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TACTILITY AND MODERNITY: 
THE SENSE OF TOUCH IN D. H. LAWRENCE, ALFRED STIEGLITZ, WALTER 
BENJAMIN, AND MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the unique importance of tactile perception in Western Modernism, focusing on three individuals and an artistic group, namely, D. H. Lawrence, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and an artistic circle centering around Alfred Stieglitz. In the tradition of Western culture, touch is often regarded as the “lowest” sense while vision is privileged as the “intellectual sense.” Through a comparative analysis of Modernist art, literature, and philosophy, I argue that the emphasis on touch in the early twentieth century challenges this hierarchy of perceptions while destabilizing the distinction between the animal and the human, and between the primitive and the civilized. I particularly focus on the oppositional relationship between modern technology and the organic image of touch, arguing that the increased discourse of touch occurs concomitantly with the rapid development of visual technology in the modern age.

This study consists of four distinct but thematically interrelated chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the discourse of touch in D. H. Lawrence’s late works on art composed between 1925 and 1930, with a particular focus on his travel writing on the Etruscan civilization and his essays on Cézanne. Chapter 2 examines the collective discourse and imagery of touch in Alfred Stieglitz and his artistic circle, including Max Weber, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and William Carlos Williams. Chapter 3 explores the Modernist dialectic between the organic and the technological in Walter Benjamin’s work in terms of its relationship to his ambivalent conception of the tactile sense, focusing on the centrality of touch in his theories of history, mimesis, and translation. Chapter 4 describes the prototypical image of touch in Modernism by analyzing Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous notion of tactile chiasm, and discusses the influence of
Cézanne and Proust on his tactile conception of space and time. Through these four chapters, this study attempts to describe the Modernist revolution of discourse on perception.
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Introduction

Near the end of his 1951 *Autobiography*, William Carlos Williams reflects upon the “transition” period of Modernism, in which “painting and the poem became so closely allied.” Describing the revolutionary change of style that “the painters following Cézanne” brought to visual works of art, Williams insists that they “began to talk of sheer paint: a picture a matter of pigments upon a piece of cloth stretched on a frame.” This material quality, Williams argues, characterizes both paintings and poems of the period: “It is the making of that step, to come over into the tactile qualities, the words themselves beyond the mere thought expressed that distinguishes the modern, or distinguished the modern of that time from the period before the turn of the century” (380). He maintains that awareness of tactile materiality in poetic and pictorial expressions emerged with the rise of Modernism.

Exploring the nexus between touch and modernity that Williams suggested, the present study seeks to critically examine the history of the tactile perception in Western modernism. Although the sense of touch is an intrinsically atemporal and universal physical phenomenon, its vitalistic and primordial implications inspired Modernist art, literature, and philosophy in a unique manner. Rather than constructing a coherent narrative on the history of the sense during the period, I focus on three individuals and an artistic group, namely, D. H. Lawrence, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and an artistic circle around Alfred Stieglitz that includes Williams, in order to analyze how the sense of touch inform their thoughts and creations. Among these individuals, one may find more differences than similarities; they worked in different fields, lived in different countries, and had different styles. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this study, their discourse and imagery of touch exquisitely resonate with one another beyond differences of
genres and languages, forming an important aspect of the project of Western modernism. Here, I should quickly stress that although this study includes discussions of theoretical works, I do not abstract their ideas of touch and “apply” them to the reading of less theoretical narratives and concrete images; in other words, this is neither a Benjaminian nor a Merleau-Pontian reading of the Modernist discourse of touch. Rather, breaking with such a hierarchical structure of “interpretation,” I will read Modernist texts and images of touch irrespective of genres in an attempt to let their details speak for themselves while striving to avoid reductions and generalizations. In this regard, I agree with Frederick Jameson’s insistence that “modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category” as well as with Sara Danius’s claim that “any attempt to historicize modernism … has to be grounded in close textual analysis” (40; 5). Although my study is obviously anything but comprehensive on the topic, close study of these artists and philosophers will reveal that the tactile sense not only offered themes to Modernists’ works but also structured their inner logics.

My emphasis on the sense of touch may appear odd, since not touch but sight has been commonly regarded as the most privileged sense in Western civilization. Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle established the supremacy of sight over the other senses; as Hannah Arendt notes, “from the very outset, in formal philosophy, thinking has been thought of in terms of seeing” (110). Indeed, vision was a predominant element of discourse in Western history and was strongly associated with the intellectual and rational capability. For example, the terms of “Dark Age” and “Enlightenment” explicitly conceptualize the increased rationality of society in visual terms. René Descartes’ belief that human rationality literally derived from the organ of the eye led him to the assertion that sight is “the most comprehensive and the noblest” of all the senses (152). Citing this phrase, Martin Jay argues that the visual ideal informed the intellectual
movement of the Enlightenment and laid the groundwork for what he calls the “ocularcentric” structure of Western culture. Vision was also foundational for the Western discourse of colonialism and Imperialism. As theorists such as Michael Foucault and Edward Said have illustrated, the model of vision served as a political apparatus for the hegemony of the West. The rhetorical importance of sight has transformed critical methods in various fields. In Anglo-American academia, “visual studies” is now established as an academic discipline, and the scholarship of gender, class, and race during the past three decades has often investigated the political implications in the act of “looking.”

The modern age has further elevated the status of vision. In particular, as Tim Armstrong emphasizes in Modernism, Technology, and the Body, scientific and technological innovation during the nineteenth century caused “a revolution in perceptions of the body,” which Modernist artists and authors represented in their works (2). The profusion of visual media such as photography and film affected the way humans looked at things, and facilitated the modern practice of visual conceptualization. Walter Benjamin famously discusses the “optical unconscious” in vision whose presence the modern technology of photography first revealed (II 1)

1 There are numerous scholarly works that analyze the supremacy of sight in Western philosophy, culture, and literature, but historical and theoretical analysis of vision seems to be most prominent in the 1990s. In addition to the first chapter of Jay’s book that I mentioned above, exemplary texts include Susan Buck-Morss’s The Dialectics of Seeing (1991), Jonathan Crary’s Techniques of the Observer (1992), a collection of essays on “the hegemony of vision” edited by Levin (1993), Rosalind Krauss’s The Optical Unconscious (1994), Kaja Silverman’s The Threshold of the Visible World (1996), and Interpreting Visual Culture edited by Ian Heywood (1999).
Inspired by this notion, Rosalind Krauss argues that what characterizes the modern is the “modality of the visual field,” that is, “the formal order of vision” strictly distinguished from “empirical vision” (12; 15). Modern visual media made explicit the difference between the concept of visuality and the physical experience of viewing primarily through their function of turning what has been invisible into visible forms. In addition to the newly invented technological media, what was also important for the modern experience of vision was new means of mobility such as cars and trains, which demanded, as Enda Duffy puts it in his study of “speed culture,” “new kinds of alertness and mind-eye coordination” (59). Modern vehicles transformed the perception of moving objects and made everyday life heavily mediated by visual effects. Thus, modern media and technology force humans to use the sense of sight in a manner that humans had never before engaged in.

The present study does not aim to subvert this privileged status of vision by claiming that touch was more important than vision in the modern age. Nor is it my concern to argue for the absolute difference between vision and touch in the modern period. Rather, I will show that the discourse of touch in Modernist works exhibits symptoms of the visually mediated age, which are, in Armstrong’s words, unique consequences of the “revolution in perceptions” (2). The transformation of tactile perception in the modern age is concomitant with that of visual perception. While the technological changes of perceptual environments brought to the foreground the importance of the eye, they also caused anti-visual sentiments. Naturally enough, the age of technology was also the age of anti-technology, and the sense of touch was often

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2 Tim Armstrong points out that “In Bergson’s Matter and Memory (1911) [the] split between human vision and technology appears as a problem inherent in representation, seen in terms of the opposition of materialism and idealism” (Cultural History 100).
associated with the latter. Film scholar Adams P. Sitney argues that “Modernist literary and cinematic works stress vision as a privileged mode of perception, even of revelation, while at the same time cultivating opacity and questioning the primacy of the visible world” (2). Sitney calls this ambivalence regarding the visual sense the “antinomy of vision.” My study of the Modernist discourse of touch approaches this negative response to the visual.

In fact, media and technology in the modern period did not positively affect the “noble” status of vision. Sara Danius’s *The Senses of Modernism* strongly argues for “the dissociation between seeing and knowing” through her reading of high modernism (22). Similarly, Karen Jacobs’s study of vision in Modernist literature draws attention to the “Western crisis of confidence in the eye” (8). Martin Jay’s pioneering *Downcast Eyes* insightfully describes “the denigration of vision” in modern French thought, insisting that there is “a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era” (14). In the age of what Jay calls the “crisis of ocular-centrism,” or of what Benjamin more generally termed “the crisis of perception,” Modernist artists and writers pursued “true experience” in non-visual perceptions (301; *Selected 1*: 645). Painters such as Cézanne, Klee, and Picasso, as well as Modernist writers such as Proust, Joyce, Woolf, and Faulkner, variously probed the potentiality and diversity of non-visual perceptual experiences. The sense of touch has a peculiar position in this collective pursuit for physical, material, and organic “truth” throughout the age of Modernism. As modern technology and science categorized and decomposed objects of the human senses, the artists and philosophers I will examine emphasized the value of physical contact as a “true experience.” If vision requires distance between the subject and the object, touch functions as a reminder of immediacy, conveying the values of unity, intertwinement, and intimacy found in the physical, organic, and primitive reality. The modern discourse of touch was thus dialectically constructed
in relation to the transformations of the visual sense in modernity.

If vision has been regarded as the “noblest” of all the senses, the sense of touch has been ranked as the “lowest” in Western culture. The non-intellectual and “irrational” characterization of touch was initially presented in Aristotle’s theory of perception. Since the Western discourse of touch is deeply rooted in Aristotle’s definition, it is useful to take a look at his theory of perception in this introduction.

In Aristotle’s theory, sight and touch have distinctly different characters. At the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, he states that “sight is the sense that especially produces cognition in us and reveals many distinguishing features of things” (4). Aristotle believes that sight has a direct relationship with human’s intellectual and artistic faculties. Meanwhile, *De Anima*, a study of the nature of living things, defines touch as a mode of perception that every animate being equally “must have”:

> All body being tangible, that is, perceptible by touch, the preservation of the animal requires its body’s being capable of touch. While the other senses, smell, sight and hearing, perceive through other things, but anything that makes contact will, if it have no perception, be unable to avoid some things and acquire others. In which case, it will be impossible for the animal to be preserved. This is also why taste is a kind of touch. For it has to do with what nourishes, and this is a tangible body. (218)

For Aristotle, the sense of touch is a condition of the body rather than a specific mode of sensation; it is essential for gaining nourishment and surviving. As Hugh Lawson-Tancred notes,
when Aristotle discusses this specific sense he views life from “the standpoint of general biological Functionalism” (240n). As long as it is concerned with the biological condition of life, the sense of touch is unquestionably primary in Aristotle’s theory, as is evident in his assertion that “The characteristics of body as body are tangible” (220). All forms of perception are based upon the tactile sense; hence, “there can be no other sense” without “the sense-organ … of touch” (220). The sense of touch is thus foundational to all the other senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting. Therefore, tactility is a corporeal medium: “it is necessary that the body be the ongrown medium of the touch-faculty and that the sensations (which are indeed many) take place through it” (184-85). For Aristotle, the tactile sense primarily plays a role of mediating physical sensations. The final chapter of De Anima establishes the status of touch as the fundamental “medium” of perception:

It is clear that without touch it can have no other sense, every ensouled thing being, as we said, a tactile body, and, while the other elements apart from earth might be sense-organs, they would all produce sensation by indirect and mediate perception, whereas touch consists, as its name suggests, in contact with objects. The other sense-organs seem to perceive by touch, but through something else, touch alone being thought of do so through itself. (220)

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3 In his detailed commentary on De Anima, Medieval philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas writes that “In the first place touching is the basis of sensitivity as a whole; for obviously the organ of touch, and the sense of touch by itself constitutes a being as sensitive” (304).
This passage illustrates the singularity of the tactile sense. Unlike the other senses which are mediated by specific bodily organs, the sense of touch directly unites the subject with the object. It is an immediate sense because of its function as a medium. In the last paragraph of *De Anima*, Aristotle famously argues that “the deprivation of this sense alone … leads to death in animals” (220). One could live without seeing, hearing, smelling, or tasting; however, the sense of touch is so foundational to the body that no living creature could sustain its life without it. Aristotle emphasizes the relationship between mortality and tactility by stating that “The elimination of the sense of touch by an excess of its object is indeed a special case of the general elimination of sense-organs by the excess of their objects” (220). Aristotle concludes that “*this* sense is definitive of the animal, as it has been shown that nothing can be an animal without it” (220). Thus, the sense of touch is of primal importance for the survival of living things.

It should be noted that Aristotle repeats the word “animals” in his definition of touch. This repetition makes the status of the tactile sense ambiguous. While touch is the foundational sense without which nothing could live, it is *nothing more than* that which every living thing possesses *a priori*. To put it another way, the sense of touch does not distinguish humans from animals, whereas the sense of sight is the corporeal basis of metaphysical thinking; Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* states that “sight is the sense that especially produces cognition in us and reveals many distinguishing features of things” (4).⁴ According to Aristotle, the sense of sight

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⁴ Jacques Derrida problematizes this distinction for its “logocentric” structure in the “thirteenth session” of his 2001-2002 seminars in *The Beast and the Sovereign* (347-48). Taking a cue from Derrida’s late concern with animals, recent scholars delve into the problem of the division between the human and the animal in Western philosophy. See, for example, Oliver.
distinguishes humans from animals because of its close association with artistic and intellectual activities.\(^5\)

However, the crisis of perception in the modern age signals the uncertainty surrounding the category of “human,” which correlates with the Modernist skepticism concerning the humanistic values associated with the sense of sight.\(^6\) The distinction between the human and the animal became significantly blurred in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. As Carrie Rohman’s recent study describes in detail, Darwinism and Freudianism had a strong influence on the Modernist discourse of animals and animality (1). The innate animality of humans, rather than their merely being “animal-like,” emerged in the realm of representation at the turn of the twentieth century, being associated with the Freudian notion of the unconscious. Naturalist authors such as Émile Zola and Theodore Dreiser often describe uncontrollable desire in humans as an animalistic otherness in the subject, while Modernist authors such as D. H. Lawrence and Franz Kafka more blatantly remind their reader of the Darwinian fact that the human is an animal. In the modern age, the animality within a human subject constituted its invisible and impersonal “truth,” which Modernist artists and authors often expressed through

\(^5\) This dualistic understanding of Aristotle’s theory of vision and touch may be too simple. S.H. Rosen argues that “Aristotle rejects the Platonic interpretation of thinking as a kind of seeing,” emphasizing the importance of the relationship between “thought and touch” in *De Anima* (129). See also Freeland on this specific topic.

\(^6\) As Jean-François Lyotard cites in his book *The Inhuman*, Apollinaire wrote in 1913 that “More than anything, artists are men who want to become inhuman” (2). Also, it is worth remembering in this context that Michael Foucault describes the history of the seemingly ahistorical notion of the “human” in *The Order of Things*, especially in chapters 9 and 10.
the discourse of touch. The animalistic “truth” of touch that has been marginalized in the long history of Western civilization became essentialized as the hidden “truth” of the human subject at the turn of the twentieth century, and its organic value formed a dialectical relationship with visual culture and technological development in the Modernist period.

The Modernist “truth” of tactility has a close association with the primitive and the primordial, representing antithetical values to the modern technological ideal. As Marianna Torgovnick brilliantly demonstrates through her works, the “primitive” is an integral part of Western Modernism. In the early decades of the twentieth century, African primitive art imported from African colonies had great impact on the vibrant artistic movements in Europe such as cubism and Die Blaue Reiter. In the twentieth century, the “primitive” is no longer a mere signifier of otherness but also the inherent “truth” of every human being. Michael Bell aptly insists that “Primitivism … is born of the interplay between the civilized self and the desire to reject or transform it … [It] is the projection by the civilized sensibility of an inverted image of the self” (80). If the tactile animality within the modern individual subject constitutes the hidden “truth,” the organic or prehistorical society represents the “truth” of the collective tactility that modern society does not possess.

This lack of “truth” in modern society often caused a deep yearning for primitive societies. Sigmund Freud claims in his 1929 study Civilization and its Discontents that “What we call civilization is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions” (68). In Freud, the image of the primitive has a close relation to the sense of touch. Totem and Taboo, for example, depicts an antagonism between law and desire in the psychological tension between “the pleasure of touching” and the taboo of “mental” and “bodily contact” (24; 23). The conflictive relationship between the
transgressor and the legislator constitute typical Freudian scheme of psychological ambivalence, which he applies to his analysis both individuals and primitive societies. Indeed, his description of the primitive reflects his theory of child psychology. In his “Author’s Preface” to Totem and Taboo, Freud states that he wrote the book in an attempt “to find the original meaning of totemism through its infantile traces, that is, through the indications in which it reappears in the development of our own children” (3). While the tactile attachment to and separation from mothers constitute important events for children in Freud’s psychology, Freudian model of the primitive community is structured through the fundamental ambivalence between desire for touch and its prohibition.

This Freudian analysis exhibits some of paradigmatic patterns of the Modernist discourse of touch described in the present study. One of the important traits of the Freudian argument is the assumption of the parallelism between the psychological development of an individual and the maturing process of a civilization. The very idea of introducing the language of physical perception into the description of society, culture, and community is grounded in the imaginative unity between the individual body and the collective entity. A tactile community was often imagined as what Marxists called an organic society, which has no physical, psychological, and social “alienation.” Among the authors that I will discuss, Lawrence and some of the members of the Stieglitz Circle shared the utopic image of the tactile community, in opposition to the inhuman, technological, and capitalistic society wherein humans lost contact with their physical environment. Modernist artists tried to find primordial “truth” in the immediate physical sense of touch and often imagined that they were united with the archaic past through their belief in the collective dimension of physicality.
As Freud describes both fascination with and fear of touch in a primitive society, the tactile sense is strongly charged with ambivalent feelings. The sense of touch provokes both positive feelings such as intimacy and kindness and negative feelings such as hatred and fear. The meanings of touch are open to multiple interpretations and depend on each individual’s sensibilities. However, feelings are not solely private but are also historically and culturally defined. Socially discriminated people were often classified as “untouchable,” and the fear of being touched by others has much to do with the conceptualization of race, gender, and class. The notions of purity, innocence, and chastity as well as of dirtiness, contagion, and promiscuity are social and cultural ideas that are not only visually but also tactilly defined. Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 1, D. H. Lawrence problematized the fear of touch in the modern period as a social and cultural problem. Discussion about the sense of touch in the modern period, therefore, naturally includes consideration of historical conditions of feelings.

Aristotle’s definition of touch as the fundamental mode of perception became comingled with the Darwinian and Freudian conceptions of human’s inner animality and primitiveness, forming the notion of the invisible inner “life.” The Modernist emphasis on touch has a revolutionary character since it refuses to rely on existing laws and existing systems of representation. It is not enough to say that the discourse of touch suggests a way to look from the periphery; more radically, it indicates otherness within a modern subject and exposes the limitations of Western conceptions of time and space. As I will demonstrate through my analysis of texts and images, the Modernist revolution of artistic forms and styles has very much to do with the transformation of perception. While Cézanne represented the tactile physicality of apples by undermining visually constructed space, Proust illustrates tactile encounters with fragments of the past through what he called involuntary memory. Cézanne and Proust, thus,
invented tactile space and time respectively. The Modernist discourse of touch foregrounds what has been repressed in the names of civilization, individuality, and rationality; it replaces privileged “aesthetic distance” with experience of immediacy and contact.

Although there have been some attempts to consider the aesthetic and political implications of touch, major contributions to the study of the sense began appearing quite recently. The anthology of art criticism, *In Visible Touch* (1997), was groundbreaking in that it resituated the relationship between vision and touch in modern art; its contributors discuss various problems such as “optical tactility” (6), “the horror of touch” (15), and “auratic” touch (210). The 2005 anthology, *The Book of Touch*, edited by Constance Classen, reflects a general interest in “the cultural formation of touch,” with contributions from historians, ethnographers, and theologians, among others (8). Daniel Heller-Roazen’s *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (2007) examines the philosophical history of the sense. Focusing on Classical and Medieval philosophers with special emphasis on Aristotle, Heller-Roazen stresses the importance of the animal implications of the tactile sense. Mark Paterson’s *The Senses of Touch* (2007), yet another philosophical analysis of the sense, includes consideration of the sense of touch in Modernist thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Emanuel Levinas, and Walter Benjamin.

Walter Benjamin’s characterization of cinema as a tactile medium, which the present study will discuss in Chapter 3, inspired various studies of non-visual experiences of visual

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7 One may rightly claim that Rosalyn Driscoll’s works antedate these theoretical examinations of the sense; she has continuously explored the relation between sight and touch through her sculptural works, most of which are “made to be touched.” See Driscoll’s “Artist’s Statement” in her official website.
media, including Laura U. Marks’s two works *The Skin of the Film* (1999) and *Touch* (2002), Noel Burch’s “Building a Haptic Space” (1990), Antonia Lant’s “Haptic Cinema” (1995), Giuliana Bruno’s *Atlas of Emotion* (2002), and David Trotter’s recent articles on cinematic touch. The association between the tactile sense and the new medium of film may seem to contradict the Aristotelian definition of touch as the primitive and animal sense. However, the rise of discourse on primitiveness and animality in the Modernist period cannot be separated from the great impact of modern technology on the body. In fact, the technological and the primitive were often associated with one another in the modern age, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

Compared with the fields of art, philosophy, and cinema studies, much in the literary study of touch remains to be explored. Santanu Das’s 2005 study *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, which inquires into the historical meaning of touch in British war literature and documents, is a relatively unique example. However, growing interest in the sense of touch in Modernist literature is evident, for example, in the 2007 special issue of the French literary journal *L’Esprit Créateur* subtitled “Contact!” One could also find other attempts to examine a unique importance of touch in literature in recent issues of academic journals. Although it is impossible to make an exhaustive list of recent contributions to the study of touch, this quick glance at a variety of fields is enough to indicate the rise of scholarly interest in touch.

Among all these recent studies of the sense of touch, to which I certainly owe many debts, one of the most important and most influential contributions is Jacques Derrida’s *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000 in original; 2004 in English translation). This book totally displaces the premise of “ocularcentrism” by arguing that a “tactilist” or ‘haptocentric’ tradition” has dominated the discourse of Western philosophy and “extends at least until Husserl and includes him” (41). Opposed to the idea that the visual has been central to the history of Western
philosophy, Derrida illustrates how Immanuel Kant privileges the sense of touch and argues that “To the extent that touch is the only sense of immediate external perception and thus the one bringing us the greatest certainty, it is the most important or the most serious one (wichtigste)” (41). Derrida further demonstrates that the image of “touching oneself” remains of great importance to philosophical “truth” in his close reading of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Franck Didier, among others. It is beyond the scope of the present study to delve into the details of this typically complex contribution by Derrida—this would require a separate volume. For now, it is sufficient to note that On Touching asserts the historical association between touch and “truth.”

As I already intimated in this introduction, the early twentieth-century writers, artists, and philosophers who emphasize the value of touch unfailingly ascribe “truth” to this specific mode of perception. Viennese art historian Aloïs Riegl claims in 1902 that “It is … essentially through the sense of touch that we experience the true quality, the depth and delimitation of objects in nature and works of art” (181). Although Riegl does not mention contemporaneous artists in his book, Cézanne and other early Modernist painters found a way to express through their paintings physical “truth,” the immediate quality of physicality which commentators on those painters’ works, including Lawrence and Merleau-Ponty, would associate with the tactile sense. In the age in which modern technology, totalitarian politics, and the rise of mass and visual culture radically collapse the traditional and conventional value of truth, the Modernists sought to return to and restart with the “truth” contained in the most primitive and the most animal mode of perception.

The question of “truth” is, however, hardly amenable to today’s scholarly discourse; especially, after Derrida’s immense influence, it is virtually impossible to treat “truth” as truth, since truth became an object of deconstruction. In “le facteur de la vérité” in The Post Card, for
example, Derrida deconstructs psychoanalytic “truth” as a gesture of “unveiling.” *On Touching* is also deconstructive in that it problematizes the privileged status of “hand” in the phenomenology of touch. Scholars and critics influenced by Derrida have tried to reveal the social and political constructions of essentialistic ideas in various fields. As a result, the opposition between constructivism and essentialism became a pivotal point of scholarly debate on the body. Most notably, gender studies in the 1980s and 1990s have often stressed the difference between the social construction of gender and the biological notion of sex. Monique Wittig, for instance, claims that the body does not exist outside the realm of “social reality” (26), while Judith Butler radically problematizes the presumption of the existence of biological sex in itself (24). Studies of race and class similarly displaced essentialistic discourse on racial or social categories. After all of these inquiries into social and cultural constructions of truth, it is almost impossible to take the Modernist discourse of tactile “truth” at its face value. I believe that no one can be free from the intellectual obligation of avoiding ahistorical and essentialistic assertions. In this regard, I am quite wary of some of recent scholarly backlash against post-

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8 Butler, however, quickly points out “the limits of denaturalization as a critical strategy” and proposes, in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), “to shift the terms of the debate from constructivism versus essentialism to the more complex question of how ‘deep-seated’ or constitutive constraints can be posed in terms of symbolic limits in their intractability and contestability” (93-94). This suggests an aspect of her gender theory that scholars typically dismiss; her theory of performativity does not necessarily lead to the negation of material facticity.
structuralism that celebrates the tactile body as a universal receptacle of the “direct” expression of feeling.9

Categorical dismissal of essentialism, however, only generates another mode of essentialism, which is totally irrelevant to Derrida’s uncompromising practice of deconstructive reading.10 The present study hopes to address the history of the Modernist discourse of “truth” rather than to deconstruct essentialistic ideas inherent in it. Although Modernist artists and writers are typically self-aware of their historical positions, their works are founded upon the essentialistic reliance on the certainty of physicality. Touch, in particular, is central to the essentialistic imagination peculiar to Modernism, inviting other terms of an essentialistic vocabulary, such as “intimacy,” “experience,” “love,” and “life.” While these ideas are often easily dismissed because of their atemporality and ahistoricalness, my arguments are founded upon the conviction that discourse about ahistorical statements is significantly historical; the meaning of touch in 1911 is very different from that in 2011. The association between touch and truth in the early twentieth century corresponds to the crisis of representation and the dissociation of modes of perception of the age. Through close readings of D. H. Lawrence, the Stieglitz’s

9 I am here thinking of the recent “affective turn.” In my view, compared with previous “turns” such as the “linguistic turn” and the “cultural turn,” this “turn” is much more loosely defined and thus potentially invites naïve reliance on the scholar’s “impressions” and “feelings.”

10 Methodical problems in anti-essentialism have been pointed out since the late 1980s. See, for example, Ellen Rooney’s interview with Gayatri Spivak, in which the problem of the opposition between essentialism and antiessentialism is fully discussed (Spivak 1-24). See also The Essential Difference edited by Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed for further debate on the problem of essentialism in feminist studies.
Circle, Benjamin, and Merleau-Ponty, I will demonstrate the historical meaning of Modernist valorizations of the most animal and the most “primitive” mode of perception.

Although I put an introductory statement at the beginning of each chapter, it may be helpful here to give an overview of the entire structure of this study, which consists of four distinct chapters. I chose these individuals and an artistic group in order to best demonstrate the unique character of the Modernist discourse of touch.

Chapter 1 discusses the discourse of touch in D. H. Lawrence’s late works on art composed between 1925 and 1930, with a particular focus on his travel writing on the Etruscan civilization and his essays on Cézanne. Lawrence insists that both paintings in Etruscan tombs and Cézanne’s paintings exhibit tactile physicality, which modern technological society dismisses. I will show that his emphasis on touch as the essential kernel of life has a close relationship to his anti-fascistic and anti-technological discourse; while his appraisal of Etruscans’s tactile sensitivity is a form of denunciation of the imperialistic Roman Empire and its modern successor, Italian Fascism, his commendation of Cézanne is related to his criticism of the photographic and visual culture as well as the photographically conceived sense of reality in modern society. For Lawrence, to write fictional and nonfictional works was a way to resuscitate the primordial mode of perception in opposition to these phenomena of modern culture, society, and politics. The discourse of touch in his works shows a historical association between primitiveness and physicality in Modernist literature.

Chapter 2 examines the discourse and imagery of touch in artists and poets gathered at Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery in New York. While Lawrence considered photography to be anti-tactile, the Stieglitz Circle attempted to express tactile physicality through the new medium.
Although their positions are apparently opposed, the collective discourse of the Stieglitz circle has much in common with Lawrence’s in that both defend the value of the organic in opposition to the inorganic and inhuman dominance of modern technology. In order to show that they share the image of touch as an organic ideal in their artistic expression, this chapter discusses many artists associated with the Circle: Max Weber, George Bernard Shaw, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, Georgia O’Keeffe, Lewis Mumford, as well as Alfred Stieglitz. I will show that their collective discourse of touch, on the one hand, explores the “primitive” truth that is antithetical to modern culture, technology, and society, and, on the other hand, contributes to establishing the organic image of America.

Chapters 1 and 2 illustrate a dialectical relationship on a thematic level. While Lawrence’s late works associate the sense of touch with the primitive and the primordial in opposition to modern technology and visual culture, the Stieglitz Circle celebrates the tactile physical reality in photographic representations and associates this new medium of art with their imagination of the primitive and organic soil of native America. I hope that these two chapters on Modernist literature and art will be read in a comparative and dialectical manner. While their attitudes toward the medium of photography are different, both possess a strong attachment to the sense of touch as well as to the value of “organic” life and culture.

The remaining chapters examine philosophical reflections on touch. Chapter 3 explores the Modernist dialectic between the organic and the technological in Walter Benjamin’s work in terms of its relationship to his ambivalent conception of the tactile sense. While Benjamin associates the sense of touch with Dadaism and films, the sense is also an important constituent of Benjamin’s famous notion of aura. I will discuss how these two different conceptions of touch in Benjamin’s work influence his thoughts on various subjects such as history and memory,
mimesis and narrative, and language and translation. Through readings of Benjamin’s various texts, I will demonstrate that the difference between modern tactility and auratic tactility is crucial to various aspects of Benjamin’s philosophy.

Chapter 4 attempts to describe the prototypical image of touch in Modernism by discussing Merleau-Ponty’s notion of tactile chiasm. I will examine the structure of his phenomenological notion of touching-touched reversibility and consider how this intercorporeal aspect of physicality informs his discussions of two major Modernists, namely, Paul Cézanne and Marcel Proust. Drawing on close reading of his works and lecture notes on these Modernist giants, I will examine how the sense of touch frames Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Modernist time and space.

In these two chapters, I pay particular attention to Benjamin’s and Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of time and space in order to trace the role of touch in their seemingly metaphysical thoughts; here, the sense of touch provides them with a novel way to conceive of the body and the world. Their anti-metaphysical thoughts cannot be separated from their thoughts on this conventionally neglected mode of perception. I will carefully examine their readings of Modernist literature and art and thereby encourage the inclusion of their writings within the larger scope of discussions of Modernism. Although the first and the second half of this project may seem to be different in character, I would like to suggest through my study that Lawrence is as philosophical as Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin is as artistic as Stieglitz. I hope that every chapter will illuminate and resound with the other chapters and transcend their differences of genre and nationality, and that each will reveal in an interdisciplinary way the historically determined character of the Modernist touch, for I believe that such a hybridization of genres and national backgrounds is one of the most productive things that the discipline of Comparative
Literature can offer to scholarship. Through the examination of touch in Modernist art, literature, and philosophy in the four chapters, I will illustrate unique poetics, aesthetics, and politics of touch in Western Modernism.
Chapter 1

Tactility and Art: D. H. Lawrence’s *Sketches of Etruscan Places* and His Late Writings on Cézanne

1. Introduction

D. H. Lawrence had a strong attachment to the sense of touch. He believed that the experiences of touching and being touched are much closer to the “truth” of “life” than words. Works ranging from his debut novel *The White Peacock* to his last work *Apocalypse* as well as his poems and essays written at various stages of his career are filled with both literal and metaphorical instances of touching. To cite a few of the innumerable examples: Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* melancholically desires to be touched by his beloved, deceased mother at the end of the novel; stories such as “Hadrian” and “The Blind Man” dramatize the act of touching as a life-changing event in which the innate “animal life” of humans is exposed; poems in *Pansies* and a late novella *The Escaped Cock* show a close relationship between the Christian faith and touch, addressing the problem of *noli me tangere*. These pathetic, revelatory, and anti-Christian examples of touching enliven his fictional world and constitute critical moments in the narratives. Touch in Lawrence’s work is primarily a trope for invisible and interpersonal connectedness, significantly engaging with the physical, psychological, and religious senses of affect and intimacy. For him, skin was certainly deeper than mind.

From early on, critics have commented on the significance of touch in Lawrence’s works mostly in terms of its explicit relations to familiar Lawrentian themes such as sex, body, and
gender; however, only a few scholars have examined Lawrence’s understanding of touch as a specific mode of representation. Kathryn A. Walterscheid’s book-length study is one of the few exceptions, which successfully reveals Lawrence in a new light by showing that touch is “more basic” than sex in his works (125). She argues that both the possibility and impossibility of touching are central to Lawrence’s understanding of physicality. In a similar vein, a chapter in James Cowan’s 1990 book is devoted to an examination of touch in Lawrence’s works, persuasively arguing its significant relevance to his major themes such as the unconscious, ritual, and sexuality (136). These critics demonstrate that touch in Lawrence’s works is worth investigating not merely as an aspect of his sexual discourse but also as a unique expression in its own right that addresses a wide range of issues.

This chapter aims to further differentiate the Lawrentian discourse of touch from its conventional associations by examining its aesthetic and political implications in his nonfiction works published between 1925 and 1930. In works of this period, Lawrence describes touch not merely as a literary expression of physicality but also as a vehicle of criticism of various modern phenomena, such as social and cultural industrialization, Fascism in Italy, and the rise of photographic culture. 11 Lawrence observes that various phenomena characteristic of modernity

11 Of course, such periodization of Lawrence’s discourse simplifies the complex ramifications of thematic developments of his writings. *Women in Love*, arguably Lawrence’s finest novel, which was written in the mid-1910s and published in 1920, surely presents touch as being antithetical to intellectualism, modern technology and machine culture. A working-class character, Halliday, for example, criticizes visual-centered modern culture while speaking to a “cerebral” character Gerald, saying that “One would feel things instead of merely looking at them. I should feel the air move against me, and feel the things I touched, instead of having only to look at them. I’m
contribute to the anti-tactile flatness of the world, which spoils the physicality of human life. Even apparently objective descriptions of sensual and sexual touch in his fiction and nonfiction are inseparable from his intension to posit tactile “life” in opposition to machinery and mechanical politics. His growing emphasis on touch in his late works is therefore necessarily performative and political rather than simply descriptive, especially when it is employed in his aesthetic and political essays.

In order to examine Lawrence’s discursive use of touch, I will pay particular attention to the late texts that are concerned with visual art: *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (1927) and two essays on Cézanne, namely, “Art and Morality” (1925) and “Introduction to These Paintings” (1929). In these texts, Lawrence finds tactility in otherwise purely visual works of art: Etruscan paintings at tombs in Tarquinia and paintings by Cézanne. In these stylistically and chronologically different works of art, Lawrence found the same sensitivity to touch. What led Lawrence to centralize the sense of touch as the “truth” of visual works of art? And how does his attachment to touch relate to his anti-modernistic stance? I will argue that Lawrence’s emphasis on touch is an allegorical criticism of various aspects of modernity, such as Italian Fascism, the institution of museums, and the photographic reality, all of which he associates with the sense of vision. This chapter will demonstrate that the opposition between vision and touch in Lawrence’s later writings on art will reveal the allegorical character of his political and aesthetic imagination.

Sure life is all wrong because it has become much too visual—we can neither hear nor feel nor understand, we can only see. I’m sure that is entirely wrong” (78). Lawrence’s late works retain this rather “instinctive” association in connection with touch while politically allegorizing the sense.
2. Etruscan Civilization and the Tactile Sensibility

Lawrence spent his final years in Italy and the Provence region of France, except for occasional excursions to surrounding countries and regions. The experience of living in the European “South” in these years strongly influenced his geographical imagination and contributed to his critical distance with respect to the “North,” including England.\(^\text{12}\) From May 1926, the Lawrences settled in Villa Mirenda near Florence, a place convenient for exploring Etruscan civilization—an ancient civilization that inhabited the Tuscany region of Italy and that lasted from 1200 BC to 550 BC—in which he had had a keen interest for several years.\(^\text{13}\) Lawrence visited the National Archaeological Museums in Florence and Perugia, both of which had major collections of Etruscan relics and artwork. In April 1927, Lawrence conducted a six-

\(^\text{12}\) In her “Introduction” to the Cambridge edition of *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Essays*, Simonetta de Filippis points out that the idea of an opposition between the Christian North and the pagan South already appeared in a 1920 letter written in Taormina, Italy, which reads, “The south is so different from the north. I believe morality is a purely climatic thing…. Here the past is so much stronger than the present, that one seems remote like the immortals, looking back at the world from their otherworld. A great indifference comes over me—I feel the present isn’t real (*Sketches* liv; *Letters* 3: 538). For a further study of the “polarity” between the North and the South, see Michaels-Tonks’s book-length study on the subject.

\(^\text{13}\) In 1920, Lawrence composed a poem “Cypresses,” which visualizes “men of old Etruria” in “Tuscan cypresses” (*Complete Poems* 296-98). The archaic image of cypresses reappears in *Aaron’s Rod*, which was written in the late 1910s and published in 1922 (265). For a detailed study of Etruscan imagery in Lawrence’s late poems, see Jones.
day tour of Etruscan cities (Cerveteri, Tarquinia, Vulci and Volterra) together with an American painter, Earl Brewster, and, in June, wrote six essays for *Sketches of Etruscan Places*. He planned to write another six essays but barely completed a fragment of the seventh chapter before he died. Using six completed essays, *Sketches* was posthumously published in 1932.14

*Sketches* is an attempt to illustrate the unique “spirit” of Etruscan civilization. Lawrence compares the two ancient civilizations of Italy, Rome and Etruria, and favors the latter: “of all the Italian people that ever lived, the Etruscans were surely the least Roman. Just as, of all the people that ever rose up in Italy, the Romans of ancient Rome were surely the most un-Italian, judging from the natives of today” (31). Such a negative view of Rome certainly goes against the typical pan-European fantasy of “the Eternal City.” Many European writers including Goethe and Stendhal considered their journeys to Italy to be a sort of return to the origin of European civilization. Lawrence broke with this traditional image of Italy by claiming the superiority of the Etruscans over Romans (47). For Lawrence, the virtue of Etruscan civilization lies in “the sense of vigorous, strong-bodied liveliness” which he cannot find in Romans, who “believed in the supreme law of conquest” (48; 28). In Lawrence’s interpretation of the two civilizations, Etruria represents the ideal organic community based upon the physical reality, while the Roman Empire symbolizes the mechanical and visual discipline that imposes “oneness and uniformity” upon individuals (47).15

14 The 1992 Cambridge edition includes this previously unpublished fragment of “The Florence Museum” as the seventh chapter of *Sketches* as well as 45 pictures of tombs, paintings, and ash-chests which Lawrence wished to include in the book.

