One positive sign is that material designed to assist with sensory education and the exploration of the environment is now finally being prepared, but particular attention needs to be paid to the sense of touch. It is worth remembering that in his Phenomenology of Perception, the

philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty devotes a chapter to the hand as exemplifying one's relationship to the world.

## Complexity of Tactile Relations

Thus the relationship based on physical contact (and specifically on touch) must be seen as irreplaceable. And it is complex, as is apparent from the dialectic between experience of the tangible and experience of the intangible which can be understood in a dual sense. The theological sense: in the above-mentioned essay, Patrick Goujon argues that “touch is overwhelmed by the experience of the intangible” to the extent that “the Gospels reveal what, in our existence, is intangible and goes beyond the experience of touch as an act of grasping (...) God cares for us without holding onto us, like a father happy to see his sons and daughters leading their own lives.” The anthropological sense has been clarified by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, recently abetted by the philosopher Aldo Masullo who observed that to touch another man is to touch his body, to feel oneself touch it, but never to feel his experience of being touched, and so never to feel, not his body, but he himself. We do not exist if we do not feel that we exist; but I will never be able to feel another's sense of his existence, just as nobody will experience mine, as **Masullo** stresses when he defines the sense of self as the “archsense” and “untouchable”. In his book, **L'arcisenso, Dialettica della solitudine**, Masullo delves into the question of solitude, aware that he is listening in on the inner life of another person but never able to gain access to it; hence the dialectic solitude and solidarity: we are alone but we can be companions, companions in solitude; we can share our uniqueness; we can stay apart and yet together.

In effect, proximity demands closeness no less than distance, as stressed by the Lacanian psychoanalyst and thinker, **Massimo Recalcati**, whose books include **Il segreto del figlio. Da Edipo al figlio ritrovato** (Feltrinelli, Milano 2018) in which he draws on his clinical experience and on interpretations of figures such as Oedipus, Hamlet, Isaac and (especially) the anonymous prodigal son in order to insist that a son may be found again and may find himself again. And the father's embrace is the strongest expression of this recovery, a contact unstinting and enveloping, where the hands of the parent (in Rembrandt's great painting) are a male hand and a female hand, of father and mother, of justice and mercy. The “good” brother is not included in the reunion; he looks on critically and has no part in the tactile encounter – a spectator, who feels none of the joy felt by the

father which expresses itself in potent physical gestures (from the embrace to the meal) which enable the prodigal to return home, to feel at home.

## A Privileged Place

Information is not enough without communication, and **Cacciari** would agree. He was among the seventeen intellectuals (including a good twelve philosophers) who signed the **Appeal**. Other signatories who attended our 24th annual festival, “Le parole della filosofia” (“The Words of Philosophy”), in Ancona, included Umberto Curi, Sergio Givone, Pier Aldo Rovatti, Carlo Sini e Nicla Vassallo. Now, the Appeal, published in “La Stampa”, 18 May 2020, censures the inadequacy of distance learning and stresses the inalienability of traditional teaching based on live interaction between students and between teachers and students. It denounces as rash “the reduction of the complex process of education to a question of instruction” and dismisses as shallow the belief that “the two modes – contact teaching and distance teaching – are interchangeable”, insisting that school “means, first and foremost, social relations, horizontally (among the pupils) and vertically (with the teachers”); it means “comprehensive, omnilateral education, intellectual and moral development, the growth of a civil and political conscience”.

The Appeal puts its finger on the essential features of a school which truly educates rather than merely instructs - in other words, a school which cannot do without personal relations, including tactile relations, among its educands. It should be added, however, that while the two scholastic approaches cannot be considered interchangeable, neither should they be seen as radically alternative or mutually exclusive: they can coexist, but in proportions which will not pervert the sense of the school. There can be no doubt that we need to be aware that the new generations (to use Mark Prensky's felicitous expressions) are “digital natives” or at least “digital residents”, that a mediological culture has taken its place alongside “the two cultures” (literary and scientific) and that each culture can be humanistic (not just the one so-called up to now) provided that it nurtures the human: broadening horizons and instilling an awareness of limits.

I would go so far as to say that, from this viewpoint, the school can take on a role as the privileged forum for the three dimensions of touch discussed earlier: contact, contamination, contagion can work there at a physical and metaphorical level (as I have had occasion to witness in nearly fifty years of secondary school and university teaching). Contacts are inevitable at class and school level, contacts between peers and between

generations: real contacts no less than ideal; contaminations, too, are the order of the day at school and in class and concern the pluralism which characterizes the pupils (from their socio-cultural extraction) and the teachers (from their didactic freedom); finally, contagion is the hallmark of the good school if the teachers who work there are not merely experts in their own disciplines but real galvanizers: if, in short, they know how to kindle an interest in culture through stimulating contacts and contaminations to the point of infecting their charges with a love of culture in its manifold expressions.

With this in mind, I should like to mention a book by **Massimo Recalcati - L'ora di lezione. Per un'erotica dell'insegnamento** (Einaudi 2014) – in which the well-known psychoanalyst reflects on what it means to be a teacher in a society without fathers and without guides, arguing that the good teacher brings new worlds into being, makes knowledge an object of desire than can stir our lives into action and enlarge our scope, so that during the lesson knowledge is invested with an erotic charge and the book becomes a body. Recalcati calls it a “small miracle”; in fact, it is not small at all, given that it has the power to change lives.

All of which leads us to insist on the need for interpersonal contact, direct contact, contact imbued with its own physicality, also tactile. I am reminded of the words of the writer and philosopher, Mirt Komel, who in a recent interview with **Alessandra Pigliaru** (“Il Manifesto”, 19 May 2020) said: “Touch can save us because, despite appearances, the problem we face today is precisely one of touch, from which we are, or we have been, alienated. This is why the issue also has a political sense, because it bears on something that is common to all of us, i.e. the community itself: if we cannot be in contact with one another – real contact, not digital, specious - then we are no longer a community but an agglomeration of atoms”.

To conclude, I should like to say that we need to beware of “tactless people” (people with no delicacy of touch); there is a need instead for “tactful people” (whose touch is sensitive) and such must be our teachers, first and foremost. With this in mind, it seems to me that school can take on the role of a privileged place where contact, contamination and contagion are allowed free play, both literally and metaphorically, a place which is founded on tactility in the broad sense - in other words, sensory physicality - and tactility in the strict sense, which brings us back to the image (real and ideal) of “taking by the hand” and “holding hands”.



## AISTHESIS. SCOPRIRE L'ARTE IN TUTTI I SENSI

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