15 The “organic community,” a Hegel-Marxist notion concerning the relationship between the individual and the state, was commonplace in the sociological discourse of the late nineteenth
Unlike the “law-abiding” Roman Empire, Lawrence explains, Etruria united people through language and religious feeling: “There was never an Etruscan nation: only, in historical times, a great league of tribes or nations using the Etruscan language and the Etruscan script—at least officially—and uniting in their religious feeling and observances” (27). Each Etruscan city was so distinctly independent of each other that, Lawrence insists, “the contact between the plebs, the mass of the people, of Caere and Tarquinii must have been almost null”; therefore, “They were, no doubt, foreigners to one another” (47). Such an acceptance of diversity within a loose “league,” Lawrence believed, was a manifestation of the spiritual richness of the civilization. In the “pre-Roman past,” Lawrence claims, there was “an endless confusion of differences” that made the civilization not an identifiable unity but an organic being which ceaselessly transformed itself (47).

What is central to this organic community is a religious chief called Lucumo. Because of his leadership, the Etruscan people “were always kept in touch, physically with the mysteries” (59). Lawrence imagines this interpersonal “touch” as a circulatory medium that united and the early twentieth century. Social philosophers in this period such as Ferdinand Tönnies, Max Weber, and Georg Lukács, shared the idea that the Modern society lost its organic sense of unity because of radical shifts in social conditions. Since the publication of influential studies on Lawrence by British critics such as F. R. Leavis and Raymond Williams, the notion of the “organic community” has been one of the most discussed themes in Lawrence’s scholarship. Leavis, for example, stated in 1933 that “what we have lost is the organic community with the living culture … an art of life … growing out of immemorial experience, to the natural environment and rhythm of the year” (Leavis and Thompson 1-3). For further details, see Holderness’s essay (“Lawrence”).
Etruscans: “The ‘touch’ went from the Lucumo down to the merest slave. The blood-stream was unbroken” (59). Although the Etruscan “plebs” were diverse, Lawrence believes that they were physically united through touch. In Etruscan civilization, the act of touching instantly attained religious significance: “Every part of the body and of the anima shall know religion, and be in touch with the gods” (50). In Lawrence’s imagination, the gods and individual bodies of Etruscan people were a continuous unity due to a sort of sacramentalization of touch; “Etruscan dancers,” therefore, “know the gods in their very finger-tips” (55). Thus, when an Etruscan dancer sensed her continuity with the divine in her “finger-tips,” that relation on a microcosmic level mirrors the macrocosmic continuity that the Etruscans believed in.

It should be noted here that Lawrence’s appraisal of organic community does not indicate his endorsement of democracy. Far from it, as his “leadership” novels suggest, he hated any kind of homogeneous society and clearly despised the mass and popular culture which seemed to him to be quintessentially “anti-life” (Hoggart 263).16 What is important for Lawrence is the relationship between a leader and citizens that is unmediated by the inhuman system of law.17

16 Lawrence considered the masses to be no more than a product of modernity. In a letter, he states that “I disbelieve utterly in the public, in humanity, in the mass” (Letters 3: 143). His anti-humanism discourse that probably came from his avid reading of Nietzsche led to his anti-democratic attitude and yearning for a heroic leader: “I don’t believe either in liberty or democracy. I believe in actual, sacred, inspired authority: divine right of natural kings: I believe in the divine right of natural aristocracy, the right, the sacred duty to wield undisputed authority” (Letters 4: 225-6). On Lawrence’s complex view of democracy, see Wallace.

17 Critics in the 1970s and 80s discussed Lawrence’s obsession with “leadership,” which is most conspicuous in three novels in the 1920s: Aaron’s Rod (1922), Kangaroo (1923), and The
Lawrence finds the essence of Etruscan touch depicted in the painted walls of Tarquinian tombs. The painting on the wall at the “Tomb of the Painted Vases,” for example, impressed him with its subtle sensitivity to touch:

*Plumed Serpent* (1926). On the ambiguous relationship between Lawrence’s inclination to hero-worship and his anti-Fascistic stance, Cornelia Nixon makes an important point:

Lawrence developed his leadership politics at a time when authoritarian political thought was on the rise, and it may be that his path to such thinking was in some way typical. It should be noted that Lawrence denounced fascism itself; nevertheless, his views were similar in many respects to those held by some contemporary European intellectuals sympathetic to fascism. Oddly enough, though in most cases Lawrence neither read nor endorsed such writers, even apparently anomalous elements in his new thought sometimes echo their thinking.

(5)

Bertrand Russell, with whom Lawrence had a brief friendship in 1915, famously wrote in his autobiography that Lawrence’s fascination with “blood-consciousness … led straight to Auschwitz” and wrongly assumed that Lawrence was a pro-Fascist (245). However, Russell’s assumption shows the extent to which Lawrence’s words such as “organism,” “blood,” and “contact” were reminiscent of Fascist propaganda. See Jarrett’s close analysis of the relationship between Lawrence and Russell.
On the end wall is a gentle little banquet scene, the bearded man softly touching the woman with him under the chin…. Rather gentle and lovely is the way he touches the woman under the chin, with a delicate caress. That again is one of the charms of the Etruscan paintings: they really have the sense of touch; the people and the creatures are all really in touch. It is one of the rarest qualities, in life as well as in art. There is plenty of pawing and laying hold, but no real touch. In pictures especially, the people may be in contact, embracing or laying hands on one another. But there is no soft flow of touch. The touch does not come from the middle of the human being. It is merely a contact of surfaces, and a juxtaposition of objects. This is what makes so many of the great masters boring, in spite of all their clever composition. Here, in faded Etruscan painting, there is a quiet flow of touch that unites the man and the woman on the couch, the timid boy behind, the dog that lifts his nose, even the very garlands that hang from the wall. (53-54)

The passage contrasts the gentle touching found in Etruscan paintings with the vulgar manner of touch obsessed in modern life and art. While the act of touching in the Etruscan picture communicates the “flow of life” from one person to another, touch in modern art and life happens merely on the surface. Thus, Lawrence ascribes the singularity of Etruscan civilization to its unique sensibility of the “soft flow” of touch.

Lawrence believes that life and art were inseparable in Etruscan civilization, so the images on the walls of Etruscan tombs contain something more than what is visually perceivable. Modern aesthetics fails to recognize the unity between life and art in the works of Etruscan art, since it institutionally collects and categorizes Etruscan objects in archeological museums and imposes a purely visual standard of beauty over them. Lawrence criticizes the historical bias in
the modern norm of beauty by writing that “aesthetic quality takes the edge off everything, and makes it seem ‘boiled down’” (164). In Lawrence’s view, the modern interpretation of Etruscan artwork lacks appreciation for its important tactile elements, which are inseparable from the actual lives of the Etruscan people.

Instead of using an aesthetic vocabulary, Lawrence uses the word “edge” to explain the unique style of Etruscan art: “The subtlety of Etruscan painting, as of Chinese and Hindu, lies in the wonderfully suggestive edge of the figures” (123). The unique “edge of the figures” conveys the essence of the tactile physicality in visible forms since it is a technique that unites the inside and the outside, rather than dividing them. Lawrence explains that the edge is not outlined. It is not what we call “drawing.” It is the flowing contour where the body suddenly leaves off, upon the atmosphere. The Etruscan artist seems to have seen living things surging from their own centre to their own surface. And the curving and contour of the silhouette-edge suggests the whole movement of the modeling within. There is actually no modeling. (123-24)

For Lawrence, the distinction between the “edge” and the “outline” has phenomenological and even ontological importance; while the “edge” suggests a human body’s vibrant contact with its atmosphere, the “outline” isolates the figure from the ground. If the “edge” is liberating, the “outline” is restraining. When Lawrence states in the passage above that “there is actually no modeling,” he means that the notion of an unchanging “model” is too abstract and too visual; it presumes neutral space in which the figure is separable from its ground. In other words, the process of “modeling” that is customarily used in modern painting modern paintings kills what
should be a “living” image by imposing a strict boundary on it. The “edge” of Etruscan paintings is an engagement with what Lawrence calls the “fullness of life”; it simultaneously belongs to the figure and the ground, dismantling the distinction between them. In place of pinning down moving objects into stable figures, it gives a sense of flow and temporality to the whole painting. For Etruscans, Lawrence insists, the process of drawing pictures on the walls was an integral part of their life, in which their philosophy of life and death was fully implicated.

In addition to focusing on the implication of vital movement in paintings, Lawrence also emphasizes the “stillness” and “quietness” of the ancient civilization, which, resonating with his idea of the “edge,” constitutes another layer of his discourse of tactility. In the passage above, Lawrence uses such adjectives as “soft” and “quiet” in order to illustrate the “flow of touch” in Etruscan paintings. Lawrence’s choice of these words suggests that there is an innate “stillness” in Etruscans’ technique of touch that is unavailable in modern society. It is important to note that Lawrence uses the same vocabulary to describe the Tuscan landscape:

There is a stillness and a softness in these great grassy mounds with their ancient stone girdles, and down the central walk there lingers still a kind of homeliness and happiness. True, it was a still and sunny afternoon in April, and larks rose from the soft grass of the tombs. But there was a stillness and a soothingness in all the air, in that sunken place, and a feeling that it was good for one’s soul to be there. (16, italics mine)

Through his narrative, Lawrence emphasizes the continuity between nature and artwork in Etruscan life. Repetitive use of the word “stillness” makes this passage something more than a
realistic description, showing Lawrence’s will to resurrect the archaic past through its depiction. The word “stillness,” therefore, has a trans-temporal function in Lawrence’s discourse: a sort of window opened to the primitive. In the chapter “Tarquinia,” Lawrence observes that “There seems to have been in the Etruscan instinct a real desire to preserve the natural humour of life” and contrasts this Etruscan characteristic with the destructive instinct that both Romans and “Moderns” possess (32-33). Lawrence tries to recover an echo of this “humour of life” in the area where the ancient city once stood: “There seems nothing of the modern world here—no houses, no contrivances, only a sort of fair wonder and stillness, an openness which has not been violated” (33). The “stillness” that saturates the Tarquinian landscape forms what Lawrence calls the “spirit of the place” and opens up a sphere in which Lawrence could perceive the prehistorical age.  

Lawrence did not choose the word “stillness” arbitrarily in describing the idyllic Tuscany; it is given a privileged position in Lawrence’s discourse of the primitive as something that goes beyond the visible. In a 1914 letter that alludes to a Greek sculpture, *Laocoön and His*

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18 Chapter 1 of *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) is titled “The Spirit of Place,” in which Lawrence claims that “Every continent has its own great spirit of place… the spirit of place is a great reality” (17). In *Sea and Sardinia*, his second travel writing on Italy, Lawrence opposes the innate spirituality of place to the mechanization of modern civilization: “The spirit of the place is a strange thing. Our mechanical age tries to override it. But it does not succeed. In the end the strange, sinister spirit of place, so diverse and so adverse in differing places, will smash our mechanical oneness into smithereens, and all that we think the real thing will go off with a pop, and we shall be left starting” (57). This passage attests that Lawrence’s spiritualistic view of place is a form of criticism of mechanical culture and society.
Sons, with which Lawrence had been fascinated from early on, he insists that an intricate relation between stillness and change is implied in it:

There is something in the Greek sculpture that my soul is hungry for—something of the eternal stillness that lies under all movement, under all life, like a source, incorruptible and inexhaustible. It is deeper than change, and struggling. So long I have acknowledged only the struggle, the stream, the change. And now I begin to feel something of the source, the great impersonal which never changes and out of which all change comes. (2: 137-38) \(^{19}\)

Clearly, Lawrence uses the word “stillness” here in the same way that he does in Sketches. It is the invisible source of life that precedes any movement of an organic entity, the “impersonal” element within the organic, which Lawrence often calls the “quick.” The “great impersonal” that Lawrence mentions in the letter is, as another letter of the same period reads, “the same single radically-unchanged element” of the self (2: 183).

The chapter titled “Excuse” in Women in Love, in which the relationship between Birkin and Ursula becomes most intense and passionate, reveals a close affinity between the notion of “quick” and tactility. When Ursula caresses Birkin’s body in a dark room, she feels “some

\(^{19}\) The figure of Laocoön and His Sons was an obsession for Lawrence. Although he asserts in the same letter that “The Laocoon writhing and shrieking have gone from my new work [“The Sisters,” a work that eventually splits into The Rainbow and Women in Love],” Lawrence mentions “Laocoon” in works of various periods such as “Samson and Delilah” (1917), Women in Love (1920), and Apocalypse (1931).
mysterious life-flow” that she understands as “a strange reality of his being, the very stuff of being” (313). As she immerses herself in the act of touching him, Lawrence suggests both the death of individual consciousness and resurrection into unity with the “great impersonal”:

She closed her hands over the full, rounded body of his loins as he stooped over her, she seemed to touch the quick of the mystery of darkness that was bodily him. She seemed to faint beneath, and he seemed to faint, stooping over her. It was a perfect passing away for both of them, and at the same time the most intolerable accession into being, the marvelous fulness of immediate gratification, overwhelming, outflooding from the Source of the deepest life-force, the darkest, deepest, strangest life-source of the human body, at the back and base of the loins.

(314)

In this moment, the dark “stillness” exists both within and without Birkin’s body, exhibiting the essential “impersonality” that intertwines the body and its surroundings. When Ursula touches Birkin, she feels that she “discovers” the transcendental otherness of the human body.

Throughout his career, Lawrence repeatedly depicts the climactic moment in which the surface meets the transcendental through touch. Through his works, he attempts to touch, and to be touched by, the essential “source of the deepest life-force.” Indeed, in an essay simply titled “The Novel,” Lawrence asserts that the novel “can’t exist without being ‘quick’” (183). Although Sketches is not a “novel,” it is an attempt on Lawrence’s part to touch the “quick” of the “Source” of Italy, which is buried deep under the ground. His tour of the tombs under the Etruscan landscape was a pleasurable return to the origin. Lawrence juxtaposes the impersonal otherness
of a human body with the otherness of the Etruscan underground; for him, both represent the impersonal “origin” of life.

While such idealization of “origin” suggests Lawrence’s inclination for mysticism, Lawrence’s criticism of modern Western culture in his late works reveals that Lawrence’s engagement with the primitive was a way to think about unidentifiable otherness. Lawrence’s idea of an “impersonal” nucleus being embedded within a subject posits a dual structure, both on the subjective level and historical level. The act of touching, unlike the act of looking, exposes the hidden “impersonal” element in humans, which exist both in the personal and the historical subject. On an allegorical level, the inherent difference between the impersonal and the personal corresponds with a series of differences that are central to Lawrence’s imagination: the geographical difference between the “North” and the “South,” the chronological difference between the modern and the primitive, and the psychoanalytical difference between the Conscious and the Unconscious. Through the study of Etruscan civilization, Lawrence restores the latter poles of each of these dualistic oppositions.

3. Roman Salute and the Politics of Touch

In order to further consider the social and cultural implications of Lawrence’s emphasis on touch, it is necessary to return to his opposition between the Etruscans and the Romans in Sketches.\(^{20}\) As I discussed above, Lawrence argued that the spirit of Italy lay in Etruscans while

\(^{20}\) At the time when he planned to tour the Etruscan places, Lawrence wrote a letter to Else Jaffe, a woman who recommended the Lawrences to go to Italy in 1912, and declared: “The Etruscans are on the tapis here in Tuscany. Italy is so wildly nationalistic, that I think Tuscany feels she
Romans were “the most un-Italian” (31). This categorical but totally unconventional dualism serves as a critical commentary on Italian Fascism’s appropriative use of the Roman past. While Lawrence was absent from Europe in the early 1920s, Italy had one of the most turbulent periods in the history of the nation. In 1922, the National Fascist Party held the power of the nation with a coup d’état (the myth-making “March on Rome”), and Benito Mussolini became the Prime Minister of Italy. He announced the despotic policy in 1925 and rapidly militarized the nation. This year Lawrence came to Italy for the first time in three years and settled in Florence, and only in a few days after the arrival, he saw the orgy of “Natale Romana,” which, as he explains in a letter, “a new national holiday that had replaced May Day in the Fascist calendar” (Letters 5: 433; Ellis 298). As this nationalistic festival attests, Italian Fascism pronounced its continuity to Roman Empire in order to glorify itself as an authentic regime of the nation. One could presume that this event should have a significant impact on Lawrence’s view of the ultra-nationalist party. As historian of Italian Fascism Denis Mack Smith observes, “As Germany was may as well go one further back than Rome, and derive herself from Etruria. But they all feel scared, because Etruria was so luxurious and ‘merely physical’” (Letters 5: 465). This letter suggests that Lawrence had already had the opposition between Rome and Etruria in his mind before touring the Etruscan relics.

In an article that examines the Roman myth in Italian Fascism, Romke Visser writes that “The cult of the romanità was very useful to support the claims that fascism was making history. Comparing Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’ with Sulla’s and Caesar’s coups d’état, fascist propaganda implied that fascist Italy crossed its Rubicon on the way to world power” (6). There are innumerable studies on Mussolini’s historical and political idealization of ancient Rome. See, for example, Jan Nelis’s recent essay.
finding her national formula in racialism, Italians were finding theirs in Roman imperialism” (84). The slogan of “Roma doma [Rome dominates]” was deeply rooted in the European ideology that the Roman Empire was “the mother of civilizations” (84; 71). In this light, Lawrence aptly observes that “the Fascists … consider themselves in all things Roman, Roman of the Caesars, heirs of Empire and world power” (Sketches 31). This statement suggests that the aim of Lawrence’s exploration of the Etruscan spirit is at least partly to establish an Italian image that resists the contemporary Fascist discourse of the nation.

In Sketches, Lawrence records his experiences witnessing the “Roman salute,” a salute with military connotations in which the right arm is raised straight ahead. Lawrence immediately sensed a symptom of the permeation of Fascist violence when he describes seeing “several officials” saluting in this manner, complaining, “Why don’t they discover the Etruscan salute and salute us all’etrusca!” (34). In Volterra, after witnessing “cheeky girls” saluting in the same way, Lawrence thought their behaviors abominable: “In an Etruscan city which held out so long against Rome I consider the Roman salute unbecoming, and the Roman imperium unmentionable” (158). The practice of Roman Salute produced what Michel Foucault called “docile bodies.” It is helpful to refer to an oft-quoted passage from Discipline and Punish, which explains the physical character of national and social discipline:

… discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns into ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity,’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the
power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.

(138)

Discipline thus institutionalizes body by turning it into functional units. Lawrence who problematized the mechanization of human body in *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* undoubtedly discerned that the Salute functioned as a physical discipline of Italian Fascism.

Given that *Sketches* was written in 1927, when Italian Fascism was still at its early stage, Lawrence’s observation of the Salute shows his shrewd insight into physical manipulation of the totalitarian regime. Indeed, a glance at the history of the Salute will instantly reveal how effective this physical discipline functioned as a vehicle of totalitarian dogma. Since Italian government adopted the Salute in 1923, the habit was quickly spread across the nation, and remained an icon until the end of the Second World War. As Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi notes, it “became part of people’s everyday existence and experience” especially through the practice at schools and offices (110). The Fascist government despised the custom of “handshaking” because of its “bourgeois” image and insanitariness; according to Falasca-Zamponi, “The salute was considered ‘more hygienic, more aesthetic and shorter,’ in the words of Mussolini” (110). Clearly, the Roman Salute appealed to the people’s vague fear of physical contacts as well as their “aesthetic” sentiments. Indeed, there was a mutually exclusive relationship between the Roman salute and handshaking:

[T]he Roman salute, which was supposed to be a sign revealing fascist character, suddenly turned out to be the sine qua non of the real fascist, the element without which one could not be considered a fascist. The means had become ends, and the
ritual in itself ensured the coming about of the new fascist man. Within this interpretive frame, shaking hands was naturally considered a disgrace, a real betrayal of fascist principles. (Falasca-Zamponi 113)

This passage reveals that it is not only the particular Salute but the Fascism in general was a politics of touch. The Roman Salute was a physical practice of producing submissive and obedient bodies which facilitated the regime’s political control. Lawrence intuitively knew such body politics of Fascism and went against it by emphasizing the tactile physicality of Etruscans.

Despite the myth-making effect of the salute, however, recent historical scholarship on Italian Fascism reveals that it was by no means historically traditional. While the “Roman Salute” was adopted by Italian Fascism for its supposed historical authenticity, the gesture was in fact not a restoration of an ancient Roman custom. Martin W. Winkler shows that the Salute first appeared in Jacques-Louis David’s neoclassical painting, *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), and that its image was popularized through plays and films between the 1880s and the 1920s, including *Cabiria*, a spectacular epic film based on the screenplay of ultra-nationalist Gabriele D’Annunzio (1914). The history of the gesture was therefore much shorter than the Fascists hoped to be. This was probably unknown even to the Italian Fascists who adopted the gesture as their official salute, let alone the Italian people at the time. However, what is at stake is that this invention of tradition eloquently attests that visual image became a dominant source of ideology through the aid of machinery of reproduction during the course of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Ray Chow notes, “fascism is possible only in the age of film, the gramophone, and the loudspeaker” (26). If the Roman Salute is an invention of French neo-

\[22\] See chapter 2 and 4 of Winkler’s book.
classist and a phenomenon of mass visual culture, then the manner of the salute does not have any relation to the “spirit” of Italian place. Lawrence saw that the Roman Salute is a mechanization of human behaviors in the modern age. It is totally submissive, a systematic architecture of human behaviors. In this regard, Lawrence would agree with Adorno and Horkheimer, who insisted in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) that Fascism was deeply rooted in the Western metaphysics where the body and the mind are systematically dissociated (9). Adorno and Horkheimer destabilize the hierarchical relationship between the barbaric and the civilized by insisting that Fascism was an inevitable consequence of Enlightenment. For Lawrence too, Fascism was not barbaric at all; on the contrary, it was too civilized and too aesthetic.  

In the Western culture, the notions of enlightenment, Christianity, and metaphysics cannot be separated from the imagery of light. What helps one to see, understand, and articulate is the presence of light, to whose tradition Lawrence deliberately opposed. In “Study of Thomas Hardy,” Lawrence clearly says that “Since the Renaissance there has been the striving for the Light, and the escape from the Flesh, from the Body, the Object” (82). In “Art and Morality” (1925), Lawrence maintains that the violation of light over shadow has continued “since Greece first broke the spell of ‘darkness’” (165). Light is naturally associated with the sense of vision: 

23 Although he did not have interest in visual art, Mussolini often identified politics with art. For example, he declared in 1926 at the Novecento Exhibit that “politics is an art, there is no doubt. Certainly it is not a science, nor is it mere empiricism. It is thus art. Also because in politics there is a lot of intuition. “Political” like artistic creation is a slow elaboration and a sudden divination” (qtd. in Falasca-Zamponi 15). Thus, Mussolini aestheticized politics. See Chapter 1 of Falasca-Zamponi’s study for further details.
"The visual" is, as Amit Chaudhuri discusses, “a medium of power and a metaphor for absolute knowledge” in Lawrence’s works (xxv). Fascism sprung up from this Western tradition of light, to which Lawrence opposes by underscoring the values of darkness. Only in the darkness, Lawrence believed, could the true nature of humans, animality, and the “quick,” be exposed. In the way that he negates the equation of Italy with Rome, Lawrence refuses to accept the clichéd image of Italy as a country of light. In *Twilight in Italy*, his first travel writing on Italy, he says:

The Italian people are called “Children of the Sun.” They might better be called “Children of the Shadow.” Their souls are dark and nocturnal. If they are to be easy, they must be able to hide, to be hidden in lairs and caves of darkness. Going through these tiny chaotic back-ways of the village was like venturing through the labyrinth made by furtive creatures, who watched from out of another element. And I was pale, and clear, and evanescent, like the light, and they were dark, and close, and constant, like the shadow. (104)

The shadow and darkness dominate Lawrence’s imagination of what is truly Etruscan, especially because Etruscan tombs lay underground. The diary-like narrative of *Sketches* contributes to illustrate the sharp contrast between the bright land of “the wind and the brilliance,” where Lawrence and Brewster enjoyed coffee at a café, and the dark, shadowy underground, where they came into contact with the ancient world (128). Lawrence excitedly illustrates the experience of going down to the Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia as if it were a move to a totally different sphere: “we descend the steep steps down into the tomb. It seems a dark little hole underground: a dark little hole, after the sun of the upper world!” (44). He feels that “gradually
the underworld of the Etruscans becomes more real than the above day of the afternoon” (44). The still and dark underground in Etruria might have reminded Lawrence of his coal-mining home town, intimately evoking his deep thoughts on the nature of origin. Indeed, in his 1929 essay “Nottingham and the Mining Countryside,” Lawrence describes the dark, but intimate space of a pit, suggesting its curious psychological effect on people:

And the pit did not mechanise men. On the contrary. Under the butty system, the miners worked underground as a sort of intimate community, they knew each other practically naked, and with curious close intimacy, and the darkness and the underground remoteness of the pit “stall,” and the continual presence of danger, made the physical, instinctive and intuitional contact between men very highly developed, a contact almost as close as touch, very real and very powerful. This physical awareness and intimate togetherness was at its strongest down pit. When the men came up in the light, they blinked. (289)

There is an obvious similarity between this autobiographical sketch of a coal pit and his description of underground tombs in Etruria; both find tactile intimacy and the organic value in the dark space.24 Lawrence’s imagination about the dark, soft, and tactile space of the

24 Through a rigorous Marxist study of Lawrence, Graham Holderness rightly points out the problem of Lawrence’s description of his coal-mining town that “To pose the ‘natural’ against the ‘mechanical,’ machinery against the human, is to distort the reality of mining in the 1880s and 1890s in the interests of a persuasive but false antithesis” (History 55). He reveals the
underground annihilates the difference of time and space. While his exploration of Etruscan relics helped him to idealistically depict his coal-mining hometown, to which he made a final visit in September 1926, his youthful memories of and familiarity with dark underground space influenced his perception of Etruscan tombs which he visited only nine months later. Sketches illustrates the tactile “inner darkness,” which forms an antithesis against the visually constructed aesthetics of Fascism (“Nottingham” 290).  

Later in the work, Lawrence reports that the tombs in Vulci and Volterra were thoroughly excavated and the artifacts that had belonged to the places were taken away to museums during the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. Although Lawrence surely visited many museums of this region and saw important paintings and artifacts of the Etruscan civilization, he felt that the museum was a product of modern conceptualization of ancient world. To borrow his rhetoric, the museum is an institution which pulls things out from “darkness” into “light” thereby kills the inherent “life” of objects. The displacement of artifacts, for Lawrence, is an institutional form of violence. Based on George Dennis’s pioneering study of Etruria, Lawrence details how Lucian Bonaparte, a brother of Napoleon, excavated Etruscan tombs, and writes with hints of irony that excavations were heavily exercised at “the hey-day of the ‘Grecian urn’” (144). The reference to John Keats’ aesthetic romanticization of ancient culture shows his critical view of the hidden association between aesthetics and violence. Lawrence implies that Keatean aesthetics was politically appropriated to justify the excavation of ancient objects: “The Etruscans had left

idealistic and romantic character of Lawrence’s conceptions of the natural, the organic, and the human.

25 See Falasca-Zamponi’s Fascist Spectacle for the close relation between Italian Fascism and the modern visual culture.
fortunes to the Bonapartes. And by 1847, it was estimated that some six thousand tombs had been opened. The great find was thousands of “Greek” vases, the ‘brides of quietness’ only too much ravished” (144-45). Reflecting on his visit to the Guarnacci Museum of Volterra, Lawrence observes that institutionalized “beauty” of Volterran urns lost in touch with their original use as a vessel “for storing the ashes of the dead” (163). The museum is an institution which aestheticizes the objects which ancient people used for everyday life, thus depriving the possibility of “experiencing” them physically. For any kind of art and artifact, “The immediacy of life” is crucial for Lawrence; without it, things would become a part of machinery.

Lawrence deploringly reports that in Volterra “nearly all the tombs … have been opened” and the most important “Inghirami tomb” had been “removed bodily to the Archaeological Museum in Florence” in 1899. He insists that the practice of excavation, collection, categorization, and exhibition sums up the Imperial violence over the primitive. Looking at the “Inghirami tomb” in the garden of Florence museum, he muses that it loses “contact” with the viewer as well as with its atmosphere:

The garden of the Florence museum is vastly instructive, if you want object-lessons about the Etruscans. But who wants object-lessons about vanished races? What one wants is contact. The Etruscans are not a theory or a thesis. If they are anything, they are an experience.

And the experience is always spoilt. Museums, museums, museums, object-lessons rigged out to illustrate the unsound theories of archaeologists,

26 Lawrence here refers to the first line of Keat’s famous ode, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness” (282).
crazy attempts to co-ordinate and get into a fixed order that which has no fixed order and will not be coordinated! It is sickening? Why must all experience be systematized? Why must even the vanished Etruscans be reduced to a system? (170-71)

It is a matter of course for Lawrence that “experience” cannot be translated into system. Although the museum that objectifies ancient artifacts may serve for the intellectual knowledge about the civilization, it dissociates the viewer from objects. The museum embodies part and parcel of enlightenment, which never steps over the realm of visuality. In the final unfinished chapter of Sketches “Florence Museum,” Lawrence says: “It would perhaps be easier to go to the Archaeological Museum in Florence, to look at the Etruscan collection, if we decided once and for all that there never were any Etruscans. Because, in the cut-and-dried museum sense, there never were” (175). The museum is an institution which replaces the physical tactility of ancient civilization with the modern exhibitions which serve merely for visual appreciation and factual knowledge.  

27 It was not only Lawrence who criticized the objectivism of museum institutions among Modernists. Paul Valéry, as Adorno brilliantly describes, similarly criticized the idea of museum. In “Valéry, Proust, Museum,” Adorno describes Valéry’s view on art and museum:

For Valéry art is lost when it has relinquished its place in the immediacy of life, in its functional context; for him the ultimate question is that of the possible use of the work of art. The craftsman in him, fashions poems with that precision of contour which embodies attention to the surroundings, has become infinitely
Etruscan civilization is one of the sources of Lawrence’s anti-imperial and anti-Fascist discourse, because it displaces the Fascist ideology that the Rome was the origin of the Western civilization. Lawrence was not nostalgically attached to the ancient Etruria as an idyllic moment in history; it was what Fascists did with the ancient Rome. Instead, he attempted to “resurrect” the physical wisdom of Etruscans that had been lost since the invasion of Romans; as he wrote in a letter very simply, Lawrence wanted “to go etruscanising” (*Letters 6*: 92). It is Lawrence’s truly anachronistic will to get primitive and a criticism of aestheticized politics that justifies violence.

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sensitive to the place of the work of art, including its intellectual setting …. The pure work is threatened by reification and neutralization. This is the recognition that overwhelms him in the museum. (180)

Although in many respects Valéry is quite a different writer from Lawrence, this explanation holds true for Lawrence’s view of museum to a great extent. Valéry’s idea that art is continuous with its surroundings corresponds with Lawrence’s vitalistic idea of “the spirit of the place.” Adorno asserts that “for Valéry the museum is a place of barbarism” (182). Of course, the “barbarism” is not so much a concept of Valéry than that of Adorno, for whom both Fascism and mass culture were inescapable consequences of the intrinsically barbaric idea of enlightenment. In *Sketches*, Lawrence similarly overturns the hierarchy between the barbaric and the civilized by describing Etruscans as “life-accepting” people and Italian Fascism as bad consequence of “perfect mechanization of human life” (*Twilight* 226).
4. “Appleness” of Apples: Cézanne and the Tactile Physicality of Things

In Lawrence’s view, the modern painter who shared the Etruscan sensibility of touch was Paul Cézanne, about whom he wrote two essays, “Art and Morality” (1925) and “Introduction to These Paintings” (1929). Lawrence insists that Cézanne’s works embody the dimension of physicality that the visual-centered West has long suppressed. In “Introduction to These Paintings,” Lawrence writes that with Cézanne’s paintings, “Art has suddenly gone into rebellion, against all the canons of accepted religion, accepted good form, accepted everything” (198); for him, Cézanne was “a pure revolutionary” (211). It is true that Cézanne contested pictorial cliché and invented a completely new method of painting, but Lawrence does not objectively describe Cézanne in the context of art history. Rather, he found what he considered the ideal form of artistic rebellion in Cézanne. Through his two essays on Cézanne, Lawrence developed his critical view of modernity. Just as Sketches presents the tactile sensibility of Etruscan civilization as a criticism of “imposing” Fascism, Lawrence’s essays on Cézanne interpret the painter’s paintings as the most exemplary pictorial expression of touch that is, Lawrence claims, antithetical to the visual-centered culture of the West.

According to Lawrence’s vitalist view of art, the act of painting should begin with the painter’s strong desire to have a physical contact with things, without which paintings would become purely visual and merely beautiful. In his 1908 essay “Art and the Individual,” Lawrence states that “We struggle to touch [the primordial silences which hold the secret of things] through art” (140). For Lawrence, true paintings are an outcome and incarnation of the painter’s inexhaustible “struggles to touch” the secret “quick” of things. In “Introduction to

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28 Jack Stewart asserts that “Lawrence’s attitude toward art was vitalist”; for Lawrence, “There is … no life that does not involve contact” (157).
These Paintings,” Lawrence describes Cézanne’s struggle to express tactile physicality of things in visual art: “He wanted to express what he suddenly, convulsedly knew: the existence of matter. He terribly wanted to paint the real existence of the body, to make it artistically palpable. But he couldn’t. He hadn’t got there yet. And it was the torture of his life” (201-02). Lawrence thus sympathized with the painter’s courageous but tragic attempts to express tactility of things. Lawrence observes that Cézanne was “most interesting figure in modern art … not so much because of his achievement, as because of his struggle” (204). In Lawrence’s view, the vital tactility of Cézanne’s paintings exemplifies the organic interrelation between life and art.

If Cézanne’s paintings reveal the primordial truth of physicality, Lawrence argues, the modern medium of photography suppresses it because it represents reality only in visual terms. “Art and Morality” denounces photography because it necessarily puts distance between the viewer and the object. Lawrence disliked “kodak” which replaced “a true relationship to the things” with visual facts. He believes that “the slowly-formed habit of seeing just as the photographic camera sees” decisively dissociates the sense of touch from the sense of vision:

You may say, the object reflected on the retina is always photographic. It may be.

I doubt it. But whatever the image on the retina may be, it is rarely, even now, the

29 On this point, Lawrence’s view of Cézanne is very similar to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s discussion in “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945), which I will discuss in Chapter 4. The essay argues that Cézanne explored “the primordial perception” in which the “distinctions between touch and sight are unknown” (15). It also considers the difference between Cézanne’s paintings and photographic reality (14). Jack Stewart mentions the similarity between Lawrence and Merleau-Ponty in terms of their view on Cézanne (168).
photographic image of the object which is actually taken in by the man who sees the object. He does not, even now, see for himself. He sees what the kodak has taught him to see. And man, try as he may, is not a kodak (164).

Thus, “kodak” made humans give up subjectively “taking in” things that they see.

Technologically produced images formalize human’s visual perception, thus equalizing the visual with the surficial. As a consequence, people acquired a habit of “visualizing everything” according to photographic reality: “We see as the All-seeing Eye sees, with the universal vision” (165). In short, photography turned human perception into a part of a machine system. In “Introduction to These Paintings,” Lawrence claims that “once you have got photography, it is a very, very difficult thing to get representation more true-to-life” (211). Photography thus encourages people be satisfied with a replica of life. This insistence recalls Martin Heidegger’s argument in “The Age of World Picture” that the process of representing the “world as picture” becomes the “world” itself in the modern age [der Neuzeit] (130). Insatiable demand for visualization leads to cultural, social, and political totalitarianism, against which Lawrence fought. Like the politics of Italian Fascism, the technology of photography totally homogenized human perception. Thus, Lawrence observes, “The identifying of ourselves with the visual image of ourselves has become an instinct; the habit is already old. The picture of me, the me that is seen, is me” (165). The unpublished first version of the essay even more emphatically states that “Nothing is real until it is visualized, in our modern intelligence” (234). Then, in the modern world everything becomes cliché, a visible sign that automatically signifies something. Lawrence discusses that the modern is the age in which kodak functions as the absolute medium, that is, as the norm of reality.
Lawrence insists that Cézanne’s still-life paintings pose a significant challenge to the tyranny of photographic realism. They are not literal representation of objects: “A water-pitcher that isn’t so very much like a water-pitcher, apples that aren’t very appley, and a table cloth that’s not particularly much of a tablecloth. I could do better myself!” (163). Yet, Lawrence writes, people cannot simply ignore Cézanne’s paintings because they “rouse the aggressive moral instinct of the man in the street” (163). Cézanne’s pitcher and apples are “immoral” for modern people because the paintings open up a stratum of reality that has been hidden or suppressed by the photographic “All-seeing Eye.” To modern eyes that have become used to the photographic reality, objects in Cézanne’s paintings are morally “wrong” (166). Lawrence ironically states that Cézanne’s paintings are “a living lie. The kodak will prove it” (165). The dominance of photography trains modern people to think that a pitcher and apples “shouldn’t be painted like that” (166). With purposeful irony, Lawrence attempts to show that modern technology deeply affects people’s moral judgments. The collective indignation against non-photographic objects suggests the extent to which photography and photographic realism function as an important norm in the modern age.

Although in these essays Lawrence attempts to defend the painter from his reputation as an “immoral” painter, Cézanne was, historically speaking, more often ridiculed for his “immature” technique than denounced for his immorality. It was Lawrence, rather than Cézanne, who was notorious for explicit expressions. One should therefore carefully take into consideration the extent to which Lawrence identifies with Cézanne in these essays. The label of “immorality” attached to Lawrence often forced him to struggle to find a publisher for his works after the mid-1910s. Especially in the last five years of his life, Lawrence was deeply involved

30 See, for example, a 1913 article in The Century Magazine (Cortissoz 808).
with combating censorship. This situation certainly made him very sensitive to the political implications of such words as “immorality,” “obscenity,” and “dirtiness.” When Lawrence ascribed the notion of immorality to Cézanne’s apparently modest still-life paintings, he attempted to displace the concept of morality. It is therefore wrong to assume Lawrence’s use of “obscene” words as merely his “instinctive” inclinations to sexual expressions, just as it is wrong to praise him as a “savage genius” (Ellis 249). Sexual expressions in his late works exhibit his awareness of the social construction and historical limitations of the ideas of sexuality and morality.

This awareness is noticeable in one of his late essays, “Sex Appeal,” which appeared in *Vanity Fair* in 1929 with illustrations of Lilian Gish, Charlie Chaplin, Rudolph Valentino, and Diane de Poitiers who are mentioned in it. Lawrence criticizes the dissociation of sex and beauty in mass culture. Modern people, Lawrence insists, set a visual standard of beauty and judge other people according to it: “We try to pretend it is a fixed arrangement: straight nose, large eyes, etc. We think a lovely woman must look like Lilian Gish, a handsome man must look like Rudolf Valentino. So we think” (145). Like photography, film industrializes “beauty” and dissociates it from physical reality. Lawrence maintains that “The great disaster of our civilization is the morbid hatred of sex … which carries with it a morbid fear of beauty, “alive” beauty, and which causes the atrophy of our intuitive faculty and our intuitive self” (145). It is the fear of physicality in modern society that hinders true understanding of the interrelation of beauty and

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31 Ellis used this phrase in order to summarize the false image of Lawrence which commentators in the 1920s tried to create. Lawrence disliked this type of admirers as well as psychoanalytical critics of his novels (Ellis 249-50).
sex. This argument is consistent with the following words by Mellors, the gamekeeper in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, the work written between 1926 and 1928:

Sex is really only touch, the closest of all touch. And it’s touch we’re afraid of. We’re only half-conscious, and half alive. We’ve got to come alive and aware. Especially the English have got to get into touch with one another, a bit delicate and a bit tender. It’s our crying need—. (277)

These words reveal the centrality of touch in Lawrence’s imagination of sex. Hatred and fear of touch are at once the cause and effect of scientific visualism in modern society, wherein lies the “problem” of Anglo-American culture. Lawrence thus sees the circulation of visual “beauty” through the media is a symptom of the modern society’s dissociation from tactile physicality.

“Introduction to These Paintings” continues this line of argument. Although this essay was written for the preface to the Mandrake Press edition of Lawrence’s paintings in 1929, he praises the unique achievement of Cézanne instead of introducing his own works. It begins with an inquiry into why the English as a race “produce so few painters” (185). Strangely enough, Lawrence speculates that the collective fear of sexually transmitted diseases such as pox and syphilis have paralyzed the sensibility of English painters. He further argues that the fear and hatred of those diseases generated hygienic consciousness of the West, especially of England, which in turn produced a people who was timid to engage in physical contact with others. The hygienic consciousness of the English people resulted in the abomination of touch, which constitutes the “root” of “modern morality” (192). For Lawrence, contagion is the material origin
of the anti-tactile sentiment of the West. He considered Cézanne to be the painter who could help the people to escape from their collective fear of touch.

Lawrence’s argument about the fear of touch at least partly derives from his strong interest in the absolute imperative of *noli me tangere* in Christian discourse, which, for him, is the origin of the loss of physical contact in Western culture. *Noli me tangere* is a major theme of late Lawrence. In particular, *The Escaped Cock* written in 1927 and 1928, challenges the ocularcentrism of the Christian tradition through a revision of the Resurrection periscope. In the Bible, the resurrected Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17). In the first half of *The Escaped Cock*, Christ similarly forbids Mary to touch him, but in the second half, he experiences an awakening of his body and comes to recognize “the absolute stillness and fullness of touch” through his sexual contact with Isis, the Egyptian Goddess of fertility (*Virgin* 160). Quite “immorally” in the Christian sense, Lawrence links Christ’s resurrection to the idea of the regeneration of the Egyptian God Osiris. This “pagan” Goddess provides an opportunity with the resurrected Jesus to break with his fear of touch. In the Lawrentian geography of perception, the sense of touch is associated with the “South,” which the “North” always tries to exclude from its field. In *The Escaped Cock*, as in

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32 It is important to note that *The Escaped Cock* was written right after Lawrence’s Etruscan tour. He writes in a letter: “those three days in the tomb begin to have a terrible significance and reality to me. And the Resurrection is an unsatisfactory business—just *noli me tangere*, and no more. Porveri noi! But pazienza, pazienza!” (6: 37).

33 Like Etruria, Egypt often symbolizes “life” in Lawrence’s works. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson examines the use of Egyptian myth by Lawrence in chapter 4 of her work.
*Sketches*, the marginalized “South” supplants the dominant power of the “North,” which is associated with the sense of vision as well as the tradition of Christian acetic morality.\(^3^4\)

Interestingly, the narrative of *The Escaped Cock* overshadows the depiction of Cézanne in “Introduction to These Paintings”:

> The man of flesh has been slowly destroyed through centuries, to give place to the man of spirit, the mental man, the ego, the self-conscious I. And in his artistic soul, Cézanne knew it, and wanted to rise in the flesh. He couldn’t do it, and it embittered him. Yet, with his apple, he did shove the stone from the door of the tomb. (202)

Lawrence describes Cézanne as if he were the resurrected Jesus that he depicted in *The Escaped Cock*, thus uniting two figures from different periods and contexts through the image of touch. For Lawrence, Cézanne was a radical materialist who bravely broke with the imperative *noli me tangere* through his paintings of apples.

Cézanne’s apples embody the painter’s sensibility of touch. Lawrence calls the unique materiality of the apples in Cézanne’s paintings “appleyness,” which signifies the invisible and the essential impression produced by every form of “life.” This tactile truth in visual expression constitutes what Lawrence calls “the great impersonal” of the physical object. As Jack Stewart

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\(^{3^4}\) In a quite similar fashion, Wilhelm Worringer, in his 1908 book *Abstraction and Empathy*, related artistic styles to geographical factors by insisting on the difference between ”North” and “South.” Possibly, Lawrence indirectly learned of Worringer’s argument from Roger Fry’s works.
rightly puts it, “Appleyness” is “the vital ontological quality of Cézanne’s art” (167). Lawrence emphatically distinguishes Cézanne’s apples from their photographic likeliness by insisting that one could find “appleyness” not only in apples but also in portraits of Madame Cézanne: “It is the appleyness of the portrait of Cézanne’s wife that makes it so permanently interesting” (212). That Cézanne’s paintings of apples and his portraits of Madame Cézanne share the same tangible “appleyness” destabilizes the boundary between humans and things, a key boundary in the Western concept of morality. Cézanne’s apples are thus transgressive and “immoral”; they resist the modern convention of equating the visual with the real. Lawrence writes that Cézanne attempted to “displace our present mode of mental-visual consciousness, the consciousness of mental concepts, and substitute a mode of consciousness that was predominantly intuitive, the awareness of touch” (211). The tangibility of Cézanne’s apples thus silently but radically poses an antithesis to the photographic reality of the modern society (211).

Cézanne’s rebellion against “visual and emotional clichés” makes his works sharply different from photographic representations of things; as a consequence, Lawrence ironically maintains, “Cézanne’s drawing … was bad because it represented a smashed, a mauled cliché, terribly knocked about” (209-10). Cézanne’s destruction of aesthetic clichés is, for Lawrence, an ethical move to preserve the tactile contour of things. Cézanne fought against clichés “with the edges of his forms and contours” (210). Lawrence here italicizes the word “edges,” just as he does in Sketches, in order to emphasize that this is not merely a technical matter. By adopting the encompassing “edges” instead of the distinct “outlines,” Cézanne saved the “life” of things. This ability distinguishes Cézanne from other “professional” painters and directly unites him with the anonymous “artizans” of Etruscan paintings (Sketches 59).
Fighting against photography and optical clichés through paintings does not mean a withdrawal into nostalgic negation of photographic reality. Far from it, Cézanne’s art was forward-looking, and it exemplifies the task of the artist in the age of photographic reality. In fact, Cézanne was way ahead of his time and influenced important painters of the early twentieth century such as Picasso and Braque. For Lawrence, Cézanne’s most important attribute lay in his “revolutionary” character. In “Introduction to These Paintings,” Lawrence repeats again and again the importance of Cézanne’s “rebellion” and “fighting” against ready-made techniques and ideas; thereby, he politicizes the painter’s works.

Such painterly rebellion had a special meaning for Lawrence in his final years. It was his hope that life and death are continuous, a hope which is closely related to his interest in the Resurrection. In Sketches, Lawrence writes that “death, to the Etruscan, was a pleasant continuance of life, with jewels and wine and flutes playing for the dance” (19). And the “Introduction,” which begins with a description of the English people’s fear of touch, ends with Lawrence’s hope that English be born again “as little children” (217). These are two dimensions of his single wish for resurrection. Lawrence’s imagination about ontogenetic beginning intersects with his phylogenetic insight into the tactile community. As mentioned earlier, Lawrence declares his hope “to go etruscanising” in a letter. In the same spirit, he states in “Introduction” that “if we have really got back to the state of the unborn babe, we are perhaps almost ready to be born. The English may be born again, pictorially” (217). This is not a simple return to the original state of being; for Lawrence, becoming a baby means a resurrection of the

35 In his psychoanalytic study, Fantasia of the Unconscious, Lawrence, following Freud, says that in his earliest stage of development, “The child knows the mother only through touch—perfect and immediate contact” (Psychoanalysis 108).
tactile sensibility, a denial of *noli me tangere*, in which he thought the future lay.\(^\text{36}\) For Lawrence, whether one goes “etruscanising” or becomes a “new-born babe,” it is important to return to the impersonal and inhuman core that exists prior to intellectual awareness in order to resist “imposing” modernity. Lawrence’s desire for resurrection negates a chronological understanding of history and unites the present with the primitive past. It defies the doctrines of progress and enlightenment on which both Fascistic totalitarianism and photographic reality are based. The Lawrentian discourse of touch that embraces both the primitive past and the future thus is an artistic form of rebellion against modernity. And his late works are infused with his will to make a modernistic criticism of modernity through his firm belief in the sense of touch.

\(^{36}\) Lawrence’s hope for a tactile society is best expressed in the four poems posthumously collected and published in *More Pansies*: “Future Relationships,” “Future Religion,” “Future States,” and “Future War.” All of these works are not so much poems as fragments of Lawrence’s “thoughts” (*Pensées*) on touch and the community. Lawrence writes of his hope for “a democracy of touch,” “the mystery of touch,” anti-industrial touch, and finally “the civilization of touch” (*Complete Poems* 611-12).
Figures

Fig. 1.1. A wall painting at “Tomba dei Vasi Dipinti”

Fig. 1.2. Pliny the Elder, Laocoön and His Sons
Fig. 1.3. Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784.

Fig. 1.4. Paul Cézanne, *Compotier, Pitcher, and Fruit (Nature morte)*, 1892-94.
Fig. 1.5. Paul Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne au fauteuil jaune*, 1888-90.
Chapter 2

The Stieglitz Circle and the Tactile Photography

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,

            Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,

            Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,

            My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly
            different from myself

--- Walt Whitman *Leaves of Grass*

1. Artists in the Stieglitz Circle and D. H. Lawrence

   This chapter examines the discourse and imagery of touch in the works of Alfred Stieglitz and his circle, a group of people who played a central role in forming American Modernism in the early twentieth century. As a prominent photographer and a promoter of modern art in New York, Stieglitz had close relationship with many significant painters, poets, and critics of his age such as Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, John Marin, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank, and Lewis Mumford. He introduced contemporary European art, especially the works of post-impressionists and Cubists, to America and offered American artists gallery spaces (291, Intimate Gallery, An American Place). The photographic journals he edited, *Camera Notes* (1897-1903) and *Camera Work* (1903-17), were important platforms for photographers, painters and poets. Although works gathered at Stiegliz’s galleries differed in methods and genres, they largely reflected the view that the ongoing mechanization of society
and culture was corroding the natural sensitivity of Americans and that the task of American art was to fight against such a trend through its expressions of the organic and tactile “truth.” The imagery and discourse of touch, which we will see in Max Weber’s concept of “tactile intimacy,” in Stieglitz’s photographs of Georgia O’Keeffe’s hands, and in Paul Rosenberg’s essay on Stieglitz, for example, played an important role in their search for “organic,” “primitive,” and “spiritual” expressions of art, significantly contributing to social and nationalistic discourse in the early decades of the twentieth century in New York. Because the collective discourse of touch in the Stieglitz circle from the 1910s to 30s is the subject of this chapter, it, unlike other chapters, examines several artists and critics.

The Stieglitz group’s collective discourse on touch has a certain similarity to Lawrence’s. Both Lawrence and the Stieglitz group sought to find links between life and art through their “organic” expressions. Although none of them seems to have met Lawrence in person, these American artists greatly admired his works and variously adopted his insights into their artistic expressions of organic “life” and community. In order to clarify the close relation between this chapter and the previous one, I will outline some important points of contact between the Stieglitz group and Lawrence before moving on to an examination of touch in American modernism.

Among the members of the Circle, Waldo Frank, Alfred Stieglitz, and Herbert J. Seligmann had contact with Lawrence through letters. As an editor of the short-lived journal The Seven Arts, in 1917, Frank exchanged letters with Lawrence regarding his stories published in the magazine and had some discussions on The Rainbow and Women in Love, the works Lawrence was then working on. Frank’s letters played an important role in kindling Lawrence’s wish to come to America (Lawrence Letters 3: 142-43, 159-61). In 1923, Stieglitz read Studies in
Classic American Literature with great enthusiasm and wrote a letter of praise to Lawrence, who replied to it a week later (Whelan, Stieglitz 502; Letters 4: 543). A few years later, when Lady Chatterley’s Lover found its way to publication in a private edition in Florence, Stieglitz promptly applied for two copies of the work (Letters 6: 381). Chatterley strongly impressed Stieglitz and his wife Georgia O’Keeffe; Stieglitz told to his friends that the book was “one of the grandest that had ever been written, a sort of Bible, on a par with Goethe and Shakespeare” (Seligmann, “Stieglitz” 135). Although it was never realized, Stieglitz planned to exhibit Lawrence’s paintings in his gallery in 1929. Finally, Herbert J. Seligmann was the writer of D. H. Lawrence: An American Interpretation (1924), the first ever book of criticism on Lawrence, which was dedicated to Stieglitz. In this book, Seligmann discusses Lawrence’s work as a series of “[struggles] against the inhuman mechanization of all mankind” (1-2). As the subtitle of the book suggests, Seligmann focuses on the anti-mechanical discourse in Lawrence’s works that was utilizable for his group’s collective resistance against “American materialism” (56). Acceptance of Lawrence in the Stieglitz group was thus closely associated with their objective of innovating American art. The relations that Frank, Stieglitz, and Seligmann had with Lawrence show the deep affinity between the artists across the Atlantic; they thought that Lawrence’s works would be instrumental in establishing American art.

In this context, one should surely mention Taos, a town in New Mexico, where an art colony was founded by Bert Geer Phillips and Ernest L. Blumenschein in 1898 and attracted many artists in the early twentieth century. Because of its closeness to Pueblo Taos and the foreign landscape around the area, artists often illustrated lives of Native Americans and the

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37 Seligman later wrote on Stieglitz in similar terms: “… he stayed to fight the unequal battle for the creative spirit against machine industrialism” (“Stieglitz” viii).
natural environments of the place. Both Lawrence and the Stieglitz group were strongly attracted to the place and they similarly regarded it as a conceptual antidote to the industrial city. Upon Mable Dodge Luhan’s enthusiastic invitation, Lawrence and his wife Frieda came to this isolated art colony in late 1922 and stayed in Kiowa Ranch, a summerhouse of the Luhans located twenty miles northwest of Taos, for about two years, although he temporarily returned to Britain once in late 1923. During the years in Taos, Lawrence wrote *The Plumed Serpent* and some stories set in America, exhibiting his mythic imagination of American primitives. Some artists in the Stieglitz group had a similar passion for Taos. Marsden Hartley, for example, stayed in Taos in 1918 and 1919, and produced landscape paintings of the place over the next several years. The person most closely associated with the place among the Stieglitz circle was Georgia O’Keeffe, a prominent Modernist painter and Stieglitz’s second wife. When she first visited the ranch on which Lawrence used to live, O’Keeffe drew *The Lawrence Tree* (1929), an exemplary image that unites Lawrence and the Stieglitz circle. The pine tree represented in the picture is put upside down as if it were drawn from the perspective of a viewer who lay down on the ground, suggesting the painter’s feeling of closeness to the native soil as well as her awe of the mesmerizing hugeness of the tree. When he stayed in Taos, Lawrence frequently wrote on a table under this tree. O’Keeffe’s painting indicates her deep sympathy with Lawrence’s achievement and appreciation of numinous energy of Taos.

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38 Just like Lawrence, O’Keeffe first visited Taos upon the invitation by Mabel Dodge Luhan. From 1929 to 1949, she almost annually visited Taos and finally settled in the place for good after Stieglitz died. Because of the strong relation between her art and the place, she became “identified with New Mexico and its desert environment” (Connor 188).
In addition to these rather direct associations, what further unites Lawrence with these American artists is their common admiration for Walt Whitman and Paul Cézanne. Artists on both sides of the Atlantic regarded Whitman as a poet who expressed tactile values in a uniquely “American” voice. Although he later omitted the passage, Lawrence wrote in an earlier (1919) version of chapter on Whitman in *Studies in Classic American Literature* that “He tells of the mystery of the touch of the hands and fingers, those living tendrils of the upper spiritual centres, upon the lower body: the hands and fingers gathering and controlling the sheer sex motions” (362-63). This passage shows that Lawrence must have perceived in Whitman what Malcolm Cowley would later call “an abnormally developed sense of touch” (xv). Likewise, the artists of the Stieglitz group frequently referred to Whitman in their search for “a new kind of democracy,” an ideal form of American politics (Connor 4).  

They shared with Ezra Pound the quick formulation that “Whitman *is* America,” and idolized the poet as an embodiment of the American ideal (122).  

In his essay on Stieglitz, Lewis Mumford equates Stieglitz with Whitman with respect to their sensitivity to touch after asserting that “He who really touches the soul of Manhattan and the pavement of New York touches, whether he knows it or not, Walt Whitman” (43).

Cézanne, like Whitman, was a vital source of inspiration for American Modernists, as it was for Lawrence, enriching their thoughts and discourses on the organic expression of art. A cubist painter-poet Max Weber was among the first Americans who noticed the importance of Cézanne; he saw Cézanne’s paintings at Leo and Gertrude Stein’s home as well as at *Salon*...  

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39 See also Brennan 29-34.  

40 See a detailed account of Whitman’s influence on modern novelists and poets, see Price.
*d’Automne* while he stayed in Paris between 1906 and 1908. And it was principally through Weber that Stieglitz recognized the greatness of the French painter. Stieglitz purchased Cézanne’s works and exhibited them (in a group exhibition in 1910 and in a solo exhibition in 1911) at 291 for the first time in the country and wrote in a letter to the editor of the *New York Evening Sun* that “without the understanding of Cézanne … it is impossible for anyone to grasp, even faintly, much that is going on in the art world to-day.” This ignited the collective enthusiasm for Cézanne in America during the 1910s and led Paul Rosenfeld, a critic and one of Stieglitz’s closest friends, to comment in his 1924 work *Port of New York* that “A new academy was commencing to form under [Cézanne’s] sign” (266). Later, in a book dedicated to Stieglitz, Marsden Hartley insisted on the “similarity” between Whitman and Cézanne (*Adventures* 30). Hartley describes Cézanne as a revolutionary painter who was “striving always toward actualities, toward the realization of beauty as it is seen to exist in the real, in the object itself, whether it be mountain or apple or human, the entire series of living things in relation to one another” (28). This emphasis on the inherent relatedness among objects is certainly reminiscent of Lawrence’s views on Cézanne’s unique representation of objects—e.g., the “appleyness” of apples. In the same book, Hartley quotes Cézanne’s words as his objective of art: “I wish to paint that thing which exists between me and the object” (Ludington 234). Hartley’s sincere devotion to Cézanne is visible in his 1927 work on Mont-Saint-Victoire, Cézanne’s favorite subject in his last years.

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41 For Max Weber’s years in Paris, see Homer 124-30.

42 As Sarah Greenough points out, beside Weber, Stieglitz learned about Cézanne through Leo and Gertrude Stein (lix).

43 Letter to the Editor, December 14, 1911.

44 See Hartley’s autobiography, especially 136-41.
These facts show that Lawrence and the Stieglitz Circle shared a lot of literary and visual resources in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century; their collective focus on the values of tactility and organic unity sheds light on the discourse of touch in the international contexts of the Modernist movement. However, Lawrence and the Stieglitz group differed at least in one crucial point, namely, their different views on photography. As examined in the previous chapter, Lawrence held negative views of the presence of photography in modern culture, to the extent that it is impossible to separate his appraisal of Whitman, Cézanne, and Etruscan civilization from his trenchant condemnation of photography and the visual-centeredness of society. Meanwhile, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz played a central role in the artistic movements in New York that aimed at organic unity of culture and society. What can we make of this sharp difference between Lawrence and the Stieglitz group?

At a first glance, Lawrence’s stance seems more consistent and clear. His negative view of photography was a part of his antidote against the machine and a mechanical society. For him, the camera was a machine that prevented humans from tactile contact with the environment. Most of the Stieglitz group artists, in contrast, never admitted photography as a part of modern industry; their dualistic antagonism against the machine, rather, placed this new medium of art on the side of the organic, and, in this seemingly strange categorization, the discourse of touch played an important role. In their collective efforts to create a uniquely American art, photographic representations were often naturalized as the medium through which one could restore tactile unity with the primordial reality. This naturalization of the new medium of art had very much to do with the question of how to establish new sort of art in the new nation.

In the sections that follow, I will examine discourse and imagery of touch in the works of the Stieglitz Circle as well as their relation to their thoughts on organicism and nationalism. The
main focus of this chapter is on the Stieglitz group during the 1910s and the 1920s. First, I will discuss Max Weber’s *Essays on Art* and consider his concept of “tactile intimacy.” Deeply influenced by Cézanne’s paintings, Weber insisted that the objective of art was to have direct contact with things through the artist’s tactile sensitivity. While he believed that paintings and sculptures can embody the tactile physicality, he was skeptical about the capability of reproducible media such as photography. Most of the Stieglitz group, however, presented optimistic views of the photographic art in *Camera Work* and other places. I will examine George Bernard Shaw’s influence on the group. Shaw was quite optimistic about the value of photographic art, satirically commenting that humans were more mechanical than cameras. In the subsequent part, I will turn to three writers in the Stieglitz group, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and William Carlos Williams, in order to see how they contributed to formulate the collective idiom of touch as anti-mechanical discourse and associated it with the national ideal of an organic society. In this section, I also look at how Frank and Rosenfeld praised the physicality in Stieglitz’s photographic art. These observations will become a foundation for the next step of reading Stieglitz’s photographic images. I will focus on his photographic works on Georgia O’Keeffe’s body, in particular her hands, and consider the problems of nation, gender and sexuality in his tactile photographs of the female body. Finally, I will briefly look at the Stieglitz group in the 1930s when their artistic search for tactile reality was on the decline, and consider the specific historicity of the imagery and discourse of touch.
2. Max Weber and “Tactile Intimacy”

Max Weber is a key figure in the early development of the Stieglitz’s group. After being born into a Jewish family in Bialystok, Russia in 1881 and moving to the US as a child, Weber studied art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn under the tutelage of Arthur Dow, who was to teach young Georgia O’Keeffe at a different institution. After graduation, Weber taught art classes for three years in Virginia before moving to Paris in 1905. During his three years in Paris, Weber became familiar with a new trend of art and was deeply influenced by Cézanne and Matisse as well as by primitive African art. He attended Matisse’s free class organized by Michael and Sarah Stein, Gertrude Stein’s brother and his wife. He became acquainted with American artists, such as Arthur Dove and John Marin, both of whom were staying in Paris, and had a close friendship with Henri Rousseau. During these fruitful years, he quickly mastered the method of modernist painting, and had occasions to exhibit his works in Salons d’Automne and other places. When he returned to the US, as William Innes Homer puts it, Weber “was unquestionably the most advanced painter in the country” (130). Although he interacted with the Stieglitz group only for the brief period between 1909 and 1910, he had a great impact on the direction in which the group would move in the following decade.45

Weber’s only book on the theory of art, Essays on Art (1916), is based on his lectures to his students at Clarence H. White’s school of photography in New York, where he taught art and aesthetics between 1914 and 1918. Though his relationship with Stieglitz had ended early in 1911, this text fully exhibits Weber’s organic conception of art which constituted an integral part of the Stieglitz group’s collective discourse. Echoing Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in

45 After the interval of about twenty years, Weber resumed his friendship with Stieglitz in 1930, although this too ended shortly (Whelan, Stieglitz 470)
Art, Weber’s book argues that the essence of art lies in what he calls the “spiritual tactility.” He begins Essays on Art with a passage that emphasizes the importance of the maker’s “intimate” relationship with things:

One of the most spiritual and significant phases of quality is intimacy. It is a state of awareness, of knowledge, of the presence of things outside of ourselves; we mean here, inanimate things. Anything that has been shaped or constructed possesses a part of the life of the maker of that thing. It is that of his life which makes the existence of that thing possible. The maker lives in the things he makes. Even his tool becomes warm in his hand and palpitates with his very pulse. Then too, the moment I behold an object, an art work, it becomes more that very moment, for I put part of myself into it along with the life of its maker. For matter is of more worth when it is embodied with the spirit of the maker. A work binds its maker to the universe. Though the maker cease to be, the work he has created keeps on pulsating and rhymes his personality on on into infinity. Often it occurs to me that objects of quality wait for us; and when once we succeed in knowing it

46 Although Alfred Werner asserts that Weber “did not know” Kandinsky’s work, it is likely that he knew it through the excerpt that appeared in a 1912 issue of Camera Work, at least second-handedly (36). Kandinsky’s view of Cézanne is quite similar to Weber’s; in the chapter “Spiritual Revolution,” Kandinsky says that “Cézanne made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive. He raised still life to such a point that it ceased to be inanimate” (37).
intimately, the object is more and we are more because of each other, or because art chooses us. (7)

What Weber speaks of in terms of “intimacy” is the way the maker communes with “inanimate things” through the manual creation of artworks. He believes that the maker not only gives shapes to objects but also infuses “life” and “spirit” into them through hands, as Pygmalion created Galatea. Works of art retain traces of the maker’s pulse and infinitely “rhymes his personality” even after the death of the maker. In other words, works of art make the maker’s life immortal. The sincere observer can perceive traces of the maker’s life in artwork beyond the limitation of time and space; he or she not only looks at them from some distance but also physically feels them pulsating and living on. Weber thought that artistic activities and appreciations of art should involve such spiritual experience of communing with inanimate objects.

Weber conceptualizes the sense of touch by associating it with his notions of intimacy and spirituality, especially when he insists on the spiritual communion between the artist and the work of art. However, the privilege of the sense of touch does not devalue functions of the other senses. Instead, Weber thought that touch is the most fundamental mode of perception that synthesizes the other senses. He explains that what he calls “intimacy of tactility” is “largely a plastic quality, which makes for spiritual plasticity, through our attitude or approach” (13). The sense of touch does not work independently from the other senses; instead, it constitutes “a marvelous union of the family of the senses” (13). He considers that the plastic capability of the sense of touch can cause the interaction among the different senses, which he believes is “the most real function of spirit” (14). For him, art is a perceptual experience of the disintegration of
boundaries, including the boundary between the artist and the art as well as the boundary between the distinct senses. He therefore maintains that “It is this spiritual tactility that brings us into closest touch and greatest intimacy with the outer world until the one enhances the other” (13). For Weber, the “intimate tactility” is the humans’ primary plasticity and the physical origin of art.

This primordial character of the sense of touch embraces the notion of the primitive. Like Lawrence, Weber thought that the primitive people had better understanding of the sense of touch. Interestingly, Weber and Lawrence seem to share interest in Etruscan civilization. In the chapter “Art Consciousness” in Essays on Art, Weber reflects that “The other day I stood and looked at an Etruscan statue. It smiled its good old peaceful smile, and I asked it at what it smiles forever. And it whispered gently: ‘At the speed and the noise of modernity’” (59). While he does not state whether he saw the statue in a museum or at an Italian site, this casually written passage about the primitive smile shows that Weber, like Lawrence, considered Etruscans as an antithesis to modern technology and culture. Indeed, his works exhibit his passion for the primitive. In

47 Weber shared the Marxist dualism between the organic and the machine with his contemporary artists and intellectuals in New York including those in the Stieglitz group. As Celeste Connor notes, American artists and critics in the 1910s adopted William Morris’s notion of craftsmanship in order to generate their definition of American art; while Van Wyck Brooks insisted on the importance of “a craft-sense” of literature, Waldo Frank emphasized the artisanal character of American art (15). Like them, Weber claims that the human’s “intimate” relationship with inanimate things as an antithesis against mechanical modern society. For him, the work of art is an ethical and spiritual engagement primarily because of its manual process of creation.
the 1910s, Weber drew several pictures of primitive materials and works, including *African Sculpture* [*Congo Statuette*], which illustrates a figurine he actually owned (Fig. 2.3.). Six years later, Clara E. Sipprell took a photograph of Weber gently touching the African sculpture (Fig. 2.4.). Sipprell captures Weber’s intimate feelings for the primitive object by eliminating other elements from the photograph. His caressing fingers on the figurine suggest that he feels what he calls “tactile intimacy” with this primitive sculpture.  

Weber’s interest in primitive cultures represents an aspect of Modernism that he assimilated in Paris and that had to do with Cézanne’s influence. Clive Bell, a British art critic, describes the strong relation between Cézanne’s legacy and the boom of primitive art in Paris in his 1922 work *Since Cézanne*: “It was [Cézanne] who—by his pictures, not by doctrine of course—sent the pick of the young generation to look at the primitives” (12). Weber was one of those artists of the “young generation.” He thought that Cézanne had invented a way to explore a primitive vitality that modern people had lost. In *Essays on Art*, Weber compares Cézanne’s works to the Egyptian Sphinx and the Grecian Parthenon, emphasizing the painter’s sensitivity to the primitive (20). Much later, in 1946, he reflects that Cézanne “opened his eyes to the ‘archaic approach’” (qtd. in Homer 127). Although Cézanne did not depict “primitive” people as his contemporary Gauguin did, Weber believed that Cézanne’s “approach” to things derived from his “primitive” sensitivity. Weber felt sympathy with the cubist method and even wrote cubist poems because he believed that cubist art inherited Cézanne’s primitive sensitivity to the

48 He also published a collection of poems titled *Primitives* (1926).

49 Such association between the primitive and Cézanne’s pictures would be shared by Marsden Hartley, who in *Adventures of the Arts* quotes the following words by Cézanne: “I remain the primitive of the way I have discovered” (31).
thingness of things: an important element of Cézanne’s paintings which Lawrence called the “appleyness of apples” and Roger Fry called the “‘treeness’ of trees” (82).\(^{50}\)

In Essays on Art, Weber also considers touching as a physical experience relevant to the effect of revelation in art. He insists that true touching occurs when one is simultaneously touching and being touched by one’s circumstances: “Animated spiritual tactility may be said to happen and to be, when we feel the reality or when matter, light, sound, temperature, reaches or touches us. It may be said to be the spiritual consciousness. It is like the finger touching the organ.” (15-16) “Spiritual tactility” is thus differentiated from our everyday experience of touching things since, unlike the customary handling of things, it involves the revelatory experience of being touched by things. Weber therefore maintains that “It is the wonder moment when spirit meets matter, when inanimate substance meets the animate and therefore its life—its plastic destiny, is decided” (16). Weber’s concept of touch engages not only with archaic primitiveness but also with the epiphanic revelation that instantly transforms our relations with circumstances. This link between the primitive and the epiphanic through the sense of touch is a

\(^{50}\) Of course, from postcolonial point of view, Weber’s fascination with the primitive implied in his oxymoronic expressions is a pure fetish. Especially when he associates the primitiveness with Cézanne, the very notion of the primitivism is totally internalized within the Western discourse of art, lacking direct contact with the reality of indigenous people. Hal Foster is right when he insists by employing Lacanian theory that primitivism emerged in the early twentieth century was a fetishistic discourse of the Western subject which was “threatened by loss, by lack, by others” (46). For Weber, African statuette served as a substitute for this irrevocable lack.
sort of imagination that characterizes the modernistic language of touch; indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, Walter Benjamin follows a similar pattern of thought.⁵¹

Weber was neither an ideological promoter of modernism nor a conservative traditionalist. On the one hand, he was skeptical about the modernist invention of “manifestoes” which, he insisted, served as “the excuse for most modern art outbursts” (23). Although he passionately explored the potentiality of the Cubist art, he believed that verbal explanations that Surrealists and Dadaists often utilized would depreciate the purity of visual expressions, insisting that “Great art reveals itself without loud verbal manifestoes” (19). On the other hand, he thought that to become a traditionalist was naïve escapism: “To try to be traditional to-day may be as erroneous as some of the modern efforts in art that run away from time itself” (20). For Weber, what is new should be organically intertwined with the “remote past” (17). He believes that there should be a bidirectional relation between the past and the future; as he dialectically puts it, “Modernity is the art of the future of yesterday. The old art is of the coming past” (58).

Primitiveness is necessary for modernism, since we become “more intimate … with the known when we crave to know the unknown” (61). In his opinion, modern artists should be inspired by the primitive unknown and be flexible enough to become “child-like” subjects in order to “make a new beginning that may make for truer modernity in modern art” (22). Weber’s prospect of truly modernistic art is founded upon his deep conviction that humans’ audacity to embrace “tactile intimacy” could renew the relationship between the self and the world.

⁵¹ An important scholar of modern primitivism, Marianna Torgovnick, notes in her discussion of Roger Fry that Fry thought “primitive drawings and sculpture represented the future of modern art. Like others in the art world, he thought primitive and modern art twin phenomena” (86).
As already established, Lawrence and Weber shared many views regarding the sense of touch. However, one should note, Weber’s discussion of touch, unlike Lawrence’s, seems to be totally dissociated from sexuality and eroticism. Weber always emphasized the vitality of “things”: “Things arouse the senses of perception. Through things I feel tied to earth. Everything lives—I live with things” (34). But he hardly appears to have real passions for humans. His affinity with the materiality of things is apparent not only in his still-life paintings but also in the works of sculpture, lithography and woodcutting, in which he became interested in later years. In a way, Weber’s eroticism lies in the act of producing works with his own hands; the reciprocal process of touching his work and being touched by it constitutes Weber’s spiritual pleasure of art. As Weber’s biographer Alfred Werner states, Weber remained “a manual worker” throughout his life (22).

Given his materialist inclinations, it is understandable that photography occupied an ambivalent position in his view on art. Unlike Lawrence, Weber did not categorically dismiss the artistic value of photography. Throughout his life, he had close friendships with many photographers such as Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Alvin Langdon Coburn and Clarence White, and he often commented on their works. Yet, as one could see in the following debate between the painter and a photographer, Weber seems to have felt that photographic art was not “direct”

52 Such passionate attachment to things is certainly a trait shared not only by Cubist painters such as Picasso and Braque but also by such contemporary avant-garde poets as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. Remember that the first definition of Imagism was famously “direct treatment of the ‘Thing,’ whether subjective or objective,” as it appeared in 1913 issue of *Poetry*. 
enough, since it lacks contact with the material. This view should have sounded rather conservative compared with his fellow artists.

The debate began with Alvin Langdon Coburn’s article, “The Relation of Time in Art,” which appeared in a 1911 issue of Camera Work. In the essay, young and prominent photographer Coburn strongly defends the artistic value of photography, insisting that photography “is more suited to the art requirements of this age of scientific achievement than any other” (72). He compares photography with “the older art of painting” and states that “the essential difference” between these two media “is not so much a mechanical one of brushes and pigments compared with a lens and dry plates, but rather a mental one of a slow, gradual usual building up, as compared with the instantaneous, concentrated mental impulse, followed by a longer period of fruition” (72, italics mine). By ignoring the difference between the painterly tools of “brushes and pigments” and the photographic tools of “a lens and dry plates,” Coburn naturalizes the art of photography. He further insists on the affinity between the new medium of artistic expression and the environment of modern American society:

Photography born of this age of steel seems to have naturally adapted itself to the necessarily unusual requirements of an art that must live in skyscrapers, and it is because she has become so much at home in these gigantic structures that the Americans undoubtedly are the recognized leaders in the world movement of pictorial photography. (72, italics mine)

Coburn thus asserts that photography is the most suitable medium for capturing the reality of the urban environment of modern New York. And, in quite a nationalistic tone, he maintains that
Americans will become “leaders” of the photographic art; for him, this new genre of art is inseparable from the new nation of the USA. As an example of such American photographic achievement, Coburn refers to Stieglitz’s “Winter on Fifth Avenue” (Fig. 2.5.): “Just to think of the combination of knowledge and sureness of vision that was required to make possible Stieglitz’s ‘Winter on Fifth Avenue.’ If you call it a ‘glorified snapshot’ you must remember that life has much of this same quality. We are comets across the sky of eternity” (72). Coburn dissociates mechanical elements from this photograph by stressing the efforts and knowledge it requires. He defends the vital value of photography from the common criticism that photography is merely a mechanical reproduction of what is visible in real space.

In a 1913 issue of *Platinum Print*, Max Weber published an article, “The Filling of Space,” and critically responded to Coburn’s claim:

By reason of the lens being an indispensable instrument in the work of the artist-photographer, matter or nature, or scenes in nature are less yielding and flexible to his medium than to the living sensitive human eye, guided by and controlled with the mind, mood, and time. The mind guides the hand, and all other senses are brought into play through spiritual contact and tactile intimacy with sound, light, motion, color, form; and the vision or phantasy after that. (6)

The distinction between the complexity of physical perception and the mechanical device of the lens was crucial for Weber. While, for artistic activities, “the living sensitive human eye” should be continuous with the plastic capability of the human mind, the photographic lens severs the organic continuum between the eye and the mind. As he does in *Essays on Art*, Weber uses his
concepts of “spiritual contact” and “tactile intimacy” in order to emphasize the importance of complex interactions among the human senses in authentic works of art. Weber believes that the intermediary “lens” undermines the flexible relationship between the artist and the artwork and, as a consequence, takes away the “directness” of art; hence, the “lens,” for him, is a mechanical noise that contaminates the purity of artistic expressions.

The difference between the views of Coburn and Weber brings to foreground the crucial point of controversy of the period concerning the photographic art, namely, the question of the mechanicalness of photography. While photographers and critics in the Stieglitz group, most of whom were passionate for promoting this new medium of art, tended to dissociate photography from its mechanical image, critics and painters who denied the artistic authenticity of photography criticized its mechanicalness. The new genre of photographic art was suspended by the oppositional ideas between the mechanical and the organic. The discourse of touch in this period sensitively reflects this problematic relation between machine and art. Before moving on to the examination of other aspects of the discourse and imagery of touch in the Stieglitz group, in the next section, I will look at how the members of the Stieglitz group treat the question of the mechanicalness of photography by reading some essays that appeared in Camera Work.

3. The “mechanicalness” of Photography and the Artistic Sphere of the Hand

Since its inception, photography has been regarded as a “lower” genre of art in comparison with paintings for a variety of reasons. One of the criticisms that were repeatedly made was that taking a photograph was too mechanical a process to be considered an art. For example, Charles Baudelaire strongly criticized the bad influence of “photographic industry” on
art: “I am convinced that the badly applied advances of photography, like all purely material progress for that matter, have greatly contributed to the impoverishment of French artistic genius, rare enough in all conscience” (87). He thought that photography is the “mortal enemy” of paintings and warningly predicted that “it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether” (88). If not as radically antagonistic as Baudelaire, artists and poets in the late nineteenth century often expressed their skepticism about the artistic value of photography.

Even in the age of modernism, such a view was hardly uncommon. Like Max Weber, artists and art critics generally believed that genuine visual works of art should be free of anything mechanical. They believed that the painter’s gifted hands were the fundamental source of artistic creations. Mary Price notes that

In photography, the hand does not become the primary instrument of registering or creation. The eye is dominant in the way a photograph is conceived. The eye sees, the segment of reality is framed and isolated by a synaptic leap between eye and reality, the exposure of film to light by means of the instrument camera is activated, the transcription to film occurs: the agency of the hand is comparatively minor. (29)

People discredited the status of photography as an art because of the minor role the hand plays in it. The invention of the Kodak box camera in 1888, which made the medium of photography enormously popular, further dissociated the ingenious hand from the process of creation. Its famous slogan “You press the button, and we do the rest” sealed the impression that photography was too dependent on mechanical processes to be counted as an expression of individual talent.
As Price notes, Kodak “[assumes] the responsibility for assembly-line performance of the operations that previously had been done individually and personally and that represented operations of the hand” (30). Thus, Kodak’s invention made the process of mimetic reproduction decisively mechanical, and caused the modern problem of isolation between the physical hand and the creation of visual representation.

In an 1897 essay “The Hand Camera—Its Present Importance,” Alfred Stieglitz argued that the popularity of Kodak and its slogan led to “the beginning of the ‘photography-by-the-yard’ era” (65). Photography, which once required professional techniques and knowledge, now became a convenient device that anyone could use without knowing details of its mechanical structure. Although this essay emphasizes the technical merit of the hand camera, he later told that the widely circulated slogan of the Kodak camera “sickened” him (Twice a Year 93). The idea of the Kodak, its ease of use and the rapid development, strengthened the mechanical image of photography that Stieglitz struggled to dismantle through the works in his galleries and through his journal, Camera Work. When he spoke about his own works, he rarely forgot to mention the time and effort he spent producing them. Coburn’s selection of “Winter on Fifth Avenue” for his explanation of the “mental” value of photography was not arbitrary; in “The Hand Camera,” which Coburn should have read, Stieglitz writes that this picture was “the result of a three hours’ stand during a fierce snowstorm on February 22nd, 1893, awaiting the proper moment” (68). The wintry storm in the photograph increases the authenticity of the work, since at the time “it was considered impossible to shoot in blowing snow” (Bochner 10). In other words, the hardship that Stieglitz experienced was an implicit message of the work, confirming the skill required to be a professional photographer. The subject of “Winter on Fifth Avenue” also reflects Stieglitz’s intention to dissociate the genre of photography from its mechanical
image. Jay Bochner aptly observes that the subject of the work corresponds with Stieglitz’s aim of art:

That vitality, for both the driver and the image, feeds on the storm, which is, after all, a natural phenomenon, like the horses; storm and team together show their muscle against the city, or at least against that sense of the city which we imagine represents the successes of industry and of money. (11, italics mine)

For Stieglitz, the muscles of the horses symbolize the power and vitality of the American nation. As is emphasized by Bochner’s use the word “against” in this passage, Stieglitz’s efforts to expose the physiognomy of American nature were always linked to his steadfast negation of American industrialism and commercialism.

Aside from Coburn’s essay, Camera Work printed many essays that sought to establish the artistic value of photography. One of the most remarkable was a radical and influential essay by George Bernard Shaw, who at that time was an established playwright in Britain. As an active amateur photographer, Shaw reviewed many exhibitions of photography that were held in England, including the ones by Coburn. The essay “The Unmechanicalness of Photography” was published in a British journal, The Amateur Photographer, as an introduction to the London Photographic Exhibitions before being printed in a 1906 issue of Camera Work. As its title clearly indicates, Shaw here strategically subverts the clichéd presumption that “all photographs are necessarily mechanical, and all designs purely ‘artistic’” by demystifying the painter’s organic production of art: “The hand of the painter is incurably mechanical: his technique is incurably artificial” (20; 18). He thought that the traditional notion of “style” is suspicious since
it implies that the painter applies his method to his works “no matter how widely his subjects vary” (18). He then continues:

And it is because the camera is independent of this hand-drawing and this technique that a photograph is so much less hampered by mechanical considerations, so much more responsive to the artist’s feeling, than a design. It gives you a direct picture where the pencil gives you primarily a drawing. It evades the clumsy tyranny of the hand, and so eliminates that curious element of monstrosity which we call the style or mannerism of the painter…. (18-19, italics mine)

By consciously utilizing the clichéd words of aestheticism for his subversive purpose, Shaw destabilizes the conventional distinction between the hand and the machine. He does not simply favor photography over paintings; instead, he advances “the truth” that “neither a photograph nor a painting is necessarily ‘artistic’” (21). Shaw thus criticizes the people who categorically negate the artistic value of photography, insisting that the value of art is not dependent upon the means and tools of expression.

Shaw’s positive view of photography encouraged the young American artists in the Stieglitz group; they felt that the artistic value of their activities was authorized by a master of literary art. The collective enthusiasm of the group is evident in the fact that they frequently refer to Shaw’s satirical defense of photography in their essays in later issues of Camera Work. In order to express their appreciation for his arguments, they even printed an excerpt of Archibald
Henderson’s study of Shaw in Camera Work. Thus, Shaw instantly became an iconic champion of photography among the Stieglitz group. Edward Steichen’s photograph of Shaw that appeared in the 1913 issue of Camera Work was titled “The Photographer’s Best Model” (Fig. 2.6.). Much later, Alvin Langdon Coburn, who also published a portrait of Shaw in Camera Work, wrote words of “praise of the controversial dramatist and critic” in his autobiography (Fig. 2.7.; 36).

There is no doubt that Alfred Stieglitz was encouraged by Shaw’s “The Unmechanicalness of Photography,” since he was making continuous and strenuous efforts to show that photographic representations are “direct” and “unmechanical” modes of expression. One of the most celebrated photographs by him, “The Hand of Man,” shows his purposeful differentiation of the symbolic meaning of the hand (Fig. 2.8.). Despite the title, no hand appears in this picture. Instead, what dominates the photographed space of the work is the powerful image of a running locomotive giving off steam into the air. By entitling this image “The Hand of Man,” Stieglitz questions the boundary between machines and humans. Just as Emile Zola, the photographer’s favorite author, represents the incarnation of human desire in a running machine in The Human Beast, Stieglitz illustrates the vitality of the mechanical object through the energetic image of the locomotive. By associating organic imagery with an inorganic object, Stieglitz manifests his desire to make artwork out of the industrial landscape of New York City.

From the late 1910s, Stieglitz spent more energy exploring the definition of American art and promoting American artists, rather than introducing European avant-garde art. The question of “America” grew in significance to him as he relocated and renamed his gallery from “291” to “Intimate Gallery” (1925-29) and finally to “An American Place” (1929-46). In this process, Stieglitz’s resistance to the mechanical image of photography gradually turned into a broader program of opposition to the mechanicalness of America. But before moving on to interpret his
photography and his notion of “America,” I will look at writings by Stieglitz’s close friends, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom provided important viewpoints about the relation between America and machine, and between America and touch in the 1910s and 1920s.

4. America, Machine, and Photography: Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and William Carlos Williams

When Waldo Frank wrote that “America is the land of the Machine” in Our America (1919), he succinctly summarized the collective image of the country that occupied the mind of American artists in the early twentieth century (181). The artists and writers who gathered at Stieglitz’s gallery believed that their task was to establish the organic unity of art and life against the dominant presence of the Machine in the country. This section focuses on three contemporaneous writers, Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom were close friends of Alfred Stieglitz. In their writings, the values of art and the nation are closely associated with the organic and often tactile images; particularly, Rosenfeld and Williams subscribed to the idea that the sense of touch is the most important element of American art and history. I will comparatively read Frank’s Our America (1916), Rosenfeld’s Port of New York (1924) and Williams’s In The American Grain (1925), and consider the role that the sense of touch plays in their writings.

As a prominent critic of culture and literature in the 1910s and 20s, Waldo Frank was quite influential in New York intellectual society. Written upon the request of two editors of French journals, Gaston Gallimard of Nouvelle Revue Française and Jacques Copeau of Théâtre
du Vieux Colombier, Our America was presented as a book that introduces various aspects of American culture and literature to French audience. It attempts to define the character of “young” America in comparison with “old” Europe. The comparison of the American nation to a “youth” was commonly made by New York intellectuals of this period. A short-lived but influential literary journal, The Seven Arts, edited by the novelists and critics, James Oppenheim, Waldo Frank and Van Wyck Brooks, positively proclaimed in its first issue in 1916 that “It is our faith and the faith of many, that we are living in the first days of a renascent period, a time which means for America the coming of that national self-consciousness which is the beginning of greatness” (Editorial 52). In order to prepare for this new beginning, the young intellectuals in New York thought it necessary to subvert the dominance of machine culture through a cultural revolution, of which The Seven Arts was an important part. It was the urgent task of young Americans to define national culture, art and literature as something radically new and unique, especially at a time when Europe seemed to lose its cultural initiative due to the ongoing War.53

As mentioned earlier, the young American intellectuals believed that Walt Whitman’s poems embodied the natural sensibility of the young nation. In America’s Coming-of-Age, a 1915 work that greatly influenced Frank, Van Wyck Brooks writes that “Whitman laid the

53 Many American artists felt that the First World War occasioned liberation of American art from its European influence. For example, Marsden Hartley wrote when he stayed in New Mexico in 1918 that “The fetish of Paris … has been destroyed by the war” (“America” 341). In Adventures in the Arts, he similarly recognizes the immense impact of the War on art and calls for a new beginning: “Art, like life, has had to begin all over again, for the very end of the world had been made visible at last. The artist may look safely over an utterly new horizon, which is the only encouragement the artist of today can hope for” (57-58).
cornerstone of a national ideal capable … of releasing personality and of retrieving for our civilization, originally deficient in the richer juices of human nature, and still further bled and flattened out by the Machine Process” (121). In addition to his unconditionally positive appraisal of the poet laureate, it is important to note that Brooks draws from Whitman the idea that the Machine Process has suppressed the flexibility of human nature in America. Whitman thus symbolized the naturalness of America and was considered a savior of the “land of the Machine.” For the young intellectuals, Whitman was a poet who “for the first time, gave us the sense of something organic in American life” (112).

*Our America* was published at the height of such collective interest in the character of America. In this book, Frank expresses negative views about mechanical pragmatism in American society. He claims that while “the soil of Europe was still rich with the spiritual past” even in the process of modernization, America lost its “spirit” through industrial progress (67). Like Max Weber, Frank uses the word “spiritual” to refer to humanity’s primordial capability to perceive the organic extension of time and space; as he explains in a different passage, the spiritual is “man’s capacity to feel life as a whole” (20). He further describes how industry in America has suppressed this inherent human capacity:

The values of life lose their inherency, become subordinate to the abstract conception of Progress, in which the world is really posited as a sort of locomotive. Value, therefore, does not implicitly inhere in being. *Life is a

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54 Frank was deeply impressed by European “organicist” thinkers such as Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche as well as the revolutionary Russian novelists such as Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. See Ogorzaly 20-23.
*machine, and like a machine eternally produces.* In consequence, individual desire is bad, save insofar as it conforms with the Machine’s abstract activity. And of course Reason is the pattern of the Machine. Reason becomes the *Ding-an-sich*, the absolute that the pragmatists pretend so piously to abhor. Desire—the emotional and aesthetic and spiritual capacity of man—is Reason’s servant.

Experience, which is the sole true norm of culture, the sole measure of growth, disappears: and the vast affluence of human energy is channeled down (in theory) to turn the wheel of whatever mundane program the philosopher deems progressive. (27, italics mine)

Frank states that the Machine and the mechanical system of society suppress and thwart individual desire and artistic creativity in modern America. Quite impressively, he asserts that “life *is* a machine” in the country. In other words, life is abstracted by pragmatic “Reason” and loses its inherent diversity and richness. His metaphor of the locomotive as a modern model of the world may be profitably used as an anti-modernistic analysis of Stieglitz’s “The Hand of Man,” with which Frank was likely to be familiar with. The mechanical power of Reason enervates human’s creativity by delimiting the course of individual desire just as fixed rails determine the direction in which the locomotive runs. In *Our America*, Frank concisely maintains that industrialism and pragmatism caused “the mechanization of Desire,” that is, the mechanization of the most fundamental element of humanity that he believed should spring up from no source other than the human body (45). Frank observes that “The Americans go to the Machine for their pleasure as well as for their food. So he comes to despise the labor of his hand” (95). The “hand” here metonymically represents the human, just as it does in Stieglitz’s works,
being put into a sharp contrast with the “Machine.” For both Stieglitz and Frank, the humiliation of the human hand signifies the crisis of humans in the machine age.

The machine physically distorts humans and transforms their relations to their environments. Frank concludes that the modern age distorted the balance between the machine and the human: “The machine is simply an appendage to the human body. The normally balanced man had hands and feet of flesh. The extraverted man had hands and feet of iron. With swift logic, the machine became the god of the American world—both had a common parentage in Europe” (44). Frank thus characterizes the historical moment in which the “normal” balance between the machine and the human collapsed. In modern America, machines are no longer subordinate to the human body; instead, they have become an integral part of humans. In a chapter that describes modern life and culture in New York, Frank maintains that “To America, [the Machine] was the toy and the tool of childhood” (181). Frank thus compares America, especially New York City, to a child who grows up with the Machine.

*Our America* places Stieglitz’s photographic art within this context:

> America is the land of the Machine. In no other nation is the mechanical fact so close a part of life and growth. Other nations found the Machine in their maturity. To America, it was the toy and tool of childhood. Perhaps therefore it is not accident, that the powerful vision which is Stieglitz should first have found itself through a machine. (181)

Frank observes that Stieglitz’s art is a consequence of machine culture in America. Indeed, Stieglitz was born close to New York in 1864 and came of age when various machines became
an important part of life in America. Given his criticism of the Machine in American culture, it appears contradictory that Frank praises Stieglitz’s photographic art. However, Frank argues, unlike typical Americans who became subservient to the absolute rule of the Machine, Stieglitz “masters the dominant details of industrial life, and makes them serve the unifying vision of human spirit” (181). Frank describes Stieglitz’s gallery as a sort of haven for the disappearing “craftsmen,” the artists who had been “spiritually homeless” due to the suppressing machine culture, and praises “291” by calling it a “miracle”:

“291” is a religious fact: like all such, a miracle. It is an altar where talk was often loud, heads never bared, but where no lie and no compromise could live. A little altar at which life was worshiped above the noise of a dead city. Here was refuge, certain and solitary, from the tearing grip of industrial disorder. When you were heartsick with all the dominance of death, you came to “291” and you found life. (184)

It is clear that Frank privileges “291” by giving it a religious status.\(^5\) He emphasizes the spirit of craftsmanship in Stieglitz’s works in order to trivialize the inevitable mechanicalness of the

\(^5\) Frank intensely studied oriental mysticism and spiritualism. In 1923, along with Hart Crane, Jean Toomer, and Gorham Munson, he had contact with George Gurdjieff, a renowned leader of spiritualism in the 1910s and 1920s. As for Frank’s spirituality, see Ogorzaly 28-33.
Frank describes “291” as a sort of spiritual sanctuary amidst the “dead city” in which “life” can thrive, and apotheosizes Stieglitz whose “hands [were] forever working as if they were molding life” (185). As this emphasis on his “hands” implies, Frank recognizes Stieglitz as a modern craftsman whose works arise out of the ingenuity of his hands. In particular, Frank praises Stieglitz’s natural sensitivity in his “nude” pictures, which, he claims, “have won a field for the camera which I, for one, would have considered forever beyond its scope” (181). This “scope” of the medium corresponds to what Frank considers the realm of the “Machine.” Stieglitz transcends the limit of the medium by his “intense subjective interpretation of the human form” (181). Frank observes that Stieglitz’s works reclaim the physical dimensions of human beings that have been forgotten ever since society and culture were mechanized in America.

In a quite similar move, Paul Rosenfeld praises Stieglitz as a “great [affirmer] of life” in his 1924 work *Port of New York*, writing that “A tree, a barn, a bone, a cloud, have released the spirit in Stieglitz” (237). Using the same organic connotation of the word “spirit,” Rosenfeld, like Frank, describes Stieglitz’s work as inherently anti-mechanical. Through the book and some of his essays on the photographer, Rosenfeld insists that Stieglitz suggests the direction in which American modernism should move.

56 Sherwood Anderson, who frequently visited Stieglitz’s place in the early 1920s, also describes Stieglitz as a craftsman who “stands at the heart of the matter” against the age of machinery (216).

57 The earlier and much shorter version of the Stieglitz chapter of *The Port of New York* appeared in the April 1921 issue of *The Dial* as a response to Stieglitz’s “comeback” exhibition of the same year, in which the majority of his works on O’Keeffe were exhibited.
Paul Rosenfeld was a critic of literature, art and music. He graduated from Yale one year after Waldo Frank, and, through Frank, Rosenfeld came to be acquainted with many young intellectuals and artists in New York including Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne and Stieglitz. In particular, he had a lifelong friendship with Stieglitz; he frequented the photographer’s galleries and exchanged many letters with him. Stieglitz’s broad interests in art were certainly stimulated by Rosenberg’s wide range of knowledge. Rosenberg was thoroughly familiar with European literature, art, and music, and he wrote many essays about European modernists such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Igor Stravinsky. He was also a champion of contemporary American writers and poets, especially the ones affiliated with the Stieglitz Circle, such as Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom he discusses in *Port of New York*.

Rosenfeld’s writings often stress the value of “life,” and this emphasis is at least partly derived from D. H. Lawrence’s influence on him. Like Stieglitz and O’Keeffe, Rosenberg was a devout reader of Lawrence, to whom, as Sherman Paul puts it, he “accorded the highest praise” (xxi). In *Men Seen*, Rosenfeld praises the writer’s physical sensitivity, arguing that “all the senses are aplay all the time in him, it seems; aplay almost to the point of excess” (51). He insists that art should be informed by the physical reality of life, and that, of all contemporaneous writers, this was most brilliantly achieved by Lawrence; he maintains that Lawrence “beat the rhythm for his age, and the truth of life” (62). In *The Seven Arts*, he contributed essays under his pseudonym Peter Minuit and joined the collective appraisal of the value of “life,” writing in his essay on “291” and the Stieglitz group that “Life, life, a thousand times, is the important thing for Stieglitz” (64). Much later, Edmund Wilson aptly summarized Rosenfeld’s approach to the arts: he was a “romantic commentator on [the arts] who is also a commentator on life” (qtd. in
Paul xxxi). Indeed, the ideas and vocabulary that address the value of “life” fill the pages of *Port of New York*, forming a part of the collective imagination about the nexus between vitalism and modern nationalism.

One of Rosenfeld’s works, *Port of New York*, came out of his close friendship with the Stieglitz group. During the summer and fall of 1923, Stieglitz not only supported Rosenfeld by providing him with necessary resources but also read and commented on various stages of his drafts. Occasionally, Stieglitz even helped Rosenfeld to edit the work (Brennan 89). It is no wonder, therefore, that Rosenfeld’s arguments heavily reflect the collective discourse of the Circle. The Stieglitz group shared the vision that the machine totally changed human nature and devastated the capacity for artistic creation in the modern age. Indeed, the following passage from Rosenfeld’s *Port of New York* could be comfortably inserted into any part of Waldo Frank’s *Our America*:

The machine has turned men mechanical. It has forced them to forego experiment and the search for finer products for the sake of repeating incessantly the few gestures demanded of them by the arms of steel. It has forced them to repeat over and over again their old experiences, to numb subconsciously the desire for self-improvement through the improvement of craftsmanship; for men cannot serve both the master of greater and cheaper production and of finer and more durable work…. In America, particularly, has the machine sown decay. The human values desolved early in the history of the country; the civilization of the pioneers was erected upon the withholding of a certain sort of feeling from the work of the hands; and it was easier here than elsewhere for the machine to suppress in men
all religious sentiment for their tools and the materials upon which the tools performed labor. (245-46)

In the above passage, Rosenfeld contrasts handwork with the machine, criticizing the latter’s dominance in modern society. While Rosenfeld repeats what his fellow artists have already argued on various occasions, the passage succinctly expresses the collective argument about the relation between art and the machine. Rosenfeld deplores that machines dominate every detail of life in modern America: “During a century and a half, the race of machines has been enslaving man and impoverishing his experience” (245). As a consequence, “the warmth of the human hand” has been “withheld” (27). The question of touch is introduced into his work based on this dualism between the machine and the hand. Rosenfeld claims that American “men” do not know how to touch materials: “Men in touching materials had not touched them out of the secret need of coming to other men, of speaking and pouring forth something of which their heart was full, of uttering an everlasting “was hael!” to the great living substance of life” (27). In America, Rosenfeld insists, the act of touching does not generate intimate feelings; they touched things only for utilitarian purposes: i.e., for taking and holding them.

Rosenfeld privileges Stieglitz as a true artist who understands concrete tactile reality of the human body: “He has brought the lens close to the human epidermis, and given the pores, the fine hairs along the shin-bone, the veining of the pulse and the moisture of the upper lip” (238). Stieglitz’s lens makes possible a close contact with the human body, and reveals a hidden aspect of physicality to which humans have long been blind. Rosenfeld insists that in Stieglitz’s photographs every part of the body is treated seriously and in detail. He photographs “every portion of the persons of women, not alone on visages and hands and rears of heads, but on feet
naked and feet stockinged and shod, on ears and nostrils, on breasts and stomachs, thighs and buttocks, on navels, armpits, and the bones underneath the skin of collar and chest” (238). Such concrete, almost pornographic attention to carnal details were, Rosenfeld observes, directly related to the transcendental spirituality of life; they speak of what he calls—in Lawrence’s vocabulary—“the dark wet quick in man” (239).58

Stieglitz’s photographs, Rosenfeld continues, are filled with “the passion for all manifestations of life; the singing and soaring of spirit stretching to grasp the overwhelming presence afloat before it, and growing rarer, stronger, steelier pinions in reaching” (242). As the words “stretching,” “to grasp,” and “reaching” in the sentence suggest, Rosenfeld elucidates the photographer’s relations with photographed objects in tactile terms. Accordingly, the relation between the photographer and the audience also becomes intimate. In an earlier version of the essay that appeared in *The Dial*, Rosenfeld writes that Stieglitz’s “very sensitive records of human existence” are “so vivid and delicate … that one wants to touch them” (“Stieglitz” 398). The tactile sensitivity to details of objects in Stieglitz’s works provokes in the viewer a desire to touch them. Rosenfeld judges that the photographer is able to expose the innate vitality of things: “A spirit has given of itself to the objects, and spread through touch with them until it has held them all contained in its own blood” (269). He argues that Stieglitz’s photographs succeed in exposing the tactile spirit inherent in material things, and that this accomplishment distinguishes his art from the mere representations of things.

58 One could also find here a reference to Pound’s famous 1919 poem “In a Station of the Metro,” (“The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.”) too. Rosenfeld uses the Lawrentian noun “quick” in the phrase “quick of life” later in the essay (277).
Stieglitz produced tactile images of the human body through a “mechanical” medium, and by so doing overcame the modern dominance of machines over humans. Rosenfeld observes that the photographer “has used the machine in perfect obedience to the moving spirit. He has used it unmechanically” (245). While Rosenfeld probably borrowed the word “unmechanicalness” from Shaw’s essays on photography, their nuances slightly differ. Shaw purposefully overturned the common sense of the body as unmechanical when he states that a human body is more mechanical than a camera’s lens. Meanwhile, Rosenfeld thinks of the distinction between the mechanical and the unmechanical in phenomenological terms, that is, on the level of how humans perceive things. He reflects that the problem of the mechanicalness of modern society lies not in the machine itself but in the “mechanical use of the new implements,” which “has harmed the human psyche” (245). In fact, his appraisal of Stieglitz cannot be separated from his criticism of the modern man:

The lazy human being, forever asteer for methods of sparing himself the fatigue of brain-work, has discovered that although it is even more difficult to make sensitive the hand of steel than the hand of flesh, it is possible, nevertheless, to produce vast quantities of articles with machinery without applying brain-power to the processes of production. The machine is capable of repeating, an infinite number of times, a single gesture; and the monotony never wearies it. (245)

Modern technology thus makes men lazy. The man equipped with technological devices often willingly gives up the tactile capability of perceiving things, since this requires “brain-power.” But the loss of the relationship between the body and the brain is synonymous with the
mechanization of humans. Without thoughtful tactile labor, human behavior easily becomes monotonous and mechanical. Rosenfeld insists that the machine makes the act of production more automatic and less relevant to the human hand.

Rosenfeld argues that Stieglitz’s “unmechanical” use of “his machine” achieves a reversal of the relation between the machine and the hand: “Through his machinery, Stieglitz has been able to produce a gamut more delicate than the hand can draw” (239). “His machine” regenerates the tactile physicality of things which “the mechanical people of America” have lost (248). The photographer’s body, correspondingly, emerges as a vital sphere of relations: “Life appears always fully present along the epidermis of his body” (244). Rosenfeld describes the formulation thus: for Stieglitz, photography “is a philosophy of life” (248).

Frank’s and Rosenberg’s views of Stieglitz’s art cannot be fully understood without carefully examining the photographer’s numerous works exploring the female body around 1920. But before examining these photos, it is helpful to consider one more important contribution to the collective discourse of touch by yet another member of the Stieglitz group, William Carlos Williams.

As a poet who “almost became a painter” as he himself puts it, Williams was not only interested in visual art but also had a masterful understanding of it (Speaking 154). In particular, as Charles Altieri and Peter Halter convincingly discuss, Cézanne and some of Cubist painters such as Georges Braque and Juan Gris greatly influenced his view on art and contributed to form his poetics. In addition to essays on art and artists, he composed poems based on classical and modern paintings throughout his lifelong career. Biographical accounts of the poet tell us that he hesitated between the vocations of painter and poet even after he had published some of his
Although Williams was busy working as a medical doctor in Rutherford, New Jersey, he occasionally took a ferry to Manhattan and visited Stieglitz’s gallery. He sensed that he shared many views on art with the people who frequented Stieglitz’s gallery. For him, as for Frank, Rosenfeld, and Stieglitz, the sense of touch was not just a mode of physical perception, but was directly related to the problem of art and the definition of the American nation. Peter Halter points out that “one of the important notions that Stieglitz and Williams shared was that of the importance of touch,” and relates the tactile implication of his works with “an important aspect of the revolution in the visual arts” at the time, that is, the end of perspective drawing (149).

Among Williams’s works, the discourse of touch is most conspicuous in *In the American Grain* (1925), a book on American myth and history written at the time when his relationship with the Stieglitz group was closest. I will examine how Williams employs the discourse of touch in order to emphasize the organic integrity of American history.

Tracing American “heroes” from Red Eric of Greenland to Abraham Lincoln while placing a heavy emphasis on early history, this book completely subverts the Puritanical perspective on American history. In order to write this book, Williams took a one year sabbatical from his job starting in the summer of 1923, and he spent the rest of the year doing research with original sources “at the N. Y. Public Library in the American History Room” (*Letters* 187). After he felt he had done sufficient research, he went abroad to Europe with his wife and wrote most of the book during the first half of the year 1924. He incorporated lots of fragments of original

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59 Williams later reflected upon his life and wrote that “You must remember I had a strong inclination all my life to be a painter” (*I Wanted* 29).

60 We shall discuss the impact of non-perspective paintings on the discourse of touch in Chapter 4.
materials within the book and adapted his style of writing to the style of historical works. In a letter, Williams explained that he had “tried to write each chapter in the style most germane to its sources or at least the style which seemed to me appropriate to the material,” and regarded this work as “a study in styles of writing,” (Letters 187). This of course does not mean that the content of the book was of little importance for Williams; in fact, the work deeply reflects his personal views on America, history, violence and women.

Throughout the book, Williams emphasizes the importance of sensitivity to touch and of direct “contact” with the native soil, deploiring the domineering tradition of Puritanism in America, which, in his view, persistently prohibited the experience of touch and contact. He writes that “our resistance to the wilderness has been too strong. It has turned us anti-American, anti-literature. As a violent ‘Puritanism’ it breathes still” (115-16). Since Americans have so mechanically employed the Puritanical dogma of “purity” in life, Williams insists, they find “fear” and “terror” in the immediacy of touch. “Here, through terror,” Williams writes, “there is no direct touch; all is cold, little and discreet:—save just under the hide” (176). Americans are “trained never to possess fully but just to SEE” (175). As the capitalized “SEE” suggests, the opposition between seeing and touching not only structures his argument about human perception but also allegorically represents the two modes of understanding society, art and literature. Like other members of the Stieglitz group, Williams thought that Americans, due to their close historical contact with the Machine and Puritanism, had been alienated from the true experience of contact, which is the physical foundation of art and literature.

In the chapter “Père Sebastian Rasles,” Williams describes the difference between English and French missionaries, who were active in the New England area in the late seventeenth century. At the time, the French territory, led by the Jesuits, covered the upper
northeast corner of North America, while the English Puritans occupied the southern area. Between the opposing territories, the “Indians,” facing the two conflicting religious sects, witnessed the different attitudes of the British and French missionaries. On the one hand, Williams argues, a Puritan missionary from Britain lacks a physical understanding of Indians’ life. As Williams describes, although the British missionary can explain to natives the idea of Puritanism and its superiority to French Catholicism, he cannot accept their handshakes and kisses, which are their signs of appreciation, because of his fear of touching them. Williams deplores his attitude: “It is very ugly—and it is that which has persisted: afraid to touch!” (119).

On the other hand, Williams favorably describes the demeanor of a French Jesuit missionary, Père Sebastian Rasles (1657-1724), who ministered native inhabitants of Quebec and Illinois in New France. Williams describes Rasles as an affirmer of life because of his bravery and physical honesty, claiming that he “touched [the New World] nearer than his southern neighbors” (129). He thus praises the French missionary’s positive attitude to life and tactile understanding of the land’s spirit. Through his contrasting descriptions of the two missionaries, Williams illuminates the problem of Puritanical fear of touch that dominated the British Federation.

Protestants, however, became dominant in America. Since then, Williams argues, the immediate contact with “Indians” was lost: “From lack of touch, lack of belief. Steadily the individual loses caste, then the local government loses its authority; the head is more and more removed. Finally the center is reached—totally dehumanized, like Protestant heaven. Everything is Federalized and all laws become prohibitive in essence” (128). Thus, instead of enjoying physical understanding of others, Americans’ bodies have been dominated by inhuman and prohibitive laws. “Indians” were physically conquered and became subordinate to strict laws; Williams insists that “History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery”
In In The American Grain, Williams denounces the inhuman and discriminatory Puritanism pressed over “Indians” in America, and insists that this negative side of American history testifies to the nation’s lack of tactile understanding of others.

Because of the country’s ascetic Puritanism, Williams argues, sex has been badly repressed in America. As Frederick J. Hoffman points out as early as 1949, the collective discourse of anti-Puritanism in the 1920s was associated with an Americanized Freudian notion of “repression” (249). Like other young intellectuals of the 1920s who “decided that any force was evil which stood in the way of a full, wholesome, primitive expression of natural impulses,” Williams regarded repression as “the American illness” and insists that the absence of sexual contact with others led to the loss of the nation’s tactile sensibility (249). In the chapter “Jacataqua,” he idolizes the princess of the Abnaki tribe Jacataqua, who possessed a mixture of French and Indian blood. He describes her as an embodiment of “the potent sexuality of the New World” (B. Conrad, 132). For Williams, the beauty of the mixed blood princess is a representation and realization of the physical bounty of non-Puritanical America. He believes that the loss of encounters with such “primitive and direct” women anesthetized the Americans’ sensitivity to physical beauty and led to the collective adoration of virginity in America. Williams sarcastically claims that the loss of virginity for an unmarried girl “means everything” in America, since “purity” and virginity are equated in the country (187; 184). By emphasizing the value of touch, he tries to destroy the Puritanical valorization of virginity in America.

Of course, such a claim is unabashedly sexist, showing that his conception of the “primitive” and of “directness” is restricted by his heterosexual fantasy of the “pure woman.” Furthermore, “the INDIAN” is feminized in the text as a passive being who should receive intimate “touch” from “a great MAN” such as Rasles (121). Even in the group of white males
centered around Stieglitz, such discriminatory sexism and racism were rare. But both the
personification of America as a woman and the feminization of the primitive are perceivable in
various texts and images in the works of American Modernists. Williams, like them, believed
that the problem of (the female) sex was the problem of the nation and that the liberation of
American art was equivalent to the problem of how to liberate the sexuality of American women
through touch.

Williams shared with the other artists in the Stieglitz group the idea that the machine was
detrimental to the tactile sensibility. He insists that Americans associate with machines by
sacrificing their opportunities to have contact with others. In *Spring and All* (1923), he
maintains that what has motivated American people to invent and produce the machine is the
feeling of “fear,” which “robs the emotions” and increases “the gap between touch and thing”
(*Collected* 177). Therefore, he insists, “Machines were not so much to save time as to save
dignity that fears the animate touch” (177). He argues that Americans’ dependence on machines
essentially derives from a Puritanical attempt to avoid contact with things and others. The fear of
touch is the essence of American life and “law” that has motivated the nation to invest in
efficient machines. As a consequence, experience of touching has disappeared from everyday
life: “Our life drives us apart and forces us upon science and invention—away from touch. Or if
we do touch, our breed knows no better than the coarse fiber of football” (179). Williams’
argument becomes purposefully subversive when he claims that there is “something akin”
between “that jazz doze and the Puritan”; for him, “both removed from simplicity, really, and
touch” (180). Williams considers the difference between the old tradition of Puritanism and the

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61 For a detailed study on the relation between the machine and Williams’ poetics, see chapter 5
of Tichi.
new jazz movement to be less significant than the shared rejection of touch in both. In this series of arguments, his anger is palpable as he denounces the anti-tactile sentiments of Americans. The aim of his poems is clear: to regenerate the texture of things in the world. “You moderns!,” he exclaims near the beginning of *Spring and All* (1923), “it is death of poetry that you are accomplishing” (177). Williams believes that what is truly poetic should bring to the reader a sense of tactile physicality of things and human bodies.

Along these lines of thought, one can observe a surprising similarity in D. H. Lawrence’s arguments that I traced in the first chapter. It is true that, as I already mentioned, most members of the Stieglitz Circle were directly or indirectly influenced by Lawrence. But, in *In the American Grain*, Williams seems to use the notions of “machine,” “fear,” and “touch” exactly in the same way that Lawrence uses them in his novels and essays. In fact, a few scholars have discussed the potential influence of Lawrence’s works, especially of *Studies of Classic American Literature*, on Williams’s *In the American Grain*. In a 1959 article, Donald Davie analyzes Williams’s style of “interlarding” quotations from original resources with his narrative, and claims that “Almost certainly, I suppose, he learned this from Lawrence’s *Studies of Classic American Literature*” (227). By citing the passage that illustrates the Puritans’ fear of touch from the chapter “Père Sebastian Rasles,” Davie further discusses the presence of the “Lawrentian idea” and “Lawrentian vocabulary” in the work: “The ‘touching,’ the readiness to risk that intimacy, is made the basis of all that Williams claims for Rasles” (233). Later critics such as Thomas R. Whitaker and Bruce Clarke agreed with Davie, similarly discussing the presence of Lawrence’s influence in *In the American Grain*, although no one has verified how much
Williams was conscious of his debt. Of course, such reliance on “Lawrentian vocabulary” does not undermine the uniqueness of Williams’ work. But, one could say at least that the discourse of touch was shared with similar implications by these two writers in the early 1920s.

Although Williams’s awareness of Lawrence is not clear, Lawrence not only read In The American Grain but also wrote a favorable review titled “American Heroes” for the April 1926 issue of The Nation. He argues that Williams presents America not as a nation but as a local place that has its own roots. Lawrence was not troubled by the author’s personification of America as a “virgin,” saying, with a twist on a reference to John Keats, that “the unravished local America still waits vast and virgin as ever, though in process of being murdered” (258). The sense of urgency in the sentence seems to come from the vision, which Lawrence and Williams shared, that modern civilization was ruining the “virgin land” as well as human’s tactile sensitivity. Lawrence certainly noticed Williams’ focus on the sense of touch, writing:

There are two ways of being American; and the chief, says Mr. Williams, is by recoiling into individual smallness and insentience, and gutting the great continent in frenzies of mean fear. It is the Puritan way. The other is by touch; touch America as she is; dare to touch her! And this is the heroic way.

And this, this sensitive touch upon the unseen America, is to be the really great adventure in the New World. Mr. William’s book contains his adventure; and therefore, for me, has a fascination. (Introductions 258-59)

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62 Whitaker claims that “In the American Grain subtly enacts the movement toward which Lawrence pointed: it renders in its structure one version of that ‘mysterious, delicate process’ of embrace and integration” (78).
The passage clearly shows that Lawrence grasped William’s basic distinction between anti-tactile Puritanism and non-Puritanical tactility. Lawrence understands Williams as touching the most essential foundation of American history through the process of rewriting it. One should note that in 1920 Lawrence wrote an uplifting call to the American reader of The New Republic to be independent from European tradition and culture, saying that “Americans must take up life where the Red Indian, the Aztec, the Maya, the Incas left off …” (Studies 384). Lawrence likely found what he was calling for when he read In The American Grain. In the review, he writes that he is “only too thankful that Mr. Williams wrote this book (259). Although this does not mean that Williams wrote In The American Grain as a response to Lawrence’s call, since he already showed his interest in ancient America in Kora in Hell: Improvisations written in 1918, it is hard to think that he was completely unaware of the relevance of Lawrence’s interest in American primitives when he began composing his project.

Williams does not mention Stieglitz or any other contemporary artist in this work. But, as we have seen, he certainly joined the collective voice of the Stieglitz group against the crassness of American modern industrialism through his historico-mythological method as well as his vocabulary of touch. According to Williams’ Autobiography, Stieglitz was impressed with In the American Grain and “wrote enthusiastically to [him] about it”; Williams further reported that Stieglitz “even said it had given him the name, An American Place, when he moved to the new site for his gallery on Madison Avenue” (236). It is unknown to what extent Stieglitz felt the parallelism between Williams’ In The American Grain and his own photographic works. But Williams surely did. Later, for a collaborative work edited by Dorothy Norman, America and Alfred Stieglitz, which was published in 1934, Williams wrote an essay titled “The American Background,” which was completely different in nature from the other contributors’ more or less
celebratory essays on Stieglitz’s lifelong achievements. Apparently, Williams’ essay is not about Stieglitz; in the twenty four pages of the essay, Williams discusses Stieglitz only in the last two paragraphs. In the remaining spaces, he sketches American national “heroes” such as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson as well as American literary figures such as Poe and Emerson, by repeating the style he employed in *In the American Grain*. William’s intention in placing Stieglitz at the end of his historical narrative is clear: Williams thought that Stieglitz was a “truly American” inheritor of the great “American” tradition.

Though Williams’ style and method were quite different from Frank’s and Rosenfeld’s, he shared their vision of the organic society as well as their vocabulary of touch. In addition, these three writers shared a serious concern about the influence of modern technology on the tactile sensibility in America. Stieglitz’s photographs of women’s bodies simultaneously influenced and reflected the themes concerning technology, tactility and modernity in these contemporary writings. In the next section, I will look at how Stieglitz’s photographic images in the late 1910s and the early 1920s resound with the discourse of touch that Frank, Rosenberg, and Williams established through their writings, and examine the extent to which the sense of touch mediates various correspondences between images and words that the Stieglitz group produced during the period.

5. The Feminine and the Primitive in Stieglitz’s Photographs of Women’s Bodies

Waldo Frank’s and Paul Rosenberg’s comments on the physicality of Stieglitz’s works primarily refer to his photographs of Georgia O’Keeffe, whom Stieglitz came to know and very
quickly fell in love with in 1916. Up until then, most of Stieglitz’s photographs were about New York City, and his portraits had been limited to more or less conventional bust-up images of his friends. His encounter with O’Keeffe brought a radical change to his style. As Rosenberg illustrates, Stieglitz studied details of the female body, especially her hands, which is the physical instrument of her painterly creation. Close-up photographs of O’Keeffe’s hands show the extent to which the subtle curves and lines of fingers can express human emotions (Fig. 2.9. and Fig. 2.10.). Rosenfeld aptly comments that Stieglitz “has arrested apparently insignificant motions of the hands, motions of hands sewing, gestures of hands poised fitfully on the breast,

63 Richard Whelan’s biography makes clear that their first encounter had happened earlier than this year. O’Keeffe visited 291 few times in 1908 and once in December 1914 or January 1915 in order to see exhibitions, although Stieglitz did not recognize her until 1916 (372).

64 Prioritizing the “hand” and tactility in art was certainly not an idea unique to Stieglitz; Adam Jolles’s recent article about the tactile in French Surrealism, which genealogically traces the postcolonial implications of touch in the works of such artists as Man Ray, Alberto Giacometti and Tristan Tzara, quotes an important passage from Henri Focillon’s 1930 book The Life of Forms in Art: “Knowledge of the world demands a kind of tactile flair. Sight slips over the surface of the universe. The hand knows that an object has bulk, that it is smooth or rough, that it is not soldered to heaven or earth from which it spears to be inseparable. Surface, volume, density and weight are not optical phenomena. Man first learned about them between fingers and in the hollow of his palm” (Focillon 170; qtd. in Jolles 33-34). This statement has much in common with modernist discourse of touch which primarily goes against the Western tradition of ocularcentrism; here, the sense of touch is conceived of as a mode of perception that has a more intimate relationship with the physicality of things than other human senses.

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motions of hands peeling apples” (“Stieglitz” 399). Indeed, images of O’Keeffe’s hands that engage with a variety of movements represent their organic vitality, plasticity, and sexuality, contrasting his series of photographs of New York City, which are dominantly composed of rigid lines of solid skyscrapers.

If Stieglitz’s photographs of New York City capture the presence of machines and technology in the urban environment, those of O’Keeffe’s flexible hands and fingers imply the unity of Nature and the human body. Through her body, Stieglitz discovered a way to express physical reality via photography. In a letter to Arthur Dove, Stieglitz writes that “O’Keeffe is a constant source of wonder to me—like Nature itself” (qtd. in Eisler 185). In a 1921 photo, her gentle grasp of grapes makes a harmonious silhouette, emphasizing a seamless continuity between the fruit and her hand (Fig.2.11.). Her artworks were also a part of Nature; Stieglitz and his fellow artists considered her paintings to be direct outcomes of her intimate “contact” with Nature. One of the earlier photographs of O’Keeffe, “O’Keeffe at 291,” captures her hands touching a spiral shape in her painting Blue I, suggesting a strong relation between her body and her art (Fig.2.12.). Referring to this image, Ann Prentice Wagner writes that “This touch of fingers on paper became parallel to the emotional thrill of flesh contacting flesh” (362). Hands are central even in her portraits; in a 1918 portrait of O’Keeffe (Fig.2.13.), for example, the focus is not so much placed on her face as on her fingers. What the artists of the Stieglitz group called a “spiritual tactility,” which had been invisible as shown in Stieglitz’s 1902 photograph “The Hand of Man,” now became incarnated through the flesh of Georgia O’Keeffe, an objective instantiation of their idea of the organic. In a 1924 letter to Sherwood Anderson, Stieglitz writes that “I do know every living and ‘dead’ soul. Each moment has its glory—its pain. And if I can make a photograph hold some of that for me perhaps that’s all the ‘tangibility’ I have a right to
hope for” (Stieglitz 210). Stieglitz’s comment shows a close association between tactility and spirituality, echoing Weber’s and Williams’ texts. He believed that his artworks could transcend the boundary between life and death, capturing the “spirit” that exists in both. In a way that anticipates Henri Cartier-Bresson, he claims that photography is an art of decisive “moment,” wherein he believes the sense of touch is embedded.

Stieglitz’s interest in physicality is not neutral in terms of gender; far from it. His notion of “tactile spirituality” has to do with his heterosexual desire. The characteristics of Stieglitz’s O’Keefe portraits become clear when comparing them with his portraits of male figures such as “Arthur Dove” (1915) and “Waldo Frank” (1920) (Fig.2.14. and Fig.2.15.). These portraits of men present traditional portraiture of individual “persons.” Their eyes gaze in the direction of the photographer, suggesting their positive and strong personalities. In these photographs, there is an implicit but conventional premise that eyes are windows of the soul. Clearly, the photographer is not so much interested in their body as he is in their persons. In contrast, most of his photographs of female figures, including O’Keeffe, do not focus on their eyes, which are, unlike the strong, willful eyes of male individuals, often aimlessly and dreamily looking into the air (as in Fig. 2.13.). Obviously, not eyes but hands, not the sense of vision but the sense of touch, are associated with femaleness in Stieglitz’s photographs. Even in rare occasions where O’Keeffe’s eyes are directed toward the camera, her hands are always just as expressive as her eyes; in a 1918 close-up photograph of her, for example, her hands which are covering part of her face, decisively affect the entire impression of the image (Fig.2.16.).

Thus, a comparison between Stieglitz’s O’Keeffe portraits and his photos of male figures reveals a fundamental duality between the masculinity of eyes and the femininity of hands in his imagination. Lewis Mumford later characterized Stieglitz’s photography as a sort of sexual
intercourse, saying that “sex was primarily the realm of tactile values. Stieglitz was to discover these values and intensify them in the photography” (56). Mumford insists that when Stieglitz photographs a woman’s body, his camera becomes an extension of his body, and the act of photography becomes a sexual act. This is not merely Mumford’s sexually biased view on Stieglitz’s photographs of O’Keeffe; Stieglitz himself acknowledged such interpretations of his photographs. Regina Lee Blaszczyk notes that Stieglitz was influenced by a popularized discourse of Freudian theories about sex and gender, and quotes a passage from Stieglitz’s 1919 essay “Women in Art,” which most exemplarily shows the photographer’s view of the difference between the man and the woman: “Woman feels the World differently than Man feels it…. The Woman receives the World through her Womb. That is the seat of her deepest feeling. Mind comes second” (233). Stieglitz, like D. H. Lawrence, thus essentializes the female body, especially the womb, as an existence that has a perceptual contact with the world. His clear-cut dualism between the rational and intellectual man versus the emotional and instinctive woman is reflected on the difference between his photographs of men and women. His “tactile” images of female bodies clearly came out of this gender dualism.

If the eyes in Stieglitz’s photographs of male figures signify their personalities, the choreographic placement of O’Keeffe’s body rather displaces the idea of her personal identity, suggesting an inherent impersonality within the personal. Referring to a nude photograph of O’Keeffe’s bony body, Jay Bochner writes that her body is “out of personality… as if it does not have to be any single woman” (233). Although Stieglitz essentialized female eroticism as the “truth” of a physical life, his photographs of O’Keeffe often expose excess of physicality that cannot be reduced to her femininity or sexuality. Stieglitz’s photographs of her hands often seem to address the plastic and organic capability of human body in general. Bochner aptly illustrates
the characteristic of these images in comparison with the typical Surrealist image of the fragmented body (236). Although both Surrealists and Stieglitz thematized the impersonality of the personal in the figure of hand, Surrealists’ images of fragmented bodies emphasize the dissociation of the body from nature in a shocking manner. In contrast, Stieglitz’s works on parts of the female body imply their potential unity with Nature. “[Stieglitz] has felt,” Rosenfeld writes, “the life of every portion of the body of women” through his photographs (“Stieglitz” 397). Stieglitz’s photographs represent female hands as if they had their own lives. By photographing O’Keeffe’s hands, he showed their direct contact with the impersonal Nature, which had been lost in the mechanical modern society.

Such a gender division between mechanical masculinity and organic femininity leads to further associations between the “female” and the “primitive,” which Marianna Torgovnick discussed in her now classic *Primitive Passions*. Two photographs of Claudia O’Keeffe, Georgia’s younger sister, taken in 1922, assert the close relation between the woman and the primitive (Fig.2.17. and Fig.2.18.). Both pictures capture the woman deeply absorbed in intimate contact with a primitive sculpture, evoking their unity. In order to emphasize the tactile quality of these photographs, Stieglitz carefully de-emphasizes elements associated with eyes in these works; in the first photograph, her eyes are firmly closed, and, in the second, they are excluded from the photograph’s frame. The character of these photographs becomes clear when comparing them with Clara E. Sipprell’s photograph of Max Weber, which we have already examined (Fig. 4). While a similar prop is used in Sipprell’s work, there is a critical distance between Weber and the sculpture in the photograph. His appreciative gaze at the primitive sculpture suggests his

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65 “The mask was possibly exhibited at 291 in ‘Statuary in Wood by African Savages. The Root of Modern Art,’ held from 6 April to 6 May 1914” (Greenough, 439).
sympathy with, and understanding of, the archaic object; however, he remains a well-clothed gentleman who cannot ultimately become a part of the primitive. Such distance does not exist between Claudia O’Keeffe and the primitive sculpture in the photographs. She does not look at the sculpture but tightly holds it to her naked body. From the beginning, Stieglitz seems to say, they are fundamentally one and the same.

The association between the “female” and the “primitive” presented here reminds us of Man Ray’s much more celebrated work of the same motif, *Noire et Blanche* (1926), in which the woman—“Kiki,” Ray’s Parisian lover—similarly closes her eyes and puts her left hand on the top of a primitive sculpture. The similarity of this photograph to Stieglitz’s photographs of Claudia O’Keeffe proves that the ideas that the feminine is the primitive and the primitive is the feminine were, if politically incorrect from today’s viewpoint, widely accepted among the Modernist artists in this period. However, the difference is just as important as the similarity. Compared with Stieglitz’s photographs, Man Ray’s photograph is much more formalistic; the woman’s face is juxtaposed with the primitive sculpture of a face. It is clear that Ray purposefully “placed” these two faces side by side on the same table for a visual effect. This “placing” of the two faces is at once physical and conceptual; Ray juxtaposed the organic with the inorganic on the same plain. In this sense, Ray faithfully observes the Surrealist principle of situating “chance meeting” of different objects, heavily relying on the viewer’s visual perception. Stieglitz’s works do not aim at attaining a shocking effect by photographing the woman and the sculpture. Instead, as Claudia O’Keeffe’s relaxed posture suggests, he tried to show that the woman is essentially one with the primitive.

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Torgovnick also compares Stieglitz’s series on O’Keeffe and Man Ray’s *Noire et Blanche*. See *Primitive*, 122-3.
Although what Claudia O’Keeffe holds in her bosom is an African sculpture, the notion of the primitive in the image corresponds with the Whitmanian ideal of the organic culture that the Stieglitz circle had long pursued for establishing American art. “Return” to the Primitive, which in fact was a movement invented by the Modernists, was an obsession of the group that fought against mechanical society and the Puritanical tradition. Stieglitz identified O’Keeffe with America, or rather with the unique origin of America. In a letter dated September 5, 1923, Stieglitz wrote to Paul Rosenfeld, who was then writing Port of New York:

[O’Keeffe] is American. So is Marin. So am I. Of course by American I mean something much more comprehensive than is usually understood—if anything is usually understood at all!—Of course the world must be considered as a whole in the final analysis. That’s really a platitude—so self-understood. But there is America.—Or isn’t there an America. Are we only a marked down bargain day remnant of Europe?—Haven’t we any of our own courage in matters “aesthetic”?

(Alfred 212)

This letter, like others in this period, attests Stieglitz’s adamant nationalism as well as his loss of enthusiasm for the contemporary European art. In Intimate Gallery (1925-29) and American Place (1929-1946), he mainly exhibited works of American artists, in particular the three artists, O’Keeffe, Marin, and Dove.\(^67\) There is no doubt that O’Keeffe, the embodiment of America, was

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\(^67\) The announcement for every exhibition read, “The Intimate Gallery will be used more particularly for the intimate study of Seven Americans: John Marin, Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur G. Dove, Marsden Hartley, Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, and Number Seven” (qtd. in Wilson 748).
one of principle reasons for his turn to American nationalism. As Connor notes, Stieglitz repeatedly said to his friends that “Georgia IS America” (188). According to a biography, he was pleased to know that O’Keeffe “had never been to Europe” (Whelan 373). For Stieglitz, O’Keeffe was a pure American, uncontaminated by “that damned French flavor” (Alfred 212). Stieglitz imagined that her nude body was America’s body in the sense that Whitman illustrated in his poems, identifying the body with the nation. To take her photography was, for him, a way to touch the primitive stratum of America, sexually.  

Seemingly, Rosenfeld, the most faithful ally of Stieglitz, understood this psychological process in his photographs of O’Keeffe’s hands; in each of them, he writes, “[Stieglitz] has found a symbol of himself” (“Stieglitz” 399). Borrowing a concept of Jacques Derrida, a series of photographed images O’Keeffe’s hands functions as “supplements” to the imaginative physicality of photographic art. Lines and curves of her hands provided the “organic truth,” the sense of immediacy and primitiveness that lacked in the dominantly visual medium of

The nationalistic character of the gallery is obvious in this manifesto. For the list of exhibitions, see Norman 232-38.

Stieglitz’s camera was often compared to a male organ. As Marcia Brennan points out, sympathetic commentators on Stieglitz such as Waldo Frank, Paul Rosenfeld, and Sherwood Anderson often viewed “the organic, even phallic, connection between Stieglitz and his camera as an antidote to the mechanized sexuality” (67). For him, photographing was “a procreative activity” (67).

Derrida uses the notion of “supplement” in many different texts for dismantling the metaphysics of ontological presence. This is most strongly demonstrated in Of Grammatology, especially in the section “The Supplement of (at) Origin.”
photography. And this “truth” functioned as agency of Stieglitz’s creation of truly “American” art. As an embodiment of the organic and the primitive, O’Keeffe represented what Stieglitz had wanted to attain long before he first encountered her, and made possible a sort of photographic expression that he had long wanted to achieve.

Certainly, this is Stieglitz’s egoistic identification of femaleness with his idealization of the nation. Although I do not agree with the view that Stieglitz “exploited” O’Keeffe—she often expressed her indebtedness to Stieglitz—, his sensual approach to O’Keeffe’s body certainly invited sexist interpretations of her paintings as well as her nude images in Stieglitz’s photographs. Indeed, Stieglitz’s nude photographs of O’Keeffe importantly affected the way in which her works were interpreted. As Marilyn Hall Mitchell points out, essays about O’Keeffe’s works written in the 1920s, mostly by the male critics of the Stieglitz group, never failed to discuss the sexual symbols in and implications of her works. Mitchell illustrates the relation between the female painter and the male artists in the 1920s Stieglitz’s Circle by citing an interesting reflection of O’Keeffe’s: “At first the men didn’t want me around. They couldn’t take a woman artist seriously. I would listen to them talk and I thought, my, they are dreamy. I felt much more prosaic but I knew I could paint as well as some of them who were sitting around talking” (Seiberling 52). She listened to the male critics, who talked about her “poetic” sensibility while ignoring her presence in the same room; in a way, O’Keeffe simultaneously occupied the center and the margin of the community of artists.70 This episode illuminates the

70 Biographer of O’Keeffe, Roxana Robinson argues that “Feminism was something O’Keeffe had supported steadily throughout her life,” and cites the painter’s letter to a sculptor, Malvina Hoffman, in which O’Keeffe writes that feminism “is the only cause I get much interested in outside my own work” (508). See Robinson 508-10.
limitation of their “dreamy” ideal of the “feminine,” nor did their notion of the “primitive” come to be a part of their real life. Stieglitz never visited Taos, and other members of his circle made only temporary excursions to “the most American place,” as Rosenfeld called it when he visited there in 1926 (By Way 222). Meanwhile, O’Keeffe lived the latter half of her life in Northern New Mexico, whose environment profoundly informed her art. In spite of their appraisal of the primitive value of America, the male artists remained city boys.

Such a collective fantasy about women significantly qualifies the revolutionary potentiality of the Stieglitz’s group’s perspectives on touch. His photographs addressing tactile sensuality flourished in the years during the height of Stieglitz’s relationship with O’Keeffe. As their relationship cooled down around 1922, the number of Stieglitz’s photographs of O’Keeffe significantly decreased. As if replacing them, Stieglitz started taking photographs of clouds, one of the most intangible objects in the natural world. He compared abstract figures of natural objects to music, and titled his 1923 works Songs of the Sky (Fig.2.20.). In “How I Came to Photograph Clouds,” Stieglitz states that clouds “were most difficult to photograph—nearly impossible” (235). He writes that he took on this difficult task in order to “find out what I learned in 40 years about photography,” and continues, “Through clouds to put down my philosophy of life—to show that my photographs were not due to subject matter—not to special trees, or faces, or interiors, to special privileges, clouds were there for everyone—no tax as yet on them—free” (237). Stieglitz believed that clouds were not only attractive as a subject matter but also appropriate for demonstrating his democratic ideal, for everyone could watch them and no one could purchase them. Whelan records Stieglitz’s saying that his cloud photos were “different from anything the eye has seen in any medium” (“Annotations” 238). Through his
photographic works, Stieglitz wished to expose the viewer to aspects of clouds that had not been perceived by anyone else.

Despite Stieglitz’s positive comments on his cloud photos, one cannot help but feel the sense of emptiness in these works, especially when compared with the O’Keeffe series. Instead of tactile intimacy and the vigorous sense of physicality, the photographs of clouds present insurmountable distance as well as a lack of physicality. Bochner suggests the pessimistic element in Stieglitz’s cloud photos by citing Nancy Newhall who was to be a famous critic of photography. Newhall records that she heard Stieglitz saying at his gallery that “All these things have death in them…ever since I realized that O’Keeffe couldn’t stay with me” (Bochner 275; Newhall 108). O’Keeffe’s actual death did not occur in Stieglitz’s lifetime; she outlived Stieglitz by four decades. But ever since he knew that “she couldn’t stay” with him, his photographic art assumed an awareness of mortality. From the late 1920s, O’Keeffe spent half a year in New Mexico. Ironically, the more closely O’Keeffe came to be tied with the primitive culture of the Southwest, the less meaningful Stieglitz’s imaginary vision of O’Keeffe as an embodiment of America proved to be. He kept photographing her, but tactile sensuality would forever disappear from his photographs of O’Keeffe after 1923.

Correspondingly, Stieglitz’s idealistic conception of “America” was also slowly dying. His pessimism is already observable in his 1923 photograph, “Spiritual America,” which captures an image of a horse tightly harnessed and cruelly gelded. The title of the photograph was intended ironically, since the photograph portrayed the organic value being suppressed by the inorganic system in America. According to Stieglitz’s comments on the photograph as reported by Dorothy Norman, the idea for this photograph occurred to him when he witnessed stallions waiting at an intersection at the midst of Paris exposing “their penises swaying half-
erect” (Norman Introduction 23). He told to Norman that he was exhilarated by this image of the masculine vitality and regretted that he did not bring his camera. Reflecting on American horses, he deplored that “In New York such a thing would not be permitted. All the horses in the city are geldings” (Norman Introduction 23). He saw in gelded American horses the fate of the nation under strict restrictions and Puritanical ideas. This photography also suggests the end of the period of his life, in which the act of taking photographs can be equated with sexual intercourse.

According to Greenough and Hamilton, in the 1930s “Stieglitz felt that he had failed.” Most of the pictures taken in this period show “the cool and impersonal skyscrapers of New York City” (214). Although New York cityscapes had been some of his major motifs, works in the 1930s expressed the dark realities of city life: dirty and cracked buildings represent suffocating atmosphere of the city (Fig. 2.22.). While earlier photographs of New York City such as “Two Towers—New York” (1911) represent the dialectical relation between nature and skyscrapers with the implication of the former’s ultimate victory (Fig. 2.23.), elements of nature were typically excluded from the framework of photographs from the 1930s. Tellingly sad and lonely, these photographs seem to imply the defeat of Stieglitz’s long struggle against the machine culture. His pessimism derived at least partly from negative criticism of his art and activities by some artists in the 1930s such as Thomas Craven and Thomas Hart Benton. While Stieglitz’s photographs and the works of his fellow artists were canonized in a series of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and other prestigious places, avant-garde Modernism now faced the wave of social realism and Regionalism of the 1930s. Stieglitz’s lack of interest in
actual politics was denounced, and his Jewish identity was disparaged by the anti-Semites of the age.\footnote{For detailed sketch of negative views on Stieglitz Circle from the 1930s to the 1950s, see Brennan, 202-271.}

Sue Davidson Lowe, a grandniece of the photographer, vividly remembers Stieglitz’s words of disappointment with America in the mid 1930s. When she and Stieglitz talked about the political situation in Germany, namely, the threatening power of the Nazis and Hitler, Stieglitz suddenly started criticizing America. She was taken aback by his sudden eruption of anger as well as his strange argument that America “ruined” the Great Germany:

Now, see here! he shot back. Pay attention; I’ve just told you. America is a whore. Her pursuit of money, of possessions, will destroy the world. I saw it when I came back in ’92; I wept with rage and sorrow. Eleven years, dreaming of my return. To find what? Only dollar signs. People who had money, and people who wanted it. Squalor. Filth. Emptiness. Bigness. Success. Garbage! Do you know what America’s biggest export is? Greed. (335)

He describes how he felt when he came back from his long sojourn in Germany to his homeland in 1892. He was deeply disappointed by the absence of an artistic atmosphere in America and angry with the greediness of the American people. However, his words are also a comment on the atmosphere of America in the 1930s, in which the country was struggling to get out of its economic Depression. The assertion that “America is a whore” shows the rupture of Stieglitz’s
idealized America as a natural “virgin.” The atmosphere in 1930s America made Stieglitz feel that he had failed in his artistic fight against American capitalism.

Both Stieglitz’s relationship with O’Keeffe and the depressing atmosphere of the age affected his communication of tactile sensibility through photography. Stieglitz’s photographs of O’Keeffe during this period often capture her with a Ford “V-8” model that she purchased. Although it would be too excessive to say that these photographs represent his pessimism, it is clear that O’Keeffe was not a pure embodiment of the organic for Stieglitz anymore. A 1929 photo of Georgia O’Keeffe with a new Ford in the background captures the sense of distance between the photographer and the model, which had never existed in his earlier photographs (Fig. 2.24.). In this photograph, O’Keeffe, now a middle aged woman, seems to be on the side of the machine instead of on the side of nature. A 1933 photograph titled “Hand and Wheel” underscores even more strongly the association between O’Keeffe and the car (Fig. 2.25.). Her hand that used to be associated with organic objects such as grapes now has contact with a part of a machine; while the car was a symbol of liberation for O’Keeffe, Stieglitz’s “The Hand and Wheel” marks the end of his expression of tactile physicality through O’Keeffe’s body. It is true that Stieglitz took photographs of Dorothy Norman’s body in the 1930s, but, as one can clearly see in a 1931 photograph of her hands, her body never captures the air of flexibility and dynamism that O’Keeffe’s body had. Unlike O’Keeffe’s hands, Norman’s hands look neat and submissive; they do not show any sign of vital flexibility (Fig. 2.26.).

However, despite these pessimistic implications in Stieglitz’s photography in the 1930s, he never gave up his belief that what is most valuable in the art of photography directly derives from the sense of touch. In 1931, upon a request to reproduce his photographs, he wrote an interesting letter of rejection:
My photographs do not lend themselves to reproduction. The very qualities that
give them their life would be completely lost in reproduction. The quality of touch
in its deepest living sense is inherent in my photographs. When that sense of
touch is lost, the heartbeat of the photograph is extinct. In the reproduction it
would become extinct—dead. My interest is in the living. That is why I cannot
give my permission to reproduce my photographs. (*Twice a Year* 109-10, italics in original)

While photography is inherently reproducible, this passage suggests that Stieglitz never thought
so. He believed that the “quality of touch” inherent in the art of photography “would be
completely lost in reproduction.” Reproduction duplicates only the visual aspects of things, while
“Stieglitz’s endeavor” was, as Lewis Mumford put it, “to translate the unseen world of tactile
values as they develop between lovers not merely in the sexual act but in the entire relationship
of two personalities—to translate this world of blind touch into sight, so that those who could
merely see might reach, through the eye, the level of feeling” (57). The word “translation,”
indeed, precisely captures the nature of Stieglitz’s works. His photographs were a series of
efforts to translate the tactile into the visible, and he thought that the impressions of the
foundational physicality of experience would never be eliminated from their visual
representations as long as they were faithfully translated by the hand. Both Stieglitz and
Mumford thought that mechanical reproductions lacked this dimension of translation; throughout
the 1930s, however, they witnessed the decline of the tactile sensibility in American life and art.
It is not a coincidence that Stieglitz’s collaborators such as Weber, Frank, Rosenfeld, and Williams, in one way or another, emphasized the importance of touch in the late 1910s and the early 1920s. Although the sense of touch is a universal aspect of the human condition, the discourse of touch belongs to this specific period in the context of American modernism and was closely linked with the problem of the American nation as well as with the image of women. Through the discourse and image of touch, the Stieglitz group collaboratively attempted to relate art to life and to resist the age of the machine and mechanical reproduction.
Figures

Fig. 2.1. Georgia O’Keeffe *The Lawrence Tree*, 1928

Fig. 2.2. Marsden Hartley, *Mont-Saint-Victoire*, 1927.
Fig. 2.3. Max Weber, *African Sculpture [Congo Statuette]*, 1910.

Fig. 2.4. Clara E. Sipprell, *Max Weber with African Sculpture*, 1916.
Fig. 2.5. Alfred Stieglitz, *Winter on Fifth Avenue*, 1893.

Fig. 2.6. Edward Steichen, *The Photographer’s Best Model*, *Camera Work*, 42-43, 1913.
Fig. 2.7. Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Bernard Shaw*, *Camera Work*, 21, 1908.

Fig. 2.8. Alfred Stieglitz, *The Hand of Man*, 1902.
Fig. 2.9. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O’Keeffe—Hands*, 1918.

Fig. 2.10. Alfred Stieglitz, *Hands and Thimble*, 1922.
Fig. 2.11. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe—Hand and Grapes*, 1921.

Fig. 2.12. Alfred Stieglitz, *O'Keeffe at 291*, 1917.
Fig. 2.13. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O’Keeffe*, 1918.

Fig. 2.15. Alfred Stieglitz, *Waldo Frank*, 1920.

Fig. 2.16. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O’Keeffe*, 1918.
Fig. 2.17. Alfred Stieglitz, *Claudia O’Keeffe*, 1922.

Fig. 2.18. Alfred Stieglitz, *Claudia O’Keeffe*, 1922.
Fig. 2.19. Man Ray *Noire et Blanche*, 1926.

Fig. 2.20. Alfred Stieglitz, *Songs of the Sky*, 1923
Fig. 2.21. Alfred Stieglitz, *Spiritual America*, 1923

Fig. 2.22. *From An American Place Southwest*, 1931
Fig. 2.23. *Two Towers—New York*, 1911

Fig. 2.24. Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O’Keeffe*, 1929.
Fig. 2.25. Alfred Stieglitz, *Hand and Wheel*, 1933.

Fig. 2.26. Alfred Stieglitz, *Dorothy Norman*, 1931.
Chapter 3

Tactility and Anachronism:

Walter Benjamin and the Modern Transformation of Touch

I. Introduction: The Sense of Touch in Walter Benjamin

In Walter Benjamin’s late texts on aesthetics and politics, the sense of touch is associated with modern forms of art such as Dadaism and film. In “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility,” Benjamin insists that “From an alluring visual composition or an enchanting fabric of sound, the Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile. It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [taktisch] quality” (3: 119). 72 Dadaism is an immediate and violent form of expression comparable to “a missile,” which leaves no room for “contemplative immersion” (3: 119).

All quotations from the 4-volume of *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* are given parenthetically with a volume number and a page number. References to the Convolutes of *The Arcades Projects* are likewise indicated parenthetically, according to Convolute number. Page numbers of *Gessamelte Schriften* (abbreviated GS) are given only when referring to the original German in quotations. Unless otherwise noted, italics and other emphases in quotations are in the original.

72 There are three versions of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility,” of which I shall use the second (first typescript) version in *Selected Writings* Vol.3 (1936), which Benjamin originally wished to see in print. For the differences between the script versions, see GS vol.7, 681-2 and Hansen “Room-for-play.”
Benjamin finds the same tactility in film: “The distracting element in film is also primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator” (3: 119). The expression “percussive effect” underscores the mesmerizing nature of film that elicits a mechanical reaction from the spectator. In an endnote to the essay, Benjamin observes that film has an “immediate” relationship not only with the spectator but also with people’s lives: “Film is the art form corresponding to the pronounced threat to life in which people live today. It corresponds with profound changes in the apparatus of apperception” (3: 132). Benjamin argues that Dadaist art and films directly reflect a “pronounced threat to life” in the modern society in which the distinction between human life and the machine blurs.

In one of his final essays, “On Some Motifs of Baudelaire” (1940), Benjamin gives further consideration to the relation between human perception and film: “In a film, perception conditioned by shock [chockförmige Wahrehmung] was established as a formal principle. What determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the same thing that underlies the rhythm of reception in the film” (4: 328). This mechanical “rhythm,” which controls the human body rather than harmonizes with it, certainly echoes the oppressive atmosphere of his contemporary society. The immediate impact of film on the viewer, as Benjamin argues in the Artwork essay, “corresponds” with the Nazis’s totalitarian manipulation of the masses. The crisis of the perceptual sense that films laid bare and fixated on reflected a larger crisis in society, that is, the sensational and psychological manipulation of aesthetics by fascist Germany (3: 122). Benjamin illustrates the film’s mesmerizing capability of reducing sensoria into variations of the

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73 This is hardly Benjamin’s original idea but one of the ideas dominant in discourse about film in the early twentieth century. Henri Bergson, for instance, criticizes cinema because of its false representation of movement in chapter 4 of Creative Evolution (1907).
single sense of touch, which Western civilization has regarded as the most primitive and animalistic of the five senses. Technological reproduction thus directly affects people’s perceptions, transforming them into receptors that are at once mechanical and animalistic: “The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily” (3: 108). Due to the rapidly increasing prevalence of films and filmic effects in society, Benjamin observes that politics comes to impinge upon daily life. The emergence of tactile perception is concomitant with the politicization of “life”; the reduced function of the sensorium is easily taken advantage of by fascism, which kept relieving the masses’ thirst for “distraction [Zerstreuung]” both in the realms of art and reality (3: 119). The age of technological reproduction produced a mechanical and perceptual short-circuit in the relationship between humans and art.

74 Benjamin elaborates on the technological condition of modern humans in section VIII of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: “Technology has subjected the human sesorium to a complex kind of training” (4: 328).

75 Samuel Weber observes in his discussion on Benjamin’s Artwork essay that the German word Zerstreuung has important connotations that “are far richer than the essentially privative terms ‘distraction’ or ‘absent-minded’ might lead one to believe. The root of the German word—the verb streuen—is cognate to the English “strew, strewn” and carries with it a strong spatial overtone” (Mediauras 92).

76 Gilles Deleuze similarly characterizes film as a tactile medium, saying that it “[produces] a shock to thought, communicating vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly” (156). Deleuze’s description underlines the “direct” and “immediate” impact of films on humans. Both Benjamin and Deleuze observe that the cinematic tactility became the
These arguments apparently suggest a simple and categorical association between modernity and tactility in Benjamin’s works. However, as critics such as Richard Shiff and Esther Leslie have pointed out, there is a different kind of tactility that is closely associated with physical immediacy and the sense of intimacy in Benjamin’s oeuvre. The figure of the hand and the idea of craftsmanship in Benjamin’s works shed light on this aspect of tactility. Shiff points out that “Benjamin frequently employs the figure of the hand” in the Artwork essay, arguing that the image of the “traces of the practiced hand” in objects is closely associated with the value of handiwork in Benjamin’s late essays and gives ground to such key concepts of his thought as “aura” and “experience” (93). Shiff thus clarifies the importance of tactile value in Benjamin’s work:

With the progress of technology, the hand of which Benjamin speaks progressively loses its cunning, its grasp, its habits, its knack. The hand no longer responds, as it were, to the continuous play of the potter’s wheel. Instead, it flicks a switch or punches a button. (93)

The thesis in the passage that technology replaces the hand in modern society reminds us of the discourse of touch in the works of D. H. Lawrence and the artists in the Stieglitz Circle. Indeed, Benjamin’s view of photography comes close to Lawrence’s when he asserts in the Artwork essay that “photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of dominant mode of perception in modern society. It should be also noted that Deleuze refers to Riegl in his discussion of Francis Bacon’s “haptic” paintings (Bacon 122-23). For Deleuze’s notion of dialectic of touch and vision, see Ionescu.
pictorial reproduction,” although Benjamin does not necessarily regard this change negatively (3: 102). For him, the dissociation of the hand from creative activities is, rather, a historical fact, being closely associated with his famous argument about the disappearance of “aura” in modern technological society. Esther Leslie claims that Benjamin’s notion of “experience [Erfahrung]” is inseparable from the image of the hand as well as from the tactile sensibility:

True experience is conceived as close and practiced knowledge of what is at hand. The hand touches, has practical experience of life. Recurrent in Benjamin’s delineations of experience are the words tactile, tactics, the tactical, entering German, as it enters English via the Latin tangere touch. To touch the world is to know the world. (6)

Thus, a broad range of ideas that are etymologically associated with the Latin word tangere constitutes the physical origin of “true” experience in Benjamin’s works. Both Shiff and Leslie argue that Benjamin’s tactility denotes the primordial physicality that is inseparable from his thoughts about otherwise abstract concepts such as time, space, history, and narrative. The image of the hand and the sense of touch are foundational to “true experiences” and artistic activities. Leslie underscores the importance of Benjamin’s tactile imaginations being grounded in the traditional notion of Handwerk, which was in danger of disappearance when Benjamin wrote the Artwork essay and other works on reproducible technology and modernity.

It is clear that this characterization of the tactile sense is exactly the opposite of what Benjamin considered to be the tactile nature of modern forms of art. On the one hand, he claims that photography frees the “hand” and dissociates the sense of touch from artistic activities. On
the other hand, he also suggests that the reproducible media of art such as film and photography are “tactile.” What can we make of this discrepancy between the two opposed definitions of touch in Benjamin’s works? Although scholars typically discuss one of these aspects and ignore the other, I would like to suggest that the meaning of touch in Benjamin’s works cannot be limited to either one of them. Rather than attempting to solve the ambiguity and discrepancy in Benjamin’s discourse of touch, I will relate its various aspects to some of his thoughts on aesthetics, politics, physicality, and history. The act of touching inevitably involves contact with others, which is, as Shiff argues, foundational to “experience [Erfahrung].” By thinking of touch and tactility broadly as communicative acts that open up one’s relations with others, I will examine how this particular sense informs his theory and philosophy.

Interpreting his rhetoric of touch is not to identify what it symbolizes, but to consider it as a component in his engagement with problems of modernity. This chapter will examine how the sense of touch allegorizes the question of modernity in Benjamin’s writings. First, I will compare Benjamin’s notion of touch with his far more famous notion of aura by tracing his early work on perception. I will then discuss how he relates the questions concerning perception to his “historical materialism,” a dialectical model of history which fundamentally breaks with traditional concepts of history, focusing on two of his famous later works, “On the Concept of History” and “The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility.” Particularly, I will pay attention to his references to Aloïs Riegl, to whom Benjamin’s language of touch owes some debts, as well as a much more famous fragment about Paul Klee’s painting of an angel, in order to consider the intricate relations obtaining among aura, touch, and revolution. In the subsequent section, I will examine the role of touch in his discussion of mimesis, mimicry, and storytelling, and consider their relationship to the sense of touch. This discussion leads to a consideration of
his theory of translation wherein touch is linguistically conceived. Through these examinations, I will explore the importance of touch in Benjamin’s thoughts on modernity.

2. “The Spell is the Magic of Nearness”: Aura and Tactility

In his late texts, Benjamin sets up the notion of “aura” in opposition to the modern sense of touch both in their temporal and spatial implications; while the tactile sense represents one’s “immediate” relationships with things in modern society, aura is a phenomenon of chronological and topological “distance.” In “Little History of Photography” (1931), Benjamin famously asks:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave [Gespinst] of time and space: the unique appearance or semblance of a distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. (2: 518-19)\(^{77}\)

\(^{77}\) The second sentence of the passage reads in German as follows: “ein sonderbares Gespinst von Raum und Zeit: einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag.” (GS 2: 378) “Notes” in Selected Writings makes an important point about this passage: “At stake in Benjamin’s formulation is an interweaving not just of time and space—einmalige Erscheinung, literally ‘one-time appearance’—but of far and near, eine Ferne suggesting both ‘a distance’ in space or time and ‘something remote,’ however near it (the distance, or distant thing, that
Benjamin describes aura as an experience of being immersed in one’s natural environment. The descriptive definition in the passage makes sense in etymological terms; the word “aura” signifies “breeze,” “wind,” and “air” in Latin and “breath” and “breeze” in Greek. “Aura” primarily signifies air in motion, “a subtle emanation or exhalation from any substance” (OED). Benjamin’s use of this word never detaches itself from these etymological implications. For him, aura is primarily an invisible and intangible phenomenon that intertwines time and space. Although Benjamin associates it with “distance,” aura does not remain stably distant. It can come close and enter one’s body, intertwining one’s subjective position with one’s environment as well as the present moment with a certain duration of time.

Benjamin argues that the invention and permeation of society with reproducible media such as photography and film generated a crisis for aura. The descriptive definition of aura cited above is followed by a less frequently cited passage about the modern mode of perception:

Now, to bring things closer to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. (2: 519)

In a way that anticipates his argument in the Artwork essay, Benjamin here describes the disappearance of the difference between the original and the copy as the nullification of distance. Instead of waiting for an opportune moment in which one could “breathe” the auralic element of appears) may be.” (3: 123) This comment establishes the importance of the spatial characteristic of aura.
nature, modern people demand that solid things be instantly available at hand. The impatient behavior of bringing “things closer to us,” which ignores the time and space inherent in the original, excludes the possibility of truly perceiving the aural uniqueness of things. Clearly, the motion indicates that Benjamin already associated the tactile sense with mechanical reproduction when he published this essay in 1931. Benjamin’s notion of aura occupies an oppositional position to this modern sensibility toward things.

To further consider these contrasting descriptions of aural “distance” and tactile immediacy, it is helpful to examine Benjamin’s early venture into phenomenology of perception. In an uncompleted essay “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,” written between 1922 and 1923, Benjamin distinguishes two different modes of body, *Leib* and *Körper* (“body” and “corporeal substance” respectively in the English translation). He insists that *Leib* consists of identifiable parts of the physical substance. *Körper*, in contrast, is less a stable existence than a formless phenomenon, which manifests itself only through transient feelings such as “pain and pleasure.” Benjamin conceives of *Körper* as a kind of body that nullifies, if temporality, the physical “limitation”: “If … we know about our corporeal substance [*Körper*] only—or chiefly—through pleasure or pain, we know of no limitation on it” (1: 394). Through the notion of *Körper*, Benjamin illuminates fluid and transitory aspects of the body which are not reducible to the stable *Leib*. Ephemeral feelings such as “pleasure and pain” destabilize the integrity of the body and transform it into a relational sphere.

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78 It should be noted that this distinction between *Leib* and *Körper* is almost the opposite of Husserl’s use of the same terms. Throughout the essay, I continue to use the German words *Leib* and *Körper* in the contexts where the distinction is crucial.
Based on the conception of the body as *Körper*, Benjamin describes the dynamism of the subjective entity and the world by conceptualizing the functionality of the two senses of sight and touch:

The sense least bound by limitation is perhaps that of sight, which we might call centrifugal, in contrast to the more centripetal senses of taste and especially touch. Sight shows our corporeal substance [*Körper*] to be, if not without limits, then at least with fluctuating, formless delimitations. (1: 394)

Benjamin thus associates the senses of sight and touch with the centrifugal and centripetal movements respectively. These two contrasting movements are fundamental in Benjamin’s “theory of perceptions.” Although, as Miriam Hansen notes, the notion of “aura” had not appeared until the later stage of his career, one could see that the “centrifugal” movement of perceptions described in “Outline” is foundational to the later concept of aura (“Aura” 338). Benjamin’s definition of aura—“the unique appearance or semblance of a distance, no matter how close it may be”—shows the immanent development of his phenomenological thoughts on perception and movement (2: 518).

The centripetal movement of tactile sense corresponds with the tactile inclination of the modern masses to “bring things closer to us.” However, one should note, while the imposition of modern tactility expels aura from one’s relation to things, the physical tactility which Benjamin describes in “Outline” does not necessarily exclude the sense of distance. In fact, Benjamin believes that the uniqueness of perceptual experience lies in the chiasmic relationship existing
between sight and touch. He explores the sphere in which nearness and distance do not exclude each other by describing the spatiality of “eros and sexuality”:

[Nearness and distance] are two factors that may be as important for the structure and life of the body as other spatial categories (up and down, right and left, etcetra). They are particularly prominent in the life of eros and sexuality. The erotic life is ignited by distance. On the other hand, there is an affinity between nearness and sexuality. (1: 397)

That both distance and nearness are important components of the sphere of “eros” makes it impossible to assume a simple binarism of sight and touch, the centrifugal and the centripetal, in his works. “Eros” encompasses both visual and tactile experiences. In order to further illustrate the “life of eros,” Benjamin cites as an example Dante’s love for Beatrice:

A complete balance between nearness and distance in perfect love—“you come flying, fascinated.” Dante places Beatrice among the stars. But the stars could be close to him in Beatrice. For in the beloved, the forces of distance appear close to a man. In this way, distance and nearness are opposite poles in the life of eros: this is why presence and separation are crucial in love—The spell is the magic of nearness.79 (1: 399-400)

79 The idea of “the magic of nearness” characterizes the romantic and mythic aspects of Benjamin’s writings, which often lend ambiguity to his theoretical narrative. Adorno wrote in a 1938 letter to Benjamin that he had detected and criticized “a profoundly romantic element” in
This passage reminds us of the definition of aura; Beatrice is “the unique appearance or semblance of a distance, no matter how close” she “may be.” In “a complete balance,” her presence is always implied in her absence, and vice versa. Here, the sense of touch remains a potentiality; but, as a potentiality, it is present in the auratic distance between Dante and Beatrice. If the experience of distance implies eros, it is because the “psychophysical” sense of distance bears implications of nearness and touch. As Richard Shiff appropriately observes, “Aura is the sign of an understanding [of] human touch, of an investment of intimate experience” (93).

“Eros” and “love” remained important sources of inspiration for Benjamin throughout his career; they produced in his thought the privileged sphere in which distance and nearness merge into each other. For instance, Benjamin praises Karl Kraus for his “erotic” sensibility of language: “Language has never been more perfectly distinguished from mind, never more intimately bound to eros, than by Kraus in the observation, “The more closely you look at a word, “On Some Motifs of Baudelaire,” saying that the essay “is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. The spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell …” (283). However, no matter how romantically conceived, this “spell” allowed him to consider the historical meaning of the “crisis of perceptions” in the age of reproduction.

80 Dante’s text exquisitely stresses the centrifugal nature of love. As La Vita Nuova describes, Dante met Beatrice only twice in his life, but his love for Beatrice had a decisive impact on his life. Recalling first seeing Beatrice as a child, Dante says to himself: “Behold, a deity stronger than I; who coming, shall rule over me” (4). Throughout the text, Dante emphasizes how the notion of “Love” ruled his mind in various stages of his life. Benjamin’s allusion to the association of Beatrice with the stars appears in the scene of the couple’s first encounter.
the more distantly it looks back.’ This is a Platonic love of language” (2: 453). Kraus thus feels the sense of distance in the words that exist in front of him. As we shall see, “looking back” is one of the most important traits of aura. The “word” that looks back occupies the same position as Beatrice; when you get closer to it, it will get away from you. In “On Some Motifs of Baudelaire,” he cites two lines from Goethe’s poem, “Blessed Longing [Selige Sehnsucht]”: “No distance weighs you down; you come flying and enchanted [Keine Ferne macht dich schwierig, / Kommst geflogen und gebannt],” and commented that these lines “must be regarded as the classic description of love that is sated with the experience of aura” (4: 339; GS1.2: 648). In this example, the beloved moves in an opposite way; she comes hither from afar. For Benjamin, the flexibility of movement itself is auratic. Aura is thus a “Platonic” mode of love in which distance comes into play with nearness. In “perfect love,” the sense of touch and the sense of sight are organically synthesized, weaving time and space. The immediate touch and the modern inclination “to bring things closer to us” instantly dispel the “magic of nearness” in which tactility remains a potentiality.

As these examples show, it is wrong to assume that the dominant mode of perception shifted from the sense of sight to the sense of touch because of the introduction of mechanical reproduction; rather, what has changed is the mode of touching. When Benjamin associates the modern sensibility with tactile immediacy, he wants to stress that people lost the ability to perceive tactile physicality with a certain distance because of the availability of mechanically replicated objects. In the Artwork essay, Benjamin sketches this subtle change in the mode of

81 Mark Paterson points out that “Benjamin’s notion of aura can collapse the haptic and the optic, the near and the far, the extensive and the intensive, while thinking perhaps about new art forms and new technologies” (102).
tactile physicality in the passage in which he compares painting and photography to the magician’s hand and the surgeon’s hand respectively:

Here we have to pose the question: How does the camera operator compare with the painter? In answer to this, it will be helpful to consider the concept of the operator as it is familiar to us from surgery. The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The attitude of the magician, who heals a sick person by a laying-on of hands, differs from that of the surgeon, who makes an intervention in the patient. The magician maintains the natural distance between himself and the person treated; more precisely, he reduces it slightly by laying on his hands, but increases it greatly by his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance from the patient by penetrating the patient’s body, and increases it only slightly by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short: unlike the magician (traces of whom are still found in the medical practitioner), the surgeon abstains at the decisive moment from confronting his patient person to person; instead, he penetrates the patient by operating. (3: 115-16)

The magician touches the patient’s body without sacrificing “natural distance” while the surgeon has to depend on the medical instruments with which he dissects and “penetrates” the patient’s body. For Benjamin, the latter approach is more tactile and modern. Unlike the magician who physically empathizes with symptoms of the person being treated, the surgeon applies prearranged methods to the patient’s body. According to Benjamin, this difference between the
two practitioners is parallel to the difference between the painter and the cinematographer:
“Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold being assembled according to a new law” (3: 116). While the painter physically engages with the surrounding space through the act of painting, the cinematographer brings “a new law” into natural environments, and dissects landscapes for his use. For Benjamin, this invention of a new law marks a significant historical transformation of human perception.

Although Benjamin’s argument above is dualistically constructed, the difference between the magician and the surgeon seem to be subtle. Benjamin carefully suggests that the similarity and continuity between the two vocations are just as important as their difference by writing in the parenthesis that “traces” of the magician are implicated in the hands of the “medical practitioner.” What is similar between the two practitioners is the figure of the hand and the image of touching the other. In the passage above, “the hand” represents the flexibility of the body, the “Körper” in the terms of the “Outline,” which exists prior to the division of the sense of touch and the sense of sight, as well as the separation of nearness and distance. This primordial touch that is associated with the hand should be strictly distinguished from the “tactility” Benjamin saw in modern forms of art. The inherent potentiality of touch encompasses both tactile expectations and impressions, providing a ground for the inspiration of “eros.” As the subtility of the difference between the magician’s touch and the surgeon’s touch suggests, what Benjamin problematizes is the shift of the manner of touching that occurred in conjunction with the influence of technology on human perception in modern society. Benjamin’s phenomenological investigation of human perceptions forms a basis for his later essays on art, history, and politics, which we will examine in the subsequent sections.

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3. Aloïs Riegl, the Haptic and Urgeschichte

What is this primordial touching that precedes the categorical division of the senses? In section IV of the Artwork essay, Benjamin associates the question of perception with his inquiries into history: “Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history” (3: 104). Benjamin learned the method of juxtaposing history with perception from works by Aloïs Riegl (1858-1905), an important member of the Vienna School of Art History, who explored a formalistic approach in his historical study of art. Benjamin both implicitly and explicitly acknowledged his debts to the scholar throughout his career. The 1928 (third) version of “Curriculum Vitae,” for instance, states that he applied “the methodological idea of Aloïs Riegl” in The Origin of German Tragic Drama [Mourning Play], while the 1940 (sixth) version mentions Riegl’s Late Roman Art Industry (1901) as one of the works by which his “thinking was decisively influenced” (2: 78; 4: 381). In the Artwork essay, Benjamin refers to Riegl along with another member of the Vienna School of Art History, Franz Wickhoff, as innovators in the study of art history, insisting that they underlined “the organization of perception at the

82 The most extensive allusion to Riegl in Benjamin’s texts can be found in a review essay on the First Volume of the Kustwissenschaftsische Forschungen, edited by Otto Pächt. In the essay, Benjamin mentions Riegl as a pioneer of the historical approach that the book under review employs (2: 668).
time the art was produced” against “the weight of classical tradition” (3: 104). Unlike the conventional historical narratives that establish a sequential development, writings by these art historians explore the way in which the mode of perception determines the form of art. Benjamin utilized Riegl’s formalistic approach in the process of generating his historical analysis of perception.

As Miriam Hansen rightly observes, what was particularly important about Riegl’s works was “the opposition of contemplative distance and haptic nearness,” which Benjamin deployed “throughout the artwork essay to throw into relief the tactile, haptic character of twentieth-century avant-garde art and film against the phenomenal distance of traditional, auratic art” (“Aura” 352-53). Indeed, the division between the optic and the haptic is central to Riegl’s formalistic description of art history. In *Late Roman Art Industry*, Riegl describes three stages of ancient civilizations whose art are respectively characterized by differential perceptual modalities: the haptic immediacy found in Egyptian art, the “normal” distance in Greek art, and the optic cognition in late Roman art. According to Riegl, as civilization develops, art becomes less tactile and more optical. Riegl’s view of art history is thus founded upon his assumption that history and physicality are closely related to one another. For him as well as for Benjamin, such a dual structure constitutes the most fundamental basis of artwork. They share the view that the mode of perception qualifies the collective character of artistic expressions.

83 As Michael W. Jennings notes, Riegl’s view of art history “has an undeniably Hegelian cast” (86). One of his central notions “*Kunstwollen* [will-to-art]” echoes Hegel’s concepts, *Volksgeist* and *Zeitgeist*, the collective “spirits” that precede differences among individual works. Riegl tried to define collective characters of art rather than examine achievements of individual artists (23-27). For a more detailed discussion about “*Kunstwollen*,” see Jennings 84-85.
Riegl explains how a difference in the mode of perception affects the viewer’s relation to a work of art. In the “haptic” era, the viewer needed to get close to the artwork in order to appreciate the distinctive character of Egyptian art. Egyptian artists emphasized the contours of things in planar space in order to emphasize their solidity, appealing to the viewer’s tactile sense. In Riegl’s judgment, Egyptians were “hostile to” the abstract notion of “space”: “Ancient art … had to negate and suppress the existence of space because it constituted an obstacle for the clarity of the absolute individuality of external objects in the work of art” (21). Riegl observes that Egyptians’ hostility to space led to their strong obsession with filling gaps, an obsession that is most conspicuous in pyramids, which almost obstruct “the functional responsibility” of the tomb to provide a space for the dead (27). In contrast, the “optic” era required the viewer to stand at a distance from the artwork, since it was situated in a homogeneous “space,” in which humans could recognize things independently from their surroundings. Riegl summarizes the development of art as a process in which space is gradually emancipated. The paradigmatic shift from tactile spatiality to optic spatiality is concomitant with the emergence of homogeneous, universal space, which made the modern pictorial method of perspective drawing possible.

As Margaret Iversen notes, although Benjamin deployed Riegl’s method in his theses on history, he turned the historical correspondence to the categories of optic and haptic perceptions “upside down” by “making modern perception tactile or haptic rather than optic” (16). Benjamin’s use of Riegl’s theory is not arbitrary, but, through his categorical inversion he ascribes to modernity a barbaric element. His 1933 essay “Experience and Poverty” states that, due to the “tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on

84 Concerning Riegl’s intricate treatment of “space” and “depth” in relation to form, see Iversen 69-90.
mankind” (2: 732). Under the regime of highly developed technology, the individual experience loses its singular significance. Benjamin expresses regret that “experience has fallen in value” since the traumatic First World War (2: 731). He conceives of this “fall” as a radical rupture that accounts for the shift in the mode of human perception: “Destructive torrents and explosions” during the War threatened “the tiny, fragile human body” and deprived humans of their perceptual flexibility (2: 732). The emergence of the tactile character in modern art coincides with this crisis of “experience,” and signals the primitive character of the modern age. Benjamin argues that the “poverty of experience” led to “a new kind of barbarism [Barbarentum]” in modern society and radically transformed the conditions of life (2: 732). With the word “barbarism,” Benjamin indicates not so much the regression of culture as the dire condition of human life and experience in the world after the War. In other words, because of the crisis of the fragile human body under the influence of highly developed technology, humans became disconnected from historical experience and returned to barbarism.

The barbaric foreignness of the present time [Jetztzeit] was a political problem under the regime of the Nazis, which took power in 1933. One should note that the point of his introducing

85 The notion of modern barbarism is taken over by Theodor Adorno and developed in his writings about the “culture industry” in modern society, especially in the work he co-authored with Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, in whose preface they explain the original goal of the book: “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (xiv). This book famously views “barbarism” in modern society not as an antithesis to enlightenment but as its inevitable consequence. Kevin McLaughlin points out by quoting his letter that Horkheimer endorsed Benjamin’s idea of “the identity between barbarism and culture” (4-5).
the notion of “barbarism” into his theory of history is less to identify it with Nazism than to
disentangle the subject from Nazism’s all-encompassing conception of time and space, which
normalizes the “state of exception.” In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin insists that
Nazism turned the exceptional into the normal through its totalitarian control: “The tradition of
the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but
the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight” (4: 392).
Benjamin contends that Nazism not only appropriates history—“The Third Reich”—by locating
itself in the national tradition of the German empire but also invokes the state of exception in
order to appropriate the notion of “danger.” Nazism annihilates the distinction between everyday
life and moments of crisis, disrupting the utility of both concepts. Giorgio Agamben’s State of
Exception accurately depicts this mechanism:

The entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve
years. In this sense, modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment,
by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical
elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens
who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system. (2)

Nazism’s invention of the “legal civil war” turns every kind of resistance movement into a
pastiche in Marx’s sense. Nazism is a sort of machine that constantly homogenizes time and
space and thereby preempts any possibility of resistance. As we saw in the example of the
Roman Salute in Chapter 1, Fascism exhibits the norm of beauty and compels people to identify
their ideals with it. The totalitarian regime also simplifies history and appropriates it for political
purposes. Through a uniformed sense of aesthetics and history, Nazism placed totalitarian
categories over people and excluded those who did not fit into them. Benjamin transforms the
concept of history in order to resist the universal ideal of aesthetics and history, of which Nazism
easily takes advantage.

In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin insists that “it is our task to bring about ‘a real
state of emergency’” in order to resist the politically constructed discourse of the “state of
emergency” (4: 392). Benjamin terms his method “historical materialism” and clearly
differentiates it from “universal history”:

The historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a
transition, but in which time takes a stand [einstehlt] and has come to a standstill.
For this notion defines the very present in which he himself is writing history.
Historicism offers the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies
a unique experience with the past. (4: 396)

Benjamin criticizes reliance on the “universal” narrative of history because it presupposes a
continuance between the present and the past, objectifying every period in chronology as being
separable from the present time. Historical materialism is a dialectical engagement with the past;
it intertwines the act of writing history with the written history and generates a sphere of
communication between the present and the past. In an age of aesthetic and political crisis,
Benjamin insists, “universal history” is too naïve and utopian: “Universal history has no
theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it masters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous,
empty time” (4: 396). “Universal history” cannot capture the specificity of events in the age of
“touch” since it fails to recognize the barbaric present; even worse, its scientific objectivity can blind people from the ongoing process of violence. If chronological history frames events, Benjamin’s historical materialism provides the notion of event as a tool to de-frame “history.” Just as Riegl historicizes the notion of abstract space, so Benjamin delimits the notion of “the empty time.” The moment of “danger,” which is hardly reducible to the “eternal” image of history and is often collectively and politically forgotten, therefore plays a significant role in his historical method:

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. (4: 391)

“Holding fast” to the fleeting “image of the past” is emblematic of Benjamin’s theory of historical materialism. It is hard to miss that this image recalls the flexible movement of aura. In his imagination, “crisis” and “eros” are closely linked, and his historical materialism cannot be separated from what one might call Benjamin’s “erotic” pursuit of the past. The “wish” of historical materialism “to hold fast” is deeply rooted in his impossible desire to reach and touch the original past, which is comparable to Dante’s unrealizable desire for Beatrice. Thus, Benjamin’s method of “historical materialism” is associated with his image of primordial tactility. His dialectical method of history negates both the panoramic view of history and the notion of “progress,” which are foundational dogmas of the “Social Democratic theory” (4: 394).

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For Benjamin, Paul Klee’s 1920 picture “Angelus Novus,” which he owned, was an image that embodied “a real state of emergency,” which would oppose to the Fascist discourse of “emergency.” He argues that the painting realizes “how the angel of history must look” (4: 392). Klee’s Angel does not strongly resemble the archetypal figure of any angel, but only traces of the tradition are present in it. It looks simultaneously tragic and comic because of its large head, widely opened eyes, short arms, and even shorter legs. But above all, the rough contour of the body, which is composed of awkward and childish lines, speaks painfully of the crisis of the body. In the picture, as Benjamin interprets it, the Angel directs his face “toward the past,” while “a storm … from Paradise … drives him irresistibly toward the future” (4: 392). Benjamin regards the storm as an allegory of “what we call progress” (4: 392). The Angel is in exile from Paradise—from his homeland—because of the invisible dogma of progress. Benjamin believed that, like the angel, a historical materialist should face the past, being laid bare to the strong wind of the “future.”

Although the Angel resists the imperative power, it does not simply represent a set of positive attributes such as nature, innocence or beauty. Evidently, the picture does not rely on the cliché’d dualism of nature and technology, the organic and the inorganic, or the human and the inhuman. Instead, it points to the modern era in which nature comes to assume the garb of artificiality and industrial objects become components of the natural surroundings. In “Experience and Poverty,” which also includes a reference to Klee’s paintings, Benjamin argues that “nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged” (2: 735). He asserts that technology is no longer external to the human body but rather a part of it; as he puts it in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” “technology has subjected the human sensorium to a
complex kind of training” (4: 328). Based on this recognition, Benjamin describes Klee’s figure as a composite of nature and technology:

For just like any good car, whose every part, even the bodywork, obeys the needs above all of the engine, Klee’s figures too seem to have been designed on the drawing board, and even in general expression they obey the laws of their interior. Their interior, rather than their inwardness; and this is what makes them barbaric. (2: 733) 86

“Their interior,” distinguished from “their inwardness,” breaks with the notion of a mystical “inner self” that operates as the essence of individuality. Indeed, the quasi-transparent body of Klee’s Angelus Novus hardly looks like more than a structure: an angel without its contents. Its body is so obedient to “laws,” not of nature but of technology and civilization, that it cannot resist the forces inflicted upon it. Benjamin interprets the disfigured angel as an embodiment of the “state of emergency,” because it captures the moment in which the most sacred sphere of the angel’s flesh comes to be at the mercy of technology. Klee’s project, like Benjamin’s, is neither

86 Klee indeed kept exploring the theme of “barbarism” in various works including “Barbarian Composition” (1918), “Barbarian’s Venus” (1921), “Barbarian Boy” (1933) and “Moon of the Barbarians” (1939). There is no doubt that this series of Klee’s works influenced Benjamin’s interpretation of Angelus Novus and nurtured his thoughts on historical materialism. Klee discovered light and color when he toured Tunisia in 1914, and the North African art, which had been excluded from the Western artistic tradition, greatly inspired his method of barbaric paintings. For the relationship between Klee and barbarism, see Helfenstein.
progressive nor conservative; it neither praises nor criticizes technology, but simply and
unflinchingly testifies to the historical moment of the “bankruptcy” of experience and the crisis
of aura (2: 732).

Benjamin, like this angel, attempted to look backward in his efforts to argue against the
dogma of progress. He generates a highly dialectical conversation between the present and the
untraceable archaic past. As mentioned earlier, Egypt is conceived by Benjamin as retaining the
time prior to “history.” Given his insistence on the necessity of “theoretical armature,” it is
possible to say that Benjamin uses the otherness of Egypt in order to vie with Nazism’s invention
of the unity of the Greco-Roman culture and the German Empire, the imagined unity that
incorporates what is newly invented into the realm of “tradition.” Benjamin’s introduction of the
concept of “barbarism” is an attempt to destabilize such a politically invented—and controlled—
narrative of history. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin claims that “in order for a part of the past
to be touched [betroffen] by actuality, there must be no continuity between them” (N 7.7). For
Benjamin, the past is not a definite point of time to be seen from a vantage point; it is a mode of
temporality that becomes enlivened when it is “touched by actuality.” Historical materialism
associates the irrelevant periods of time. And Benjamin’s radical discussion of the historical
status of modernity is intended to associate it with the foreign image of the barbaric. In this
regard, Klee’s angel is truly historical for Benjamin, since it is one of the few artistic expressions
which incarnate “a new, positive sense of barbarism [Barbarentum],” a counter image to
Nazism’s aestheticized notion of history (2: 732). In “Experience and Poverty,” Benjamin writes
about the potential utility of the idea of “barbarism”:
Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. (2: 732)

In the age in which the value of “experience” irretrievably diminished, barbarism was less an option than a condition of any artwork opposed to the totalitarian aesthetic. The “positive sense of Barbarism” designates the alternative situation in which “one can start from scratch.” Implicit in the concept is this potential otherness that disrupts the politically constructed system of aestheticism, interesting with Lawrence’s efforts to displace the aesthetic through the primitive in the 1920s. As Kevin McLaughlin contends in “Benjamin’s Barbarism,” the word “barbarism” signifies “a specific kind of linguistic deformation that comes from foreignness” (8). Historically, the word is associated with another word “Berber,” which was used “in the ancient Arab world to describe the peoples of North Africa and of the areas south of Egypt,” similarly meaning “to talk noisedly or confusedly” (8-9). Hence, the words “barbarism” and “Berber” suggest an implicit relationship between phonetics and politics. Deviation from the phonetic standard of one’s own language is closely associated with the political and cultural margin.

This etymological fact sheds light on Benjamin’s tactic of inventing a positive image for barbarism. He criticizes the “new law” that structures normative speech as well as the Western system of representation in general. By introducing barbaric otherness into the historical narrative, Benjamin’s dialectic model reveals the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that
“universal history” always practices. He aims to point out the artificiality of the division between the civilized and the barbaric. When he founded his “historical materialism” upon the lesson of “the tradition of the oppressed,” Benjamin attempted to relativize the authorized voice of “history” which was always central to the Greco-Roman historical tradition.

Thus, Benjamin used Riegler’s criticism of “space” in order to problematize the notion of “universal history.” Just as Riegler traces the origin of art back to the point where the notion of geometrical space and the status of the optical sense were not yet established, so too Benjamin attempts to return to the point prior to “history” by introducing the notion of “Urgeschichte,” which signifies at once “pre-history” and “primal history” in English. The notion of Urgeschichte becomes thinkable when, and only when, one views history, not as an integral unity, but as a unique process of dialectical interactions. In this regard, the character of Benjamin’s method of historical materialism is most explicitly presented in a passage in “Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian”:

Historicism presents the eternal image of the past, whereas historical materialism presents a given experience with the past—an experience that is unique. The replacement of the epic element by the constructive element proves to be the condition for the experience. The immense forces bound up in historicism’s “Once upon a time” are liberated in this experience. To put to work an experience with history—a history that is originary for every present—is the task of historical

87 In The Philosophy of History, Hegel remarks that Africa “is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit” (99).
materialism. The latter is directed toward a consciousness of the present which
explodes the continuum of history. (4: 262)

The point of the method of historical materialism, as the passage insists, is to understand the past
not as an instance in sequential time but as a sort of temporality that affects the state of the
present. Benjamin believed that the dialectical method of historical materialism could revive the
value of “experience,” which was in crisis. It is not enough to know, understand, and articulate
the past. For Benjamin, history must be a door to “experiencing” the sphere in which the past and
the present are intertwined. In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin contends that “The past
carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption,” and asks “Doesn’t a breath of
the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well?” (4: 390). This “caress” of the auratic breeze
brings a sense of “happiness” with it, a Proustian happiness in which a fragment memory of the
past suddenly comes up in the present time (4: 390). Benjamin believes that historical
materialism is a method by which one could have contact with the past through the “index,”
which is embedded in the present.

In a chapter of Yasuo Kobayashi’s book examining Benjamin’s notion of origin, he
appropriately insists that Benjamin’s historical method is fundamentally anachronistic (279).
Notably, at the beginning of thesis XIV of “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin quotes Karl
Kraus’s words: “Origin is the goal [Ursprung ist das Ziel]” (4: 395). As Kobayashi shows
through his entire analysis, this quote manifests Benjamin’s “will” to a new method of history,
which not only breaks with the linear model of history but also projects the past onto the present.
When Benjamin casts his eyes to the past, they are directed toward the moment of “origin” in an
attempt to generate a reverberation between the past and the present. As Georges Didi-Huberman
insists, Benjamin’s notion of origin “does not in any way designate something remaining ‘upstream’ from things, as the source of the river is upstream from it,” rather it is a medium that sets history into a dialectic motion (4). Indeed, in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin writes:

Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the becoming and disappearance…. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development. The principles of philosophical contemplation are recorded in the dialectic which is inherent in origin. (45; GS 1.1: 226)

Unlike the Biblical notion of “genesis” that is closely associated with the “law,” Benjamin’s notion of “origin” does not refer to an ultimate point of “beginning.” Rather, he insists that the “origin” already involves dialectic movements in time. Thus, the “origin” does not precede the “subsequent development,” but is “a past charged with now-time” (4: 395). Such a “past” is discoverable only in its relation to the present time. For Benjamin, revolution is a force of anachronism, which is not merely a resistance to authority but a resistance to “homogeneous, empty time” (4: 395). Benjamin thus formulates an anachronistic view of history, or even history as anachronism, in his incessant pursuit of origin. This origin [Ursprung] requires a “leap

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“Sprung’” into the past (4: 395). Benjamin’s view of history opens up a submerged stratum of the past, and in turn offers a way to view the present time archaeologically.

Benjamin’s inverted use of Riegl’s distinction between the haptic and the optical eras is thus rooted in his fundamentally anachronistic conception of history. One should note, however, that the parallelism between the Egyptian era and the modern age by no means suggests a return of the same. In the Artwork essay, Benjamin critically quotes a view expressed by French film director Abel Gance who writes that, “By a remarkable regression, we are transported back to the expressive level of the Egyptians…. Pictorial language has not matured because our eyes are not yet adapted to it. There is not yet enough respect, not enough cult, for what it expresses” (qtd. in 3: 109-10). Benjamin criticizes Gance’s mythologization of film because it simply ignores the qualitative difference between ancient eras and the contemporary society. It is true that Benjamin juxtaposes the two different periods of time in order to produce a dialectical understanding of history. However, for him, the image of Egypt is effective insofar as it remains the other that exposes the limitations of a European-centered conception of “history” and inspires him to contemplate the problem of “origin.” It is an ethical obligation for him to think outside the representational system of history that conceals the origin and the original. Unlike Benjamin, Gance regards ancient Egypt as no more than an immature stage of history. Another passage by Gance quoted in the Artwork essay represents his historical universalism: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films…. All legends, all mythologies, and all myths, all the founders of religions, indeed, all religions … await their celluloid resurrection, and the heroes are pressing at the gates” (3: 104). Gance’s optimistic reliance on the happy transcendence of time through film sums up the culture of flatness that the technology of reproduction generates.
Benjamin thought that such a flat conception of history through cinematic images would eternally dissociate the sense of touch from the sense of sight.\textsuperscript{88}

For Benjamin, the emergence of tactile art such as Dadaist paintings and films marks the end of the age of aura. However, this also marks the beginning of an era in which “a positive barbarism” is made possible through the dialectical contemplation of the “origin.” Benjamin believes that the element of aura can return as a “flash” when the primitive past and the present time are intertwined through tactile artwork. In other words, while modern tactility dispelled the tradition of auratic art, it also opened up a link to the primordial tactility that the visually constructed “universal history” had suppressed. Benjamin’s discourse of touch responds to the age of crisis. He believes that both art and historiography should change in relation to the ongoing “poverty of experience.” Tactility is embedded in Benjamin’s historical materialism, which opens up a state of otherness where one can relativise the present time. If Nazism turns a “state of exception” into the ordinary, Benjamin’s critical strategy is to expose the ubiquity of “emergency” throughout art and history. The notion of “a new, positive sense of barbarism” is central here. Like D. H. Lawrence and many artists in the Stieglitz group, Benjamin found in the primitive a revolutionary potential to overturn the dogma of Progress. Benjamin’s historical materialism is founded on the tactile link between the primitive and the present time, and its

\textsuperscript{88} Theodor Adorno readily understood this mechanism after he read a draft of the essay. In a letter to Benjamin dated May 28th in 1936, Adorno writes that he went the day before to watch Max Reinhardt’s \textit{The Midsummer Night’s Dream} (1935), which is the film cited in the Artwork essay, and he was convinced that the film was a “highly dialectical confirmation” of Benjamin’s theory since “[its] ambitions to attain ‘auratic’ dimension itself leads inevitably to the destruction of aura” (137).
practitioner should “hold fast” to the fleeting image of the past instead of attaining a panoramic view of history. Thus, Benjamin’s historical materialism resists the culture of flatness and the totalitarian regime of Nazism, which replaces the past with represented images of that past.

4. Mimetic Faculty and the Topos of Hand

In Benjamin’s late theory, the question of “origin” is closely linked with another important question of reproduction. Benjamin observed that the modern technology of reproduction totally changed the way people understood ideas of “origin” and “original,” since the possibility of producing copies through mechanical media debases their auratic authenticity. The reproducible medium’s appropriation of distance in terms of both time and space irretrievably debases the “mimetic faculty,” which, for Benjamin, exemplifies the natural instinct to relate oneself to one’s environment. In his 1933 essay “On the Mimetic Faculty,” he contends that

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role. (2: 720, Italics mine)
While he regards the “natural” inclination to imitate as a fundamental human capacity, Benjamin qualifies his statements about the “mimetic faculty” with the word “once.” This qualification encourages us to consider his thoughts on mimesis along with his late theory concerning mechanical reproduction. Since he views “aura” as the inherent authenticity of objects that are in danger of disappearance, he sees that the “mimetic faculty,” which is man’s most fundamental creative ability, is disappearing because of the technology of mechanical reproduction. People in modern society who are used to mechanical reproductions do not take the trouble to reproduce things by hand. For Benjamin, the decline of the mimetic faculty is one of the most important signs of the dissociation of the body from the process of reproduction in modern life.

Benjamin’s definition of the mimetic faculty as man’s natural and “higher function” is by no means original. This is a view repeatedly advocated by Western philosophers since Aristotle, who in the *Poetics* famously argues that artistic works such as poetry, drama, and music are all “imitations” [*mimesis*].\(^89\) Aristotle claims that “imitation comes naturally to human beings from childhood (and in this they differ from other animals, i.e. in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation); so does the universal pleasure

\(^89\) The translator of the *Poetics* notes in his “Introduction” that he uses the word “imitation” rather than “representation” to translate the Greek word “mimesis” for two reasons. First, an essential element in the notion of *mimesis*, that is, similarity, “does not rest wholly on convention,” unlike signs. The second reason is that “representation fails to capture the full range of Aristotle’s concept. The use of a quasi-technical term of modern aesthetics may tend to obscure the continuity which Aristotle perceives between mimesis in painting, poetry and music and in other, non-artistic forms of activity, such as the mimicry of animal noises and other sounds … and children’s play-acting” (Heath, viii).
in imitations” (6-7). Imitating others is pleasurable, and so is the process of learning. Aristotle reasons that man’s capacity of imitation is universal and inherent and that artwork is the ultimate outcome of this capacity. Benjamin follows Aristotle’s lead when he speaks of the naturalness of children’s propensity and talent for imitation: “Children’s play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior” (2: 720). Children acquire knowledge of the world through imitation: “The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train” (2: 720). ⁹⁰ For a child, to pretend to become surrounding objects and individuals is a means to understand one’s environment physically. Children do not view the world objectively but rather grasp it in its relation to themselves.

In his autobiographical sketch, Berlin Childhood Around 1900, Benjamin writes about his own experience of doing imitative plays in his childhood: “The child who stands behind the doorway curtain himself becomes something white that flutters, a ghost. The dining table under which he has crawled turns him into the wooden idol of the temple; its carved legs are four pillars.” (99) The child easily “becomes” the objects around him just as creatures disguise themselves with camouflage and mimicry in accordance with their surroundings. He transcends the boundary between the organic and the inorganic, and between nature and technology, through his playful mimicry. Using the language of the “Outline” essay, children’s desire for imitation bears a centrifugal relationship to the world.

⁹⁰ Benjamin was a collector of children’s books and toys. In particular, he had a strong interest in Russian toys, which, he thought, were less mass produced than German toys and therefore contained more primitiveness. See his small note on the subject, “Russian Toys,” as well as his 1928 essay, “Old Toys.” For the thematic importance of children in Benjamin’s works, see Jeffrey Mehlman’s Walter Benjamin for Children.
It is helpful to consider Benjamin’s theory of mechanical reproduction in light of this important link between human’s “mimetic faculty” and artistic creation. In the Artwork essay, Benjamin writes that

Technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room. (3: 103)

When he states that “the cathedral leaves its site,” he suggests the disappearance of the sense of auratic distance. The availability of copies minimizes the need to confront the original and undermines the significance of origin. The origin and the original in their most robust senses exist only as unattainable goals, but technology of mechanical reproduction makes them virtually available through their copies. This virtual immediacy of things is what Benjamin calls modern tactility. The development of reproducibility, Benjamin insists, reached a certain stage around 1900, in which the mechanical medium came to be inseparable from daily life (3: 102). Through the technology of reproduction, one can come face-to-face with various objects in the world.

As is already discussed, Benjamin considers the act of reproduction to be an inherently natural practice that originally arose from children’s propensity for imitation. In the Artwork essay, he admits that “in principle, the work of art has always been reproducible” (3: 103). Indeed, tradition would not be possible without various practices of “reproduction.” What is
critical for Benjamin is the distinction between the mechanical reproduction and the reproduction by hand: “The authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand” (3: 103). In Benjamin’s theory of reproduction, the finite and organic medium of the “hand,” unlike that of the machine, does not violate the authenticity of the original. Works made by the “hand” emerge in this context as exemplars of organic reproduction.

Here, the “hand” is not merely a part of the human body but also a political and Marxist symbol. Like Stieglitz, Benjamin ascribed a vital image to it. In a 1936 essay, “The Storyteller,” Benjamin discusses the figurative function of the “hand” in the act of storytelling; in particular, section IX focuses on the similarity between the narrative act and the artisan’s handiwork [Handwerk]. The first sentence of the section describes this relationship: “The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work—rural, maritime, and then urban—is itself an artisanal form of communication (Die Erzählung, wie sie im Kreis des Handwerks—des bäuerlichen, des maritimem und dann des städtischen—lange gedeiht, ist selbst eine gleichsam handwerkliche Form der Mitteilung)” (3: 149; GS 2.2: 447). The sentence in the German original shows that the image of the hand is embedded in the act of storytelling. Benjamin conceives of storytelling as a form of handiwork: a gift that is “handed” over from the storyteller to the audience, and from an older generation to a younger generation. Thus, storytelling contributes to forming the imaginative basis of community. A few lines later, Benjamin provides a simile describing the tactile link between the storyteller and the story: “Traces of the storyteller cling to a story the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel (So haftet an der Erzählung die Spur des Erzählenden wie die Spur der Töpferhand an der Tonschale)” (3: 149; GS 2.2: 447). “The traces [Spur]” of the storyteller are indelible indexes embedded in the story that lie in wait for future readers, but the English word “communication” does not entail such temporal nuance.
Things reproduced by hand engage with two different levels of time; they anticipate a dialectical encounter between the past and the present. As such, for Benjamin, storytelling is a singular event which intertwines not only different individuals but also different generations like “a precious ring” (2: 731).

The word “Mitteilung” in the passage is another German word that has etymological importance for our discussion. Samuel Weber claims that “The word Mitteilung is composed of two parts: the root, formed from the verb teilen (to separate or partition), and the adverbial prefix mit- (‘with’). Literally, then, the word suggests ‘partitioning with,’ or also, ‘sharing.’ But to share, one must first divide, and it is precisely this double movement that is reflected in the English word, to ‘impart’ (Benjamin’s -abilities 40-41). Both “partitioning with” and “sharing” evoke the image of the hand as a fundamental medium of narrative. The word “Mitteilung” is associated with the sense of touch that unites the storyteller with the audience, whereas its English translation “communication” is not.91

Reproduction by hand is mimetic, for it has its unique time and place of creation. It also contains an anachronistic view of time due to its indexical reference to the origin and the original. Mechanical reproduction disavows such specificity by making the process of creation automatic, replacing the function of the hand with instrumental devices. As Leslie notes on her essay, “The hand is made redundant by technological advance” (7). Sharing the view of this intricate relation between the “hand” and technology, David S. Ferris draws attention to the fact that Benjamin

91 Richard Shiff also comments on the word Mitteilung, adequately describing four stages of the concept that appears in Benjamin’s writings: “enlivened storytelling (a kind of folk culture),” “ordered narration (the novel),” “fragmented information (journalism),” and “mere sensation” (92).
describes the reproducible art as a “handle” in the Artwork essay (22). Again, the English translation of the Artwork essay, in either one of the two versions, misses the tactile connotation of this word. Ferris’s own translation within his essay is helpful to look at the etymological importance of “hand” in the following passage: “This much is certain: today, photography and film give [geben] to this understanding the most useful handles [die brauchbarsten Handhaben]” (4: 257; GS 1.2: 484). By comparing photography and film to handles, Benjamin suggests the instrumental character of these media. What was brought about by the transition from hand to handle is not merely technological but also perceptual and phenomenological, closely related with that Benjaminian dialectic between the eye and the hand:

For the first time, photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction—tasks that now devolved upon the eye alone. And since the eye perceives more swiftly than the hand can draw, the process of pictorial reproduction was enormously accelerated, so that it could now keep pace with speech. (3: 102)

For Benjamin, what is revolutionary about photography in physical terms is that it dissociates the hand from artistic creation. Drawing a picture by hand is not just a production of a representation but an engagement with the environment and the passage of time. Handiwork also allows us to recognize the potentiality and finiteness of our body. The act of drawing a picture by hand unites the subject and the world due to the amount of time that is necessary for the completion of a work. Benjamin saw this process of intertwinement as a source of erotic pleasure, a foundational “truth” of life.
As is clear from the discussion on mimesis, the hand is closely related to the notion of
origin and, as such, is sublimated into transcendental sphere of creation in Benjamin’s oeuvre.
This image, above all, recalls the biblical story of creation, and benefits from its vitalistic
implications. Benjamin suggests that, unlike the machine, the “hand” can infuse life into objects.
However, what is important about the figure of the hand is not the act of touching itself but the
potentiality or traces of touching. The “hand” is, unlike the “handle,” not a stable “position” but
a sphere of relations, which incessantly engages with the effect of temporal difference. In
Benjamin’s dialectic, the act of touching is hardly achieved, since the dialectical movement is set
into motion only when the process of touching is not completed. For Benjamin, experiencing
otherness is ultimately an experience of temporality. The “hand” is a primal medium that
precedes any sort of technology; it is a primal techné, that is, a foundational sphere of what Riegl
calls Kunstwollen, or the will for art. 92 To appreciate art is, then, not separable from imagining its
manual process of creations. “On the Mimetic Faculty” sheds light on the problem of
technological reproduction from a different angle than that found in the Artwork essay. It
clarifies the primordial relation between the tactility and creation, which mechanical
reproduction completely disrupted.

92 See “Art or Technical Skill” in Nichomachean Ethics, in particular the following passage:
“Every art [techné] is concerned with bringing something into being, and the practice [poiesis] of
an art is the study of how to bring into being something that is capable either of being or of not
being, and the cause of which is in the producer and not in the product” (149). In Grecian
philosophy, techné and poiesis are thus closely linked to each other.
V. Touch of Translation

In this line of thinking, it is important to consider Benjamin’s discursive theory of translation, which illuminates yet another aspect of mimesis. In an earlier work “The Task of the Translator,” which was written in 1921 and published as a Foreword to his translation of Baudelaire’s “Tableaux parisiens” in 1923, Benjamin displaces the commonsensical relation between the original and the translation. Translation is ordinarily regarded as a secondary product that is always preceded by the existence of the original. Benjamin argues that the common discussion concerning the “fidelity” and the “freedom” of a translation in its relation to the “original” presupposes a hierarchical order between them. In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin claims that translation does not necessarily occupy a secondary position in relation to the original. For Benjamin, like his historical materialism or his perspective on “mimetic faculty,” translation is not simply a transcription of the original in a different language but a form of language that introduces otherness into linguistic expressions in general and thereby exposes the fundamental character of language. Benjamin argues that translation can expose “pure language,” a core of linguistic communication that precedes variations of different languages. Although Benjamin’s essay on translation was written at least a decade earlier than his historical writings, I will demonstrate that the similar movement of reversal significantly informs the structure of his arguments in his essay on translation; just as he puts the barbaric and the modern in a dialectical relationship, so too he places the translation on an equal footing with the original.

In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin insists that translation is a “form” and distinguishes the essential category of “translatability” from actual works of translation: “The laws governing the translation lie within the original, contained in the issue of its translatability” (1: 254). Benjamin conceptualizes translation as a basic constituent of language in general.
According to him, translation does not exist independently from the original, nor does it come after the original:

Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability. It is evident that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Nonetheless, it does stand in the closest relationship to the original by virtue of the original’s translatability; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital one. (1: 254)

“Translatability” represents the perceivable qualities of the “specific significance inherent in the original” and the potential that “the closest relationship” can obtain. A translator should respond to this element of translatability inherent in the original. It is important that Benjamin introduces vitalistic language into his thoughts on translation. Remember the descriptive definition of aura, whose “breeze” penetrates the human body and intertwines it with its environment. The notion of translatability in this earlier essay anticipates the notion of aura as a vital and spiritual quality inherent in things. For Benjamin, “translatability” is not merely a functional category in his theory of translation. Rather, Benjamin believed in the presence of “life” in translatability. Indeed, he claims that the vital connection between the original and the translation is not a metaphor: “The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity…. The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a
history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life” (1: 254-55).
This passage shows the presence of an important link between his theory of translation and his
method of “historical materialism”; both investigate a way to approach the origin or the original.
If the original is a “life,” the task of the translator is to create the “afterlife” of the original by
expanding on its linguistic potentialities.

“Translatability” is comparable to the modern concept of entanglement insofar as the
original and the translation in some of their most essential characteristic are identical and bear
the “closest relationship” to each other; however, they are at the same time radically separate,
leading their own “lives.” One could further generalize this thesis; the most fundamental
property of language is its role as a medium. For Benjamin, every language is essentially a
translation. In one of his earliest works, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” he
differentiates two levels of language: “all communication of the contents of the mind is language,
communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of the justice,
poetry, or whatever underlying it or founded on it” (1: 62). The distinction between the essential
“language as such” and the actual “human language” corresponds to the difference between
translatability and the translation; in both discussions, the presence of medium is of a great
importance. Benjamin therefore argues that “all language communicates itself in itself; it is in the
purest sense the ‘medium’ of the communication” (1: 64). The notion of purity draws on
Benjamin’s vitalism, for “language as such” is an active medium that is irreducible to an
instrument of communication. For Benjamin, language is not separable from communicability,
that is, a potential to engage with others.

Based on the relation between the intrinsic element of translatability within the original
and the translation, Benjamin insists that “the task of the translator consists in finding the
particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original” (1: 258). It is important to note that the “intention” exists not on the translator’s side but on the side of the original. Instead of engaging with “the sterile equation of two dead languages,” Benjamin insists, the translator should “find” the vital source of “translatability,” whose “centrifugal” element naturally flows out from the original and moves into the target language.

Benjamin assumes that a “suprahistorical kinship between languages” lies in their common intention toward one and the same “pure language,” the language that cannot be represented in a single unified form but is foundational to all linguistic communication (1: 257). This primordial “pure language” is perceivable only when the “intensions” of different languages “[supplement] one another” and create a totality as a collective intension (1: 257). Benjamin describes the “pure language” not as a definite linguistic system but as a vital entity composed of various movements among a plurality of languages. Because of his engagement with the differences and similarities between two languages, the translator must get closer to the essential characteristics of the “pure language” than the original “poet.” Benjamin states that “the intention of the [poet] is never directed toward the language as such, at its totality, but is aimed solely and immediately at specific linguistic contextual aspects” (1: 258). Benjamin insists that while the poet works only within a definite realm of a language, the translator is able to “liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work” (1: 261). Meanwhile, the translator is also able to influence the target language by bringing foreign elements into it: through translation, he “[breaks] through decayed barriers of his own language” (1: 261). The translator thus destabilizes the systems of two languages and resurrects the primordial flow of the “pure language.”
Although the translator comes after the poet chronologically, he responds to the primordial stratum of language within the original and exposes the historical condition of the original work. Benjamin affirms quoting Rudolf Pannwitz’s argument that translation “must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge” (1: 262). In Benjamin’s theory of translation, the hierarchy between the original and the translation is thus overturned. This reversal of the hierarchical structure anticipates his discussion about the role of barbarism in historical thinking. Indeed, translation is to the “pure language” what the barbaric is to the “historical materialism” in Benjamin’s thoughts. The vital touch of translation, like the touch of the barbaric, problematizes the unitary system of representation and by doing so exposes the most fundamental role of language as a medium.

In “A Touch of Translation: On Walter Benjamin’s ‘Task of the Translator’,” Samuel Weber examines the tactile relation between the original and the translation in Benjamin’s essay, claiming that “the task of translation can be described as that of touching without taking” (“Touch” 72). Instead of possessing and owning the original, translation touches the original only “fleeting” and takes nothing away from it. This translational tactility corresponds to the image of the primordial tactility immanent in aura. Through a geometrical simile, Benjamin describes translation as a unique way of touching the original:

As the tangent fleetically touches (flüchtig berührt) the circle only in one point and as it is this touching (Berührung), not the point, that governs its trajectory into the infinite, so that translation touches the original fleetically and only in the infinitely minute point of its meaning, in order to pursue its own course (Bahn)
following the law of fidelity, in the freedom of the movement of language. (qtd. in Weber “Touch,” 76)

Note how Weber makes explicit the tactile nuances in the German original. Benjamin uses this geometrical simile in order to illustrate the minimal contact between the original and the translation. He insists that the original and the translation ordinarily go on different paths, because “the law of fidelity” never allows the translation to have direct contact with the original.

But this touch of the translation on “the infinitely small point of the sense” is significant because it generates the “afterlife” of the original. For Benjamin, the perfect example of translational touch is Hölderlin’s translations of the two tragedies by Sophocles: Oedipus and Antigone. Benjamin considered these translations to be “the most perfect renderings of their texts as a prototype is to a model” and thus characterizes their relations to the original in the following way: “In them the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an Aeolian harp is touched by the wind” (1: 262). A prototype of his concept of aura is easily perceivable in this sentence, especially because of his use of an aerial simile.

Although Hölderlin and Sophocles were divided by immense “distance” in various ways, the former’s translations resurrected the latter’s “life” through a tangential point of contact. Benjamin praises the auratic dynamism present between the distance and the point of contact in Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles’ works. Through the act of translation, Hölderlin perceived the aura of Sophocles’ tragedies beyond their different eras and languages, and gave them “afterlives.”

Translation touches the original only “in the infinitely minute point of its meaning” and inevitably moves away from it. Weber detects the alienating effect of translation in this
movement: “In moving away from the original, translation unfolds the ways of meaning by moving words away from the meanings habitually attached to them” (“Touch” 75). By moving away from the original in a centrifugal manner, however, translation most radically exposes the character of language as such. This movement is reminiscent of the receding figure of the Angelus Novus, which looks intensely at the past while being blown away from it. This inevitable recession from the origin and the original is a condition of historical and translational thinking. What Benjamin problematizes in his discussion of film’s tactility is not only aura’s disappearance but also the disappearance of the human capability of sensing the subtlety of touch. Benjamin’s allegorical treatment of touch teaches us the fate of art and of humans in general in the age of technological reproducibility.
Fig. 3.1. Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920.
Chapter 4
The Tactile Time and Space:
Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Chiasm

1. Introduction

This chapter aims to examine the phenomenological discourse of touch in Merleau-Ponty’s work. Although it may appear incongruous to include Merleau-Ponty in this study of Modernism, his thoughts on physicality have a close affinity to European art and literature in the early twentieth century. He often cited literary works by French modernists such as Paul Valéry, Marcel Proust, and Andre Gide in his essays and books, and wrote about such modern painters as Cézanne and Klee. These literary and visual works were not only cited as examples to explain his philosophical arguments but also served as important sources of insights for his phenomenology and ontology.\(^93\) Both the dominance of literary realism and the method of perspective drawing came to an end with the rise of Modernism. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of body, particularly his late concept of tactile chiasm, is founded upon these fundamental changes in the manner of artistic expression.

This chapter consists of three parts. In the first part, I will examine Merleau-Ponty’s concept of tactile chiasm, which he mainly developed in *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. I particularly focus on its relation to Merleau-Ponty’s dialectical

\(^93\) For the influence of paintings on his philosophy, see Johnson’s book-length study on the theme.
thoughts on the notions of flesh, reversibility, and negativity. While Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the importance of the physical experience of contact, he insists that the experience of touching inevitably involves the problem of the impossibility of touching the other; like Walter Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty claims that the true experience of touch is dialectically related to the absence of touch. This line of inquiry will lead us to consider the structural relation between touch and aesthetic experience in Merleau-Ponty’s thought. In the latter two sections, I will examine relationships obtaining between his notion of tactile chiasm and his interpretations of Cézanne and Proust. In the section on Cézanne, I will discuss Merleau-Ponty’s enigmatic spatial concept of “depth” and explain its difference from geometrical space. In various essays, Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne as a revolutionary painter who reclaimed the sense of physicality in paintings by breaking with the traditional method of perspective drawing and opened up the sphere of “depth.” I will consider how his discussion of “depth” coincides with his observation of Cézanne’s paintings. In the part on Proust, I will examine the chiasmic relationship between the past and the present that both Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and Proust’s work propose; in particular, I will focus on the tactile implications in Proust’s unique expression of memory, that is, *la mémoire involontaire*, and consider how it informs the temporal aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of chiasm and “primordial” time. The examinations of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical reading of Modernist works will allow us to regard him as one of the final contributors to the Modernist discourse of touch.

2. Tactility, Reversibility, and Negativity
The central image of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of tactile physicality is that of one hand touching another hand. Since a hand that touches is simultaneously the object of the other hand’s touch, it is impossible for one to assert that only one hand is touching while the other one being touched. Although such a linguistic articulation as “one hand touches the other hand” fails to fully express the phenomenal ambiguity of the two hands touching each other, the distinction between the subjective body and the objective body, or the active body and the passive body, is overcome in action. The act of touching is an experience of being touched to some degree, and a logical understanding of this unique phenomenon would never grasp the phenomenal ambiguity of the experience. The act of touching is also an experience that destabilizes the distinction between the world and the self. As Sue L. Cataldi notes, “Tactile experience is corporeal experience, and in tactile experience, we cannot deceive ourselves about the extent to which our bodily flesh is embedded and engrossed in the flesh of the world or about the extent to which the flesh of the world is engrossed and embedded in us” (119). As we shall see, “flesh [la chair]” is Merleau-Ponty’s term that signifies the impersonal aspect of the human body. For Merleau-Ponty, the intertwining relation between touching and being touched is the essence of flesh and of our relation to the world.

The collapse of the object-subject division through the act of touching leads Merleau-Ponty to insist that the touching-touched relation is intrinsically reversible. Although, as we shall see, the notion of tactile reversibility is developed most fully in The Visible and the Invisible, it already appears in Phenomenology of Perception, in which he claims: “When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side, but of an ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of ‘touching’ and being ‘touched’” (93). The experience of the right hand touching the left hand can
be instantly transformed into an experience of the right hand being touched by the left hand; what is necessary to make this reversal happen is a conscious effort to objectify one of the hands in relation to the other one. This reversal is true not only for tactile chiasm but also for perception in general. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty generalizes this corporeal ambiguity as the problem of “double sensation,” a central enigma of phenomenal physicality: “What was meant by talking about ‘double sensations’ is that, in passing from one role to the other, I can recognize the hand touched as the same one that will in a moment be touching” (93). The idea of “double sensation” plays a central role in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of body: “My body, it was said, is recognized by its power to give me ‘double sensations’” (93).  

As a footnote in the same page indicates, Merleau-Ponty is not the originator of the idea of “double sensation.” He researched Husserl’s then unpublished material which would later become *Ideen II*, in particular, paragraphs 36 and 37 of the book, wherein Husserl argues that “double sensation” is a uniquely tactile experience. He states that if touching “happens by means of some other part of one’s Body, then the sensation is doubled in the two parts of the Body” (153). Husserl further claims that tactility, unlike visuality, is inseparable from specific places in the body where we receive physical sensations. Because of its localized character, he concludes that the sense of touch is the most concrete perception of all the senses:

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94 Sartre criticizes the logical confusion in Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of “double sensation”: “To touch and be touched… these are two species of phenomena which it is useless to try to reunite by the term ‘double sensation.’ In fact, they are radically distinct, and they exist on two incommunicable levels” (304). See Moran 55-59.
The localized sensations are not properties of the Body as a physical thing, but on the other hand, they are properties of the thing, Body, and indeed they are effect-properties. They arise when the Body is touched, pressed, stung, etc., and they arise there where it is touched and at the time when it is touched: only under certain circumstances do they still endure after the touching takes place. Touching refers here to a physical event. Even two lifeless things can touch one another, but the touching of the Body provides sensations on it or in it. (153-54)

Husserl indicates that touching is “a physical event” that exposes the two aspects of the Body: the Body as a physical entity and the Body as a sphere of sensations. By distinguishing a merely physical contact between “lifeless things” from the tactile experience of the human body, Husserl suggests the importance of “life” in his theory of “double sensations.” Remember that Aristotle’s De Anima defines the sense of touch as a perception without which no creature could survive. As Husserl insists above, the Body feels contact both on its surface and as one of the properties that now constitute it. As Deniel Heller-Roazen insists through his entire book, this inner touch was often considered the most fundamental element of life in Western civilization.

Husserl’s phenomenological study of this tactile duality is grounded in a close link between touch and life. If phenomenology is a method to analyze the concrete finitude of “life” through the examination of cognitive particularities, then the sense of touch exposes not only the potentiality of phenomenology’s but also its limitations. When Husserl says that each instance of touching “refers to a physical event,” the adjective “physical” refers to the entire body, and, as such, deconstructs the phenomenological doctrine of intentionality. Since, as Aristotle claims, the body is necessary for life, the sense of touch is a condition of life and that by which life is
conditioned. The reversible nature of tactility challenges the phenomenological thesis that consciousness always has its object—the foundational thesis of phenomenology which Husserl proclaims in *Ideen I* (1913). However, Husserl did not pursue the ambiguity of the sense of touch to the extent that it could collapse his own method of phenomenology. In Husserl’s phenomenology, the sense of touch occupies a privileged position without being analyzed critically in a way that is comparable to the phallus for Freud and Lacan: an absolute signifier of the body.

This is part of the reason why Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on the sense of touch coincide with his late turn to what one might call a phenomenological ontology. *Phenomenology of Perception* still betrays Husserl’s strong influence, in that it resides within the traditional phenomenological discourse of atemporal intentionality, or a schematic structure of consciousness in relation to the world. This phenomenological principle of intentionality, however, fails in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in which the body is *always already* intertwined with the world *prior to* any function of human consciousness. Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of “flesh” for referring to the chiasmic and anonymous mode of physicality that precedes any objective articulation of body, and emphasizes its inseparability from the world through the notion of “the world of flesh.” As one can see in the anonymous status of “flesh” as well as the phenomenon of “chiasm,” Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of body not only departs from the traditional method of phenomenology but also commits to the risk of losing phenomenological exactitude and falling into a sort of mysticism.

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95 Some of the working notes for the book reveal that the tentative title for *The Visible and the Invisible* was “Being and World.” For example, see 198.
François Dastur’s criticism is useful for clarifying the most problematic ambiguity in Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of tactility in *The Visible and the Invisible*. She insists that Merleau-Ponty dismisses a “‘striking’ difference between the visible sphere and tangible sphere” which Husserl established in *Ideen II*: “If there is … at least an experience of double contact, a touching-touched, there is not in contrast a similar ‘reflexivity’ of vision nor a seeing-seen. This is why one cannot assimilate seeing and touching by speaking ‘metaphorically’ of a look that would ‘palpate’ things” (39). True, tactility in *The Visible and the Invisible* becomes quite metaphorical and metonymical to the extent that Merleau-Ponty often ascribes to both vision and touch the same faculty of “reversibility” that should be unique to the phenomenon of touch (41). Phenomenologically speaking, Merleau-Ponty’s confusion of touching and seeing is problematic, since, as Dastur states, “A purely ocular subject could not have a phenomenal body at all, because it would see its own body solely as a material thing” (39). One cannot see parts of one’s body from the inside, while touching one’s own body is a unique experience of simultaneously touching and being touched. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty seems to confuse the abilities of the two senses.

Though negatively, Dastur’s criticism illuminates what distinguishes *The Visible and the Invisible* from his other works. There, Merleau-Ponty’s main focus is, not on the characteristic of particular senses per se, but on the ontological structure of “the very pulp of the sensible” (268).96 While, as we have seen, Husserl equates the sense of touch with physical perception and

96 Many critics have suggested Merleau-Ponty’s “ontological turn” in his final years, and after the recent publication of a series of lectures on nature at *Collège de France*, many have come to agree that this lecture marks his “turning point that leads him toward ontology” (Barbaras, *Nature* 25).
with the very notion of the body in general, Merleau-Ponty further emphasizes the applicability of his discussion about the reversibility of touch to the consideration of the intercorporeal structure of physicality in general. Merleau-Ponty often describes visual phenomena with tactile metaphors; for example, he writes in *The Visible and the Invisible*, “The look [*le regard*] … envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things” (175), and also “Vision is a palpation of the look” (177). For late Merleau-Ponty, seeing and touching are not only interdependent but structurally identical. Indeed, he asserts that “We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility” (*Visible* 177). Of course, this suggests that the spheres of the visible and the tactile are inseparable. In “Eye and Mind,” the last of his essays that Merleau-Ponty was able to see in print in his lifetime, he says that “to see is to have at a distance” (166). This expression indicates that late Merleau-Ponty was not interested in the distinct differences between the two perceptions as much as the primordial faculty of perception that precedes the division of the senses. Indeed, from early on, Merleau-Ponty was suspicious with the division of senses, since, as he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “the senses communicate with each other” (225). In his opinion, “the experience of the separate ‘senses’ is gained only when one assumes a highly particularized attitude, and this cannot be of any assistance to the analysis of direct consciousness” (225). Therefore, any attempt to describe the exclusive characteristics of specific senses would be too metaphysical for Merleau-Ponty. “Communion” of or “communication” between the senses precedes the specific functions of individual senses (*Phenomenology* 320).

Merleau-Ponty analyzes the structure of seeing-seen relationship through the model of touching-touched reversibility, and by so doing approaches the problem of the fundamental passivity of every perceptual activity. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reversibility is
close to Walter Benjamin’s formulation of aura, that is, the capability of things to “look back.”

Being sensible to such centrifugal functions in things opens up a question concerning the intercoporeal structure of perception, which, for Merleau-Ponty, is synonymous with the ontological thesis of “being-in-the-world.”

It is important that Merleau-Ponty engages with this Heideggerian question through phenomenological notions of the “sensible” and “reversibility,” since it is an expansion of both phenomenological and ontological fields. It is an attempt to deconstruct the dualism that exists between the body and the mind as well as between empiricism and idealism. In a recently published note written in May 1960, he writes, “Show that the ‘sensible’ as such is transcendence, i.e., accessibility of the inaccessible” (Reader 438). As this small fragment concisely attests, the main aim of The Visible and the Invisible is to consider the reversible relation between the positive and the negative, the active and the positive, and the possibility and the impossibility: a group of oppositional ideas that traditionally constitute the formula of the dialectic.

When Merleau-Ponty rethinks the problem of corporeal duality in The Visible and the Invisible, he again uses the ideas of “double sensation” and reversibility that he already examined in Phenomenology of Perception, but the focus of his description is now quite different:

We say … that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double

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97 We should note that Phenomenology of Perception already describes “being in the world” as the structure of being that is always already “thrown” into concrete “environments,” that is, as a factor that limits intentionality.
belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. It cannot be by incomprehensible accident that the body has this double reference; it teaches us that each calls for the other. (Visible 137)

The duality of the body here is essential to this passage, but Merleau-Ponty’s interest in the sense of touch is less phenomenological that in his previous treatment of the concept in Phenomenology of Perception, at least in the sense of “phenomenology” strictly defined by Husserl. Evidently, he is much more interested in the duality itself than in the specific character of touch. Duality, or the two-ness is, despite its apparent simplicity, quite significant in this work. A working note for The Visible and the Invisible reads: “Consider the two, the pair, this is not two acts, two syntheses, it is a fragmentation of being, it is a possibility for separation [écart]…, it is the advent of difference…” (217). “Two” is not a number that can be divided into two ones, but a pair that is meaningful only as a pair.98 To consider the “two” is not to consider two

98 The frequent allusion to the number “two” in his final writings shows the significant influence of Hegelian dialectic on his later thought. In the last two months of his life, Merleau-Ponty was preparing for a project entitled “Philosophy and non-Philosophy since Hegel,” in which he examines Hegel’s actual importance in his contemporary society. In this essay, he insists that both Hegelians and anti-Hegelians miss the essential point of Hegel’s dialectic, since both of them believe that the process of dialectic is subservient to its consequence. Opposing such a view, Merleau-Ponty claims that what is important about Hegelian dialectic is the conflictive (and thus phenomenological) encounter between two different elements rather than its outcome. Merleau-Ponty claims that one of the few thinkers who understood the essence of dialectic is Marx, who

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individuals but to consider the divisibility of an individual as well as to consider the chiasmic reversibility. The intertwining structure of the “two” that exists within an individual endlessly destabilizes the self-contained unity of the individual by producing the effect of otherness.

If the two elements are in a completely reversible relation, then these two would not work as a pair anymore. Merleau-Ponty is aware of this problem when he writes in a working note that “it is that reversibility is not an actual identity of the touching and the touched” (Visible 272).

Merleau-Ponty revises Husserl’s notion of reversibility in order to accommodate the question of ontic-ontological difference. In The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty introduces the qualitative difference into the model of tactile chiasm by insisting that touching and being touched do not occur at the same time:

If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the

emphasizes the internal “movements” of the dialectic and considers the function of “the other” in them (Philosophy 77). As Merleau-Ponty insists, Marx defines man not as “a pure subject nor a fragment of nature” but as “a sort of coupling of ‘subject-object’ with two sides; a relation to an object, or an active object, and also a relation essentially to another man, a generic being (Gattungswesen), ‘society’” (Philosophy 77). “Society” here signifies not only a communal unity but also a sphere of perceptual interactions. Merleau-Ponty takes Marx’s socialized dialectic as a study of “man as relation.” Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy rejects syntheses. Concerning Merleau-Ponty’s later reading of Hegel, see also “Hegel’s Existentialism” in Sense and Non-sense.
moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand. (9)

Reversibility fails just as it occurs; it is therefore an event that never achieves its realization. The unique physicality of the hand abides even when the function and the relation that characterizes the function transfers to the other hand. Merleau-Ponty mentions this failure of reversibility in another part of the book:

We must not think the flesh starting from substances, from body and spirit—but we must think it, as we said, as an element, as the concrete emblem of a general manner of being. To begin with, we spoke summarily of a reversibility of the seeing and the visible, of the touching and the touched. It is a reversibility always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization. (Visible 147-48)

“Flesh” is at once concrete and general; it is a physical notion that corresponds with the Heideggerian notion of Being. By emphasizing the unexchangeable specificity of “flesh,” a notion which I shall discuss shortly, Merleau-Ponty links his phenomenology with his ontology. The last-minute failure of the “coincidence” of touching and being touched illuminates a unique quality of Being. It is important to note that in both passages, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the decisive “moment” at which correspondence fails. This “moment” can be criticized by deconstructing Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical assumptions.
However, we should suspend this criticism for a further examination of Merleau-Ponty’s corporeal version of “ontological difference” in the context of touching-touched reversibility.

Merleau-Ponty writes, “This last-minute failure does not drain all truth from that presentiment I had of being able to touch myself touching” (Visible 9). The failure does not cancel out the process of attempts; rather, it is the failure of the “coincidence” of the sensible body and the sensed body that makes the body a sphere of relations. This definition of body is close to Kierkegaard’s definition of “the self” as “a relation which relates itself to its own self,” negating the rational understanding of “self-identity” (41). As Douglas Low accurately writes, “the lack of coincidence and the lack of total separation … between the two aspects of the body are what makes human experience possible. Experiencing (or perception) is a contact that remains at a distance” (25). This spatiality filled with implications of tactility reminds us of Walter Benjamin’s spatiality of aura that we examined in the previous chapter. For both Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin, the true experience is an experience of failure. In fact, Merleau-Ponty doubts the possibility of any conclusive form of realization in his philosophy. It is noteworthy that in an unfinished late essay, “Philosophy and non-Philosophy since Hegel,” Merleau-Ponty repeatedly claims that “philosophy is destroyed only if it is realized” (63). This assertion sheds light on the structure of his concept of tactile chiasm, in which Aufhebung counts as nothing. The impossibility of correspondence between the touching and the touched evinces the temporal aspect of the “double reference,” which is latent in being and surfaces only in process (Visible 124):

I experience—and as often as I wish—the transition and the metamorphosis of the one experience into the other, and it is only as though the hinge [chanière]
between them, solid, unshakable, remained irremediably hidden from me. But this hiatus [hiatus] between my right hand touched and my right hand touching …, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. My flesh and that of the world therefore involve clear zones, clearings, about which pivot their opaque zones, and the primary visibility, that of the quale and of the things, does not come without a second visibility, that of the lines of force and dimensions, the massive flesh without a rarefied flesh, the momentary body without a glorified body. (Visible 148)

The touching-touched reversibility thus generates a unique kind of difference, which Merleau-Ponty addresses through such spatial metaphors as “hinge,” “hiatus,” “gap [écart]” as well as the Heiddegerian image of “clearings,” although its implication extends, as the differentiation between “one moment” and “the following one” in the above passage shows, to the problem of time. Merleau-Ponty believed that there is an element in the body that connects two different levels of time and space while staying external to both of them. Cathryn Vasseleu rightly says that “the body is … a hinge; an articulation of the world; an entre-deux” (27). This is a dimension of the body that Merleau-Ponty calls “flesh [chair],” which is an invisible physicality that directly connects humans with the world prior to the articulated differentiation of the “I” and “the world”; more radically, echoing the imaginary spatiality that children of the pre-reflective
period possess, he asserts that “the world is flesh” (*Visible* 138, emphasis mine). Therefore, the notion of flesh cannot be separated from ontological time and space. The enigmatic notions of “the flesh of the world” and “the flesh of time” should be understood in the sense that the flesh is simultaneously world and time.

The passage above also shows that the “flesh” understood as a “hinge” remains “irremediably hidden from me,” just as Heideggerian “Being” conceals itself in “everyday [alltag] Dasein.” Merleau-Ponty equates the sphere between two hands touching each other, which is physically empty, with “the dimension of the hidden” (219). “Being hidden,” of course, does not mean that the flesh or the “hinge” does not exist. It rather suggests the multidimensional and temporal structure of being. Merleau-Ponty states that “spatial ‘metaphors’” in his discussion should be “understood as an individuation of being and nothingness” (216). This is a clear but negative allusion to Sartre’s masterpiece. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the difference between his notion of “hinge” and the Sartrian notion of nothingness [*néant*], criticizing Sartre’s assertion of the “pure negative” as “a high-altitude thought,” and insists that “Being and Nothingness are

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99 See also the following fragment in a working note: “My body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived), and moreover this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt [*senti*] at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping” (*Visible* 248).

100 Merleau-Ponty mentions Heidegger’s idea of the unconcealment of the concealed as a moment of truth in a working note (254).
indiscernible’’ (Visible 69, 66). While Sartre’s nothingness is a stable and transcendental
	onption that precedes and dominates every individual existence, Merleau-Ponty believes that

negativity cannot exist without a positive element of being. Hence, “There is pure negation only

in principle” and “pure being is nowhere to be found” (Visible 68). “Purity” is one of the notions

that Merleau-Ponty repeatedly criticizes in his late works for its metaphysicality. For him, the

space of “zero degree” is non-pure because of its influence on the things surrounding it. Merleau-

Ponty carefully states that “The only ‘place’ where the negative would really be is the fold [le

pli],” an ambiguous place that is closely associated with the notion of “depth,” where the

distinction between the inside and the outside collapses (Visible 264). The negative is a spatio-

temporal agency that mediates the system of differential relationships among existences: a source

of ontological difference. What is hidden is hidden only transitorily: “One sees things” where

there used to be nothing (Visible 262). Therefore, “Nothingness and being are always absolutely

other than one another, it is precisely their isolation that unites them; they are not really united,

they only more quickly succeed one another before thought” (Visible 68). The relation between

101 See the first chapter “The Origin of Negation” of Being and Nothingness (27-69). For Sartre,

nothingness is what precedes and conditions être-pour-soi: “The Being by which Nothingness

arrives in the world must nihilate Nothingness in its Being (47). As such, even if Nothingness is

essential to Being, they are in a conflictive relationship. However, critics have pointed out that

Merleau-Ponty simplifies Sartre in various ways that I cannot enumerate here. On the differences

between the two philosophers’ views of the negativity, see Jon Stewart and Whitford.

102 Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of “purity” probably reflects the influence of Henri Bergson, who

in Matters and Memory (1896) insists that pure perception “exists in theory rather than in fact”
being and nothingness defined here is parallel to his argument about touching-touched
reversibility, since in both, the two elements do not independently exist but are intertwined with
a spatio-temporal effect of difference. Being is a variation of nothingness, and vice versa.103

It is therefore inappropriate to ask where the “invisibleness” or “nothingness” is hidden.
While nothingness does not occupy any concrete space nor is it subject to any identification, it is
not an abstract concept. Instead, it “takes place” and constitutes an event, just as the sense of
touch does:

It is precisely because Being and Nothingness, the yes and the no, cannot be
blended together like two ingredients that, when we see being, nothingness is
immediately there, and not in the margin like the zone of non-vision around our
field of vision, but over the whole expanse of what we see, as what installs it and
disposes it before us as a spectacle. (Visible 66)

“Nothingness” exists, to use a title of his essay, “everywhere and nowhere,” since it is a
phenomenon that occurs in the sphere of the in-between.104 It may appear preposterous to claim
that the invisible constitutes “a spectacle,” since the word normally refers to a visual
phenomenon. However, for Merleau-Ponty, a spectacle is a sort of rupture in the cognitive
structure, an event that is neither purely visible nor invisible but temporal and situational. A

103 In his lecture at the Collège de France on the theme of nature, he states that “the reality of
organisms supposes a non-Parmenidean being, a form which escapes from the dilemma of being
and non-being” (Nature 34).

104 Signs 126-58. It was written as an introduction to an anthology, Les Philosophes célèbres.
“spectacle” goes beyond the limit of one’s expectation of what is visible; it challenges the sphere of the visible and the touchable in general.

Merleau-Ponty finds in such exposure of the “sensible” a possibility of aesthetic experience: “The aesthetic world” is “a space of transcendent, a space of incompatibilities, of explosion, of dehiscence, and not as object-immanent space” (Visible 216). He uses the strong word “explosion” in order to express the incommensurability of elements within a single being. For him, art corresponds with the structural rupture of perception, which in turn constitutes the unique potentiality of the sensible. He states that “The absolute of the ‘sensible’ is the stabilized explosion i.e. involving return” (Visible 268). The sense of rupture upon the contact of two extreme opposites, such as being and nothing, visible and invisible, and touchable and untouchable, is simultaneously explosive and aesthetic. For Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne and Proust were two Modernist figures who could fully express this sense of rupture through their works. Indeed, through the examination of these artists, Merleau-Ponty came to attain a recognition of the indestructible impersonality within the entity of human, which is the absolute negativity that opens up through perceptual reversibility. The Merleau-Pontian “spectacle” is not necessarily visually spectacular at all. Instead, it is fundamentally structural in that it requires a temporal correspondence between the “inside” and the “outside,” that is, the event of “contact … of self with self,” with the inevitable effect of dehiscence (Visible 268).

It is now clear that just as negativity is inherent in the sensible, the tactile chiasm structurally necessitates its other. Merleau-Ponty claims, “Something else than the body is needed for the junction to be made: it takes place in the untouchable. That of the other which I will never touch” (Visible 254). Although it may appear contradictory, what is really essential for
the touchable is the existence of its negative counterpart: the “untouchable.” Subsequently, he also writes as follows:

The negativity inhabits the touch (and which I must not minimize: it is because of it that the body is not an empirical fact, that it has an ontological signification), the untouchable of the touch, the invisible of vision, the unconscious of consciousness (its central punctum caecum, that blindness that makes it consciousness i.e. an indirect and inverted grasp of all things) is the other side or the reverse (or the other dimensionality) of sensible Being… (Visible 255)

There is nothing that is untouchable a priori. Instead, the negative element of a perceptual experience is concomitant with the experience of touching. While untouchability is normally “hidden” and does not surface independently, this indestructible, impersonal, and anonymous element not only precedes individual reflection but also constitutes the foundation of “life,” which is “an original of the elsewhere, a Selbst that is an other” (Visible 254). Merleau-Ponty insists that the act of touching opens up a passage from the sensible to the insensible as well as from the insensible to the sensible, and thereby attests to the “anonymity innate to Myself” (Visible 139). Interpreting the tactile duality in Merleau-Ponty’s late work as a mode of “autobiography,” Judith Butler writes:

105 For the importance of the notion of “life” in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, see Barbaras, who aptly says that “life escapes the phenomenological reduction … because it appears again on the transcendental level” (“Phenomenology” 207).
To be touched is, of course, to undergo something that comes from the outside that postpones the plausibility of any claim to self-identity. The “I” is occasioned by alterity, and that occasion persists as its necessary and animating structure. Indeed, if there is to be self-representation, if I am to speak the “I” in language, then this autobiographical reference has been enabled from elsewhere, has undergone what is not itself. Through this undergoing, an “I” has emerged. (189)

The impenetrable otherness constitutes the core of the “invisible” and “untouchable” sphere in the body, forming the unity of “I” through its temporal effect of difference. If self-reference is possible, the third element that exists outside the relation between the signifier and the signified should be necessary. However, if the “elsewhere” is not another name for transcendence, how does this placeless place intervene in the constitution of the self? And how is it related to the question of aestheticism in ontological terms? In order to engage with these questions, we should examine the spatial and temporal nature of rupture, which Merleau-Ponty considers through an examination of art and literature in his late works.

3. Depth, the Vertical, the Primitive: Cézanne and Touching

“The problem of negativity is the problem of depth,” Merleau-Ponty asserts in a working note for The Visible and the Invisible (236). What is negative constitutes depth, which cannot be equated with geometrical or optical distance. This notion first appears in Phenomenology of Perception, in which Merleau-Ponty objects to Berkley’s insistence that “depth” is “breadth seen from the side,” writing that “in order to treat depth as breadth viewed in profile, in order to arrive
at a uniform space, the subject must leave his place, abandon his point of view on the world” (255). In other words, geometrical space is constructed from the God’s perspective. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty posits the notion of “depth” as a space bound to the finite condition of the human body. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes his observations of patients who just recovered from blindness, and claims that “there is a space so strictly tactile that its articulations do not and never will stand in a relationship of synonymity with those of visual space” (223). Although Merleau-Ponty does not use the word here, this non-optical spatiality is associated with the notion of “depth,” through which Merleau-Ponty proposes a differential “medium” in human’s spatial conceptualization. Merleau-Pontian “depth” embraces the existential state of “thrownness” as defined by Heidegger as the fundamental passivity of humans, as he states that it “forces us to reject the preconceived notion of the world and

106 Edward S. Casey emphasizes that “depth is less a dimension than a medium” in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology (10). Casey also aptly suggests that the sphere of “depth” has a strong resonance with Plato’s notion of *chora*, which in the *Timaeus* is a primordial (“maternal”) receptacle filled with multidirectional movements: a sphere of genesis and differentiation. Hugh J. Silverman’s comparative study of Kristeva and Merleau-Ponty draws attention to the similarity between Kristeva’s theorized notion of *chora* and Merleau-Ponty’s later thoughts on speech. Kristeva, following the model of the Lacanian distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic, makes a distinction between two different but interrelated levels of speech, namely, the semiotic and the symbolic, and uses the non-representational space of *chora* to explain the primordial irreducibility of the semiotic in *The Revolution in Poetic Language*. For Kristeva, *chora* is a semiotic (that is, pre-symbolic) image, filled with a constant flow of signs, energies, and drives (40).
rediscover the primordial experience from which it springs: it is, so to speak, the most ‘existential’ of all dimensions” (*Phenomenology* 256). By means of the notion of “depth,” Merleau-Ponty ontologizes the otherwise neutral notion of space.

The difference between geometrical space and sensible space becomes clear, for instance, in a Gestalt psychology experiment concerning the perception of moving objects:

The object moving away grows smaller, and the object approaching grows larger, less quickly for my perception than the physical image on my retina. That is why the train coming towards us, at the cinema, increases in size much more than it would in reality. (*Phenomenology* 260)

This describes a difference between Newtonian truth and psychological truth. Merleau-Ponty here refers to a famous account concerning Lumières brothers’ *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat*, the story that the viewers who watched an image of a train that appeared to move in their direction felt panicked. This famous story is often cited as a proof of the intrinsically spectacular nature of the cinema as well as of the naïveté of early cinema viewers. Whether this myth is historically true or not, Merleau-Ponty’s point is that the two dimensional screen is not able to produce the effect of “depth,” the impression created by moving objects on the recipient. Seeing moving objects by means of the human eye is different from watching them through the camera’s eye. Merleau-Ponty states that “We ‘have’ the retreating object, we never cease to ‘hold’ it and to have a grip on it, and the increasing distance is not, as breadth appears to be, an augmenting externality: it expresses merely that the thing is beginning to slip away from the grip of our gaze and is less closely allied to it” (*Phenomenology* 261). As his choice of words in this
passage makes clear, Merleau-Ponty suggests that moving objects evoke tactile responses in the body. “In reality,” we feel that objects are approaching us less quickly as a side effect of our visual “grip” on the objects. A fragmentary note for *The Visible and the Invisible* reads: “The touch = movement that touches and movement that is touched” (256). On this matter, Sue L. Cataldi states that “The achievement of tactility is its establishment of a certain optimal proximity between the here that is feeling and the there that is felt. This tactile proximity is not just a proximity of spatially static contiguity. It is proximity established through the body’s exploratory movements” (118). Thus, the sense of touch works together with the sense of vision when one perceives moving objects or when one engages in actions, while films deprive body of this flexible interaction between vision and touch.

Merleau-Ponty explores the non-geometrical notion of “depth” in three essays on paintings, “Cézanne’s Doubt” (1945), “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” (1952), and “Eye and Mind” (1960) as well as in significant portions of *Phenomenology of the Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*. Toward the end of his career, he gradually associated his project of ontological phenomenology with the methods of modernist painters. He thought that phenomenology and modern paintings have in common in that both treat “the actual body … which is an intertwining of vision and movement” (“Eye” 162). Referring to this passage, Jacques Taminiaux says that “to see is, at the outset, to be able to come within proximity of what is seen, to hold it at arm’s length and to come within closer range” (199). Merleau-Ponty observes that modernist painters, in particular Cézanne, tried to express this primordial, tactile space that is animated by movements.
For Merleau-Ponty, the most important achievement of modernist painters such as Cézanne, Matisse, and Klee, is that they break with the classical method of perspective drawing and expose the existential basis of “space” and “things” beyond their objective appearances, namely, space and things in motion. Merleau-Ponty shares a critical view of perspective drawing with early twentieth century art historians in the Germanic-speaking countries, such as Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, Fritz Novotny, and, above all, Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky’s 1928 study *Perspective as Symbolic Form* significantly influenced Merleau-Ponty’s project to de-intellectualize the spatiality. In this work, Panofsky demonstrates the parallelism between the Western “vision” of the world and the method of perspective drawing, critically analyzing “homogeneous” space and “perspectival construction” (50). In modern paintings, he found “the emergence of the truly modern view of space,” in which “bodies and space are bound together” (50). For Panofsky, the disappearance of a pictorial method is a symptom of the end of an age in the history of Western civilization. This agrees with Merleau-Ponty’s view of modern paintings as well as his phenomenology of space. Merleau-Ponty states in a course on “Institution” at the *Collège de France* from 1954 to 1955 that “Renaissance perspective” is “not … the true telos,” and that it is “neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the value of a work of art” (*Institution* 41; 42). Such a critical attitude toward the method of perspective drawing ultimately led him to consider, as Renaud Barbaras puts it, the “mode of unity between expression and perception, between truth and experience” (“Nature” 27). While geometrical space mechanically dissect this mode of unity, his notion of “depth” is grounded in this unity, being closely associated with the primordial state of perception.
Among other Modernist painters, Paul Cézanne was the one whom Merleau-Ponty admired most ardently as an important innovator of pictorial space. He insists that Cézanne “refuses to follow the law of geometrical perspective” and “attempt[s] to recapture the physiognomy of things and faces by the integral reproduction of their sensible configuration” (World 53; Phenomenology 322). Merleau-Ponty insists that Cézanne’s method of de-familiarization leads to the disclosure of the true figure of nature, which the method of perspective drawing has long suppressed. As Joachim Gasquet recalls, this goal was precisely what Cézanne himself was pursuing. On being asked by a young painter of how to paint nature, Cézanne said that one should “treat nature in terms of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone”; through these defamiliarizations, the “vertical” aspect of the world is exposed (163). “Depth” is a word that Cézanne himself preferred to use to describe the essence of nature. According to Gasquet, Cézanne said that “nature, for us human beings, has more to do with depth than with surfaces” (163). It is quite possible that Merleau-Ponty adopted the word “depth” from Gasquet’s memoir of Cézanne, which he liked to cite in his works.

What Cézanne meant by the word “depth” may not exactly be identical with what Merleau-Ponty hoped to express by the word. Yet, Merleau-Ponty actively finds a close relation between Cézanne’s efforts and his own philosophical examination of “depth.” In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty contrasts Cézanne’s unique expression of space with the perspectival representation of space based on Cartesian metaphysics:

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I believe Cézanne was seeking depth all his life,” says Giacometti. Says Robert Delaunay, “Depth is the new inspiration.” Four centuries after the "solutions" of the Renaissance and three centuries after Descartes, depth is still new, and it insists on being sought, not “once in a lifetime” but all through life (179).

As Merleau-Ponty states here, “depth” was indeed a keyword for quite a few of Cézanne’s commentators. Most notably, Fritz Novotny’s standard study of Cézanne (1938), to which Merleau-Ponty refers both in Phenomenology of Perception and “Eye and Mind,” closely interprets details of Cézanne’s paintings and explains how Cézanne challenges the optical and systematic “representation” of space through his pictorial expression of sensorial space and the sense of depth:

The cautious joining of surfaces and contours, the constantly changing strength of these contours, the apparent lability but fundamental firmness of the picture’s general framework—these are the means that make it possible to shake a fundamental system of linear perspective from the inside out, as it were, to the farthest depth, a system that is to all appearances thoroughly indisputable and that, handled in a different way, allows no doubt as to its accuracy in depicting space. (384)

Through this compelling interpretation of Cézanne’s pictorial space, Novotny concludes that Cézanne’s paintings are a sort of knell to the “system of linear perspective”: “perspective in the old sense is dead” (424). This insight coincides with Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Cézanne
and other modernist painters. For Merleau-Ponty, this “death” of scientific perspective has almost an existential significance, and attests to the death of Cartesian (optical) space.

“Cézanne’s Doubt” describes Cézanne’s concern about geometrical space as well as his own painting abilities, illustrating how these fundamental doubts concerning painting threw him into an endless struggle to truly realize what he envisioned. Merleau-Ponty insists that Cézanne’s paintings are a series of confrontations with the “birth of the landscape” (World 53). For Cézanne, landscape was not an object in the world but a lived space that could not be separated from the viewer’s subjective experience of being within it. Merleau-Ponty emphatically states that “the objects in a modern painting ‘bleed,’ their substance spreads under our eyes, they distinctly question our gaze” (“Expression” 152). He thus ascribed to death a vitalistic image, which Lawrence, Stieglitz, and Benjamin also explored through their works.

For Cézanne, life cannot be separated from the act of painting. Merleau-Ponty observes that Cézanne’s works bear “the signature of a moment of life,” which testifies to the painter’s struggle to create (“Indirect” 51). Cézanne’s painting is not “imitation” but “a process of expressing” (“Doubt” 17). Richard Shiff argues that his pictures lead us to face the simple fact

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108 See Joachim Gasquet’s account of Cézanne’s words: “In order to paint a landscape well, I first need to discover its geological structure. Think of the earth’s history as dating from the day when two atoms met, when two whirlwinds, two chemical dances, joined together. When I read Lucretius, I drench myself with those first huge rainbows, those cosmic prisms, that dawn of mankind rising over the void. In their fine mist, I breathe in the new-born world” (153).
that the process of painting consists of “touches, not vision” (135).¹⁰⁹ “Tactile experience is,” Shiff says, “inherently subsided (touch by touch), whereas vision comes whole” (149). Instead of adopting either classical method of perspective drawing or the Impressionistic style, Cézanne insists on beginning with the tactile experience; only by doing so could he approach the origin of nature and of the sensible, the invisible elements that he considered the true objects of painting. Although Cézanne painted Mont Sainte-Victoire over sixty times, every painting session meant something completely new to him.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty asserts, “the painter’s vision is a continued birth” (“Eye” 168). Richard Shiff is right when he insists that Cézanne’s “touch returns vision to the primordial experience of immediate physical contact, and perhaps even to a time before the body is distanced from objects, before it requires language or a symbolic order to negotiate a constructed reality” (“Eye” 168). Shiff associates Cézanne’s paintings with both primordial time and space. Thus understood, one could say that Cézanne was a practitioner of phenomenological reduction. His paintings bracket social, cultural, and environmental realities in order to explore the true figure of things beyond what one would expect in visual representations. Cézanne’s paintings therefore remind the viewer of the “primordial perception” that exists within the human body, the mode of perception in which the “distinctions between touch and sight are unknown” (“Doubt” 15). Yve-Alain Bois seems to agree with this when he insists that “Cézanne wanted to attempt, namely, to splice vision and touch together at the very moment when the two sensory fields were in the process of splitting apart: in some way to invent a tactile vision” (37). Seeing

¹⁰⁹ In a similar move, Roger Fry famously describes the character of the “Post-Impressionists”: “They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life” (177).
Cézanne’s works is thus an experience of returning to the point prior to the division between vision and touch.

Merleau-Ponty underlines the existential importance of primordiality through an examination of the peculiar relationship between Cézanne’s pictures and natural environments. Comparing the “difficulties” in Cézanne’s painting process to “those of the first word,” he makes the following claim:

[Cézanne] considered himself powerless because he was not omnipotent, because he was not God and wanted nevertheless to portray the world, to change it completely into a spectacle, to make visible how the world touches us. (“Doubt” 19)

Merleau-Ponty portrays Cézanne’s painterly creation as a sort of translation of tactile experience into visual expression. While the tactile is associated with the primordial, the task of the painter is to translate this primordial touching into visual expression. Since the order between the tactile perception and the visual expression is of primal importance to Merleau-Ponty, he has to emphasize that “Cézanne does not try to use color to suggest the tactile sensations which would give shape and depth” (“Doubt” 15). For him, being touched by Nature is the experience that precedes visual representation; hence, what is to be perceived through the sense of touch cannot be “suggested” by the use of color. In other words, what is tactile is pre-optical. ¹¹⁰ What is

¹¹⁰ In The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance (1896), Bernard Berenson argues that “The essential in the art of painting … is somehow to stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that the picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our
important here is not the analogy but the effect of translation from tactile experience to a visual form. Unlike the systematic representation of reality through perspective drawing, corporeal translation requires the painter a physical engagement with the act of painting. Merleau-Ponty insists that “Cézanne wanted to paint [the] primordial world, and his pictures therefore seem to show nature pure, while photographs of the same landscapes suggest man’s works, conveniences, and imminent presence” (“Doubt” 13-14). This sentence reminds us of Lawrence’s reading of Cézanne. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lawrence believe that Cézanne’s paintings exhibit his deep understanding of the physical reality and the “primordial world,” which photography would never be able to capture. Merleau-Ponty believed that, unlike photographic reproductions of landscapes, Cézanne’s paintings establish a translational relationship between nature and body.

In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty emphasizes this point by quoting Paul Valéry’s aphorism: “The painter ‘takes the body with him,’ says Valéry. Indeed we cannot imagine how a mind could paint. It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings” (162). Through the process of painting, the painter’s body becomes a “medium”

tactile imagination” (5). Merleau-Ponty opposes to this conception of tactility in “Eye and Mind,” stating that “painting evokes nothing, least of all the tactile” (166). While Berenson claims that tactile effects come from visual representations, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological premise is that the tactile experience precedes the optical realization.

111 Note that the French verb traduire means not only “to translate” but also “to express,” “to interpret” and “to indicate” as well.

112 As Takashi Kakuni points out, the original by Valéry reads “The artist [artiste] takes the body with him,” which Merleau-Ponty quotes in its entirety in an earlier essay, “Man and Adversity”
that transforms the world into an art. Merleau-Ponty finds traces of Cézanne’s tactile efforts to explore corporeal “depth” in his paintings.

Through the consideration of Cézanne and other modernist painters, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on his notion of touching-touched reversibility. In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty insists that “depth is … the experience of the reversibility of dimensions” (180). He suggests that the painter’s body is intertwined with Nature through the act of painting.\(^{113}\) As the one hand touching the other hand constitutes a sort of event, the genuine act of painting throws the painter into a momentary interrelation with nature that will lead to what Merleau-Ponty calls a “spectacle.” Such “primordial space [lieu] is,” as Renaud Barbaras aptly puts it, “indistinctively place [place] and event” (Being 213). In this model, nature or “the world” is not a static object; instead, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in a previously quoted passage, it “touche\(\)s us.” Merleau-Ponty believes that painting, or activity of artistic expression in general, should never detach itself from this primordial, tactile experience.

“Depth” is, then, ultimately a synonym for the “hiatus” in the touching-touched chiasm, arising inevitably in the zone of contact between the painter and the world. Since “depth immediately reveals the link [lien] between the subject and space,” it forms the origin of

\(^{37}\) In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty replaces the word “artist” with “painter,” although he does not place it outside the quotation marks.

\(^{113}\) A recent publication of his notes for the course at the Collège de France from 1956 to 1960 establishes that the concept of “Nature” preoccupied Merleau-Ponty in his final years. In Situation IV, Sartre reports a communication with Merleau-Ponty, who talked about Alfred North Whitehead’s influence on his interest in nature. For a further discussion of this topic, see Toadvine.
intersubjective relations (*Phenomenology* 267). Merleau-Ponty therefore defines “depth” as “a transcending of the negative toward the sensible,” contrasting it with Euclidean space, which is merely “the model for perspectival being” and therefore lacks “transcendence” (*Visible* 259; 210). If a model of geometrical space identifies the location of the body as a range of determinate given points, “depth” enlivens both the human body and the world, binding them together in a continuum of “flesh.” To put this in a different way, for Merleau-Ponty, there is no such a thing as a “transcendental ego,” which not only Kant but also Husserl presupposed in their theories of subjectivity. In “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” Merleau-Ponty insists that “To say that the ego ‘prior to’ the other person is alone is already to situate it in relation to a phantom of the other person, or at least to conceive of an environment in which others could be” (“Philosopher” 174). Merleau-Ponty uses the French impersonal subject pronoun “on” to refer to this anonymous pre-individualized subject. Flesh dwells in this pre-personal sphere, in which it is in the process of becoming and keeps disorienting itself from the location of the self.

This negative medium that precedes individual intentionality forms the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on the relation between ontology and transcendence. In a working note for *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes that “if being is to disclose itself, it will do so before a transcendence, and not before an intentionality, it will be the engulfed brute being that returns to itself, it will be the sensible that hollows itself out—” (210). The passage shows Heidegger’s strong influence on his ontological phenomenology. In particular, the idea of “disclosure of being” recalls Heidegger’s notion of *aletheia*, that is, the truth as unconcealedness. One should note that, at the time when he was working on *The Visible and the Invisible*, he offered a series of lectures on contemporary philosophy with a focus on Husserl and Heidegger at the *Collège de France*. In a draft for the lectures, he emphasizes that Heidegger, unlike Sartre,
considered being and nothing to be inseparably related. The primal negativity in Heidegger’s notion of Dasein is, Merleau-Ponty says, “Being as ‘abyss,’ ‘abysmal bottom’ [Le Sein comme abîme, fond abyssal] (Notes 109). The negative space of “abyss” constitutes a rupture in the existence of Dasein, but is also the basis for it. There is no doubt that this spatial image of Being influenced Merleau-Ponty’s ontological notion of depth. As Galen A. Johnson notes, “Eye and Mind” “was written in quite sympathetic dialogue with Heidegger” (8n). Merleau-Ponty believes that Cézanne explored ontological truths through painting that Heidegger approached through philosophical inquiry.

In fact, the parallel between Heidegger and Cézanne in Merleau-Ponty’s description is not a mere coincidence. Heidegger himself was a great admirer of the painter. He visited Cézanne’s hometown in the region around Aix-en-Provence in the mid-1950s, and is reported to have said that “These days in Cézanne’s homeland are worth more than a whole library of philosophy books. If only one could think as directly as Cézanne painted” (qtd. in Young 151). Heidegger even wrote a philosophical poem entitled “Cézanne” in 1971 and revised it in 1974. In the poem, he declares a close affinity between his ontology and Cézanne’s paintings, which realize the “duality of the ‘present’” (310). He further interprets Cézanne as having independently arrived at some of his ontological insights, translating a term in Cézanne’s vocabulary into his own philosophical language:

What Cézanne calls la réalization is

the appearance of the present in the clearing

of coming-to-presence—such that the duality of both

is bound up in the simplicity of the pure
In this poem, Heidegger describes the emergence of an ontological space, a “clearing,” as an event that makes a qualitative alternation in time. Like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger finds the phenomenon of “birth” in Cézanne’s pictorial expression. Both philosophers consider aletheia to be foundational for art and artistic activity. And for both of them, Cézanne is a painter who reclaimed the organic sense of aletheia in art by breaking with the convention of perspective drawing.

But there is a significant difference between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger in terms of the negative medium. For Heidegger, what constitutes “depth” or negativity of Being is ultimately death. “Being-toward-death” constitutes the truth of life even when death is just a potentiality—even when people “forget” it (Being 299). While Merleau-Ponty shares with Heidegger the idea that pre-personal conditions precede specification of individual beings, he emphasizes the importance of “life” by such words as “brute being” or “wild being” instead of “death.” For Merleau-Ponty, death is something that is always yet to come and is therefore beyond one’s experience. Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that the anonymous transcendentality exists within life destabilizes the opposition of immanence and transcendence. This is an instance of the uniqueness of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. It is useful to note that, in his course about Nature at the Collège de France in 1956-7, Merleau-Ponty quotes Bergson’s formulation that “life in general is mobility itself” while discussing Bergson’s notion of élan (60). Following Bergson’s idea of the primordial mobility of life, Merleau-Ponty regards transcendence as a movement, or a differentiation. His notion of “depth” as well as “separation (écart)” addresses such qualitative differentiation within the immanent. The work of perception is a “never-finished differentiation”
(Visible 153). Merleau-Ponty therefore emphasizes the importance of the negative perception immanent in the positive perception by means of such experiences as “invisible of the visible” and “the untouchable of the touchable.” The experience of perception, for Merleau-Ponty, exhibits the duality of life, which is fundamental to the act of creation as well as to the phenomenon of genesis. Depth is a pulse-like rhythm that touches life, differentiating itself intermittently; the incessant movement of the organic space “calls ‘coincidence’ in question” (Visible 128).

4. The Tactility of Time, Memory, and Forgetting

Such a characterization of “depth” almost annihilates the distinction between space and time. Since “depth” engages with temporal differentiation, it represents not only in-between space but also in-between time. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty’s theory of touch poses the question of temporality in a uniquely corporeal manner. Like Bergson, Merleau-Ponty regards clocklike, calculable time as a false construction, and explores the relationship between physical sense and the true experience of time. Merleau-Ponty, however, differentiates himself from Bergson on a point which is of crucial importance for him. In a footnote in Phenomenology of Perception, he criticizes Bergson’s notion of time as being conceptually monistic:

Generally speaking, Bergson saw that the body and the mind communicate with each other through the medium of time, that to be a mind is to stand above time’s flow and that to have a body is to have a present. The body, he says, is an instantaneous section made in the becoming of consciousness (Matière et
Mémoire, p.150). But the body remains for him what we have called the objective body; consciousness remains knowledge; time remains a successive “now,” whether it “snowballs upon itself” or is spread as spatialized time, Bergson can therefore only compress or expand the series of “present moments”; he never reaches the unique movement whereby the three dimensions of time are constituted, and one cannot see why duration is squeezed into a present, or why consciousness becomes involved in a body and a world. (Phenomenology 78-79n)

Although the passage in some ways simplifies Bergson’s philosophy, it is worth noting that Merleau-Ponty criticizes the homogeneous model of time in order to emphasize “the unique movement” present in the phenomenon of time. 114 Instead of adopting the Bergsonian fluid model, one-way stream of time, Merleau-Ponty introduces a dual directionality between the past and the present into his concept of time. The contact and communication between two different frames of time constitute “events,” which “are shapes cut out by a finite observer from the spatio-temporal totality of the objective world” (Phenomenology 411). The notion of the “event” addresses both the contingency and the finitude of subjective relation to time, suggesting its conceptual affinity with the notion of depth. 115 Thus, Merleau-Ponty insists that time “arises from my relation to things,” in which the body cannot remain objective (Phenomenology 412). In other words, it is impossible to speak of time as a pure phenomenon that is separable from personal relations to environments. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological time is therefore concomitant with the genesis of one’s corporeal relation to the world as well as to the past and

114 For a detailed study of Merleau-Ponty’s ambivalence toward Bergson’s philosophy, see Grosz.

115 Cataldi points out that “Depth is … associated with the medium of the Present” (81).
the future. In order to establish such relations in time, one should “abandon the description of the problem in terms of ‘representation,’ as he insists in a lecture note.\textsuperscript{116}

For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between the past and the present, and between the present and the future, is chiasmically structured through the medium of body: “My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it” (\textit{Phenomenology} 240). The body is thus the origin of temporal relations, and the sense of touch plays a significant role in this primordial sphere of temporality. Consequently, Merleau-Ponty questions the absolute rule of clocklike time as well as the Bergsonian image of flowing time by introducing physicality into his philosophy of time.

Merleau-Ponty suggests the tactile implication in the concept of time by saying that “I have [my day] in hand” (\textit{Phenomenology} 416). He insists that “my day” does not consist of some objectified time but of “my ‘field of presence’ [\textit{mon champ de présence}],” which encompasses the past and the future in its immediacy. The immediate past and future provide an illusion that time is near at hand. Merleau-Ponty claims:

\begin{quote}
The temporal perspective with its confusion of what is far removed in time, and that sort of “shrinkage” of the past with oblivion as its ultimate limit, are not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{116}“The problem of memory remains a dead end as long as one hesitates between the conceptions of memory as conservation and memory as construction. It is always possible to show that consciousness only finds in its ‘representations’ what it has put into them, and thus that memory is construction—and that nevertheless another memory behind the latter is needed to measure the value of its creations, in other words, a past given gratuitously and in a way quite opposite to the operation of memory as construction” (“Problem” 119).
accidents of memory, and do not express the debasement into empirical existence of a consciousness of time theoretically all-embracing, but its initial ambiguity: to retain is to hold, but at a distance. *(Phenomenology* 423)

The original French of the last part in the passage (“retenir, c’est tenir, mais à distance”) emphasizes the common root of the two verbs (*tenir* and *retenir*). Since to “retain [*retenir*]” principally means “to remember” or “to recollect,” this phrase points to the etymological association of tactility and remembrance. Through the frequent use of tactile metaphors, Merleau-Ponty suggests a kind of time that stimulates physical sensations. In the “field of presence,” says Merleau-Ponty, “I make contact with time” *(Phenomenology* 416).

The tactile “contact” with time informs Merleau-Ponty’s thought on memory. He distinguishes conscious synthesis of the divisions of time from the passive or natural synthesis:

> In order to have a past or a future we do not have to bring together, by means of an intellectual act, a series of *Abschattungen*,¹¹⁷ for they possess a natural and primordial unity, and what is announced through them is the past or the future itself. Such is the paradox of what might be termed, with Husserl, the “passive synthesis” of time …. *(Phenomenology* 419)

Merleau-Ponty thus distinguishes the active recollection of the past from the “passive synthesis” of time. While the former pattern of memory is conscious intellectual effort, in the latter type of

¹¹⁷ *Abschattungen* is a Husserl’s phenomenological concept that signifies the varied appearances of the same object.
remembrance, the past takes an active role and impinges itself on the body. Merleau-Ponty focuses on the experience of the latter form of recollection, which allows one to perceive the “natural and primordial unity.” The examination of such a “passive synthesis” of temporality leads him to consider the relation between physicality and the faculty of memory:

The part played by the body in memory is comprehensible only if memory is, not only the constituting consciousness of the past, but an effort to reopen time on the basis of the implications contained in the present, and if the body, as our permanent means of “taking up attitudes” and thus constructing pseudo-presents, is the medium of our communication with time as well as with space.  

(Phenomenology 181)

Here, Merleau-Ponty’s thought on time comes very close to Walter Benjamin’s dialectical model of history that we examined in the last chapter. Both Benjamin and Merleau-Ponty claim that conscious recollection would never provide with a true recollection of the past. For them, the past is a sort of spiritual being that constitutes itself and reappears in the present. In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin contends that “The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption” (IV 390). Quite similarly, Merleau-Ponty believes that the faculty of human memory consists in “an effort to reopen time on the basis of the implications contained in the present” (Phenomenology 181). He thus introduces plurality into the notion of the “present.” In “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” he also speaks of the “unlimited fecundity of each present” in Husserl’s concept of “Stiftung [Institution]”: 

222
Husserl has used the fine word *Stiftung*—foundation or establishment—to designate first of all the unlimited fecundity of each present which, precisely because it is singular and passes, can never stop having been and thus being universally; but above all to designate that fecundity of the products of a culture which continue to have value after their appearance and which open a field of investigations in which they perpetually come to life again. (59)

Remember Benjamin’s words on the subject: “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again” (IV 390). For both Benjamin and Merleau-Ponty, “the fecundity of each present” depends upon its capability of resurrecting the fleeting image of the past. They imagine that the point at which the past and the present meet is an embodiment of “life” in time. The similarity of these statements derives from the fact that they share the same source of inspiration: Marcel Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

In the footnote to the passage above, Merleau-Ponty associates his philosophy with Proust’s theme of time by quoting a long passage near the opening of *Recherche*, which describes young Marcel waking up in bed without being sure of where he is. In the slow process of waking up, Marcel gradually recognizes the things surrounding him such as the walls and furniture. This is followed by Proust’s observation about the corporeality of memory:

> Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, knees, and shoulder-blades offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept; while the unseen walls kept changing, adapting themselves to the shape of each successive
room that it remembered, whirling madly through the darkness…. My body, the side upon which I was lying, loyally preserving from the past an impression which my mind should never have forgotten, brought back before my eyes the glimmering flame of the night-light in its bowl of Bohemian glass, shaped like an urn and hung by chains from the ceiling, and the chimney-piece of Sienna marble in my bedroom at Combray, in my great-aunt’s house, in those far-distant days which, at the moment of waking, seemed present without being clearly defined.

(Swann’s 5-6)

“Without being clearly defined,” fragmented memories often generate a network of associations of various places and “my body.” The passage describes the way in which Marcel’s “field of presence” gradually expands in the room as he slowly establishes his relation to the things surrounding him. In this process, “my body” and “my room” become inseparable. The tactile sense, collaborating with the visual sense, clearly plays an important role here. The side of the body pressed upon the bed preserves the pre-linguistic impressions he received in his childhood. It is not “I” but the body that remembers; “All the efforts of our intellect must prove futile,” Proust writes in a different part of passage in Recherche, since “the past is hidden somewhere outside this realm, beyond the reach of the intellect” (Swann’s 47-48). As already discussed, in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin compares the trace of the past in the involuntary memory [la mémoire involontaire] to “the trace of the potter’s hand” that remains in “an earthen vessel” (IV 316). In Benjamin’s historical materialism, objects such as the vessel contain fragments of the past, which only an artisan’s touch could restore.
In Proust’s novel too, the tactile sense is associated with the non-intellectual aspect of human memory. The involuntary memory takes form in the scenes in which the tactile sense plays an important role: the feel of a towel, the taste of a madeleine, the solidity of paving stones, the sound of spoon touching a plate. All of these events and phenomena capture such moments of contacts that occasion Marcel’s involuntary encounters with the past. Touching things momentarily brings back the things that have been lost to the intellectual mind but preserved in the body. In these epiphanic moments, the distinction between the past and the present disappears. Merleau-Ponty thinks of such temporal reversibility when he states that “The sensible, Nature, transcend the past present distinction, realize from within a passage from one into the other” (Visible 267). Remember that Merleau-Ponty writes in Phenomenology of Perception that philosophical efforts “are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive [naïf] contact with the world” (vii). Although Proustian touch appears to be quite personal, its instant associations with the past and natural environment point to the primitive perception that Merleau-Ponty wanted to explore through his phenomenology. The perceptive time thus opens up the “primordial” state of things as well as the primordial body, which Merleau-Ponty calls flesh. In a working note for The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty states the necessity of thinking of “time” as a temporal form of “chiasm” (267). The relationship between the past and the present becomes meaningful only when they form myriad associations.

In The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty claims that “The in-visible is the secret counterpart of the visible” (215). This structural relationship between the negative and the positive corresponds to Proust’s notion of forgetting that constitutes the “secret” of remembrance. Take for example an episode in “Intermittences of the Heart” in Sodom and Gomorrah, which describes Marcel’s unexpected remembrance of his deceased grandmother. In the episode,
Marcel revisits a hotel in Balbec alone where he once spent a summer with his family. When he takes off his shoes in a hotel room, a memory of his grandmother, who already died, returns to him all of a sudden. Touching his shoes in this particular place brings back to him the memory of his grandmother who once helped him to take them off. His touch and his grandmother’s touch, which belong to two different time periods, become intertwined through the transitory link between the tactile sensation and the involuntary memory that accompanies it. What has been forgotten is encrypted in his body and comes to the surface of his consciousness through his tactile encounter with the past. Although Merleau-Ponty does not mention this particular scene, his phenomenology of time owes much to Proust’s exploration of the nexus between physicality and temporality, which is dramatized in the scenes that address the effects of the involuntary memory. Merleau-Ponty agrees with Proust in that memory and forgetting are not separable phenomena but two aspects of the same phenomenon that work interrelatedly in body and mind. Indeed, in a lecture at the Collège du France, he claims that “memory would not be the opposite of forgetfulness, and it might be seen that true memory is to be found at the intersection of the two, at the moment where memory forgotten and kept by forgetfulness returns” (Themes 51). In “Reading Notes on Proust,” he more concisely writes that “The past exists in the mode of forgetfulness” (Institution 211). One would normally expect that the past exists in “memory”; however, through his reading of Recherche, Merleau-Ponty reached the conclusion that “forgetfulness” plays a critically important role in one’s engagement with the past. This insistence is paralleled by his emphasis on “depth” in his phenomenology of space.

What is correlative importance is the question of “absence,” a negative medium that makes presence meaningful. Absence understood as a temporalization of the other’s presence challenges the notion of “extension” in traditional Western philosophy, exemplifying the spatio-
temporal singularity of the human body. Proust certainly captures this ambiguous relationship between absence and presence through the scenes in which involuntary memory takes hold of the subject’s world view. In the scene from “Intermittences of the Heart” that I mentioned above, for example, the fact that Marcel’s grandmother has already died is an important factor in Marcel’s remembrance. The impossibility of seeing or touching her impresses on Marcel her absence. Through descriptions of truly rare and fortuitous occasions of involuntary remembrance, Proust illustrates the gravity of absent things and persons.

When Merleau-Ponty takes up the problem of love in Proust in a course at the Collège du France, he draws attention to the fact that love in Proust’s Recherche is always a love for something already lost. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty observes that Proust’s novel is a “criticism of love” (Institution 30). He insists that Swann’s love “does not go to Odette”: “Swann possesses Odette not because he desires it but because he happens to miss her at the Verdurins’ home…

The pleasures of self-love are only the occasion of this “agitation,” of this lack, of this anxiety, which are negative realities” (Institution 30). The idea that lack is the cause of one’s desire anticipates the Lacanian thesis that desire for the other is fundamental for the constitution of the subject. Odette does not exist in the same sense that women do not “exist” in Lacan’s formulation of desire. When “Swann possesses Odette,” he possesses nothing(ness) which inevitably results in failure. Merleau-Ponty formulates the relationship between love and absence as follows: “One loves nothing but the absent. Love is a hollow in us, not the presence of the other. Love is ‘unrealizable,’ ‘outside of the plane of life’” (Institution 37). Marcel faces a similar case of the impossibility of love in his relationship with Albertine, who “is present at a distance like the little phrase in its sounds, not separable from them and yet intangible, noli me tangere” (Institution 38). One’s desire is therefore the desire to touch the intangible. Although
the negative imperative of *noli me tangere* is found in Albertine’s response to Marcel’s desire, it
does not perform its intended function but rather becomes a stimulus for Marcel’s desire, just as
Beatrice did for Dante. Merleau-Ponty goes so far as to claim that presence is “suppression of the
absence or of the lack” (*Institution* 34). He thus reverses the relationship between presence and
absence upside down in his examination of love; for him, absence is not a negative counterpart to
presence but a fundamental source of love and life.

Merleau-Ponty considers love to be a temporal phenomenon. In *Recherche*, feelings of
love are not directed toward the presence of persons and things but to their image. Desire arises
from the “impossibility of love, [the] ‘error’ of love”; therefore, “Possession does not lead up to
satisfying them, for they need the other qua other, qua ‘marvelous’” (*Institution* 36, 30). Feelings
of love necessitates the epiphanic moment of being touched by involuntary memory, since it
situates the ‘marvelous’ moment of coming-to-presence. Thus, the anachronistic character of
temporality is just as important for Merleau-Ponty as for Walter Benjamin; for both of them, the
“reversibility” of the relationship between the past and the present is evidence of the fact that the
past is a physical and psychical necessity of life.

Negative media, such as forgetting and absence, intertwines the past and the present
chiasmically. And yet, just as a hiatus exists between the touching hand and the touched hand,
the remembered past can never reach full coincidence with the past itself. Involuntary
remembrance is necessarily preceded by an event that should have happened in the past but
remained outside the “field of presence,” constituting the primordial, impersonal past. In the last
sentence of the chapter “Sense Experience” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty
already mentions the primordial past, which he calls the “original past, a past which has never
been present [*un passé original, un passé qui n’a jamais été present*]” (242), but he never
developed this idea in the book. This burgeoning idea finds its expression in his later thought on the transcendence of perception, that is, the inhuman within the human. In his lecture on passivity included in *Institution and Passivity*, Merleau-Ponty refers to Freudian psychoanalysis and insists that “the traumatizing event” sets up the primordial, intractable past. “What is essential to the unconscious is,” Merleau-Ponty states, “that our life, precisely because it is not a consciousness of others, in different balance, but a node of significations which are traces of events, consisting of excrescences and gaps, forms a baroque system” (*Institution* 200). What he designates by the words “baroque system” is the view of the world prior to the invention of Renaissance perspective. This indicates that Merleau-Ponty found a parallel between the pre-perspectival view of the world and the “original past” invoked in the Freudian interpretation of trauma. Within this system, unlike the world constructed according to the perspectival model, the present is always open to and in interaction with the past. This past never loses its singular temporality: hence, it is “pressure … of the past as past, indestructible, preserved in itself” (*Institution* 201). This primordial past touches us through the physical objects in which it is preserved.

Merleau-Ponty reconsiders the Freudian idea of an “indestructible” past in a particularly dense working note in *The Visible and the Invisible*, contrasting it with “the common idea of time as a ‘series of Erlebnisse’” (243).\(^{118}\) The return of this primordial “time before time” interrupts the otherwise mutual interaction between the present and the past. As is evident from Merleau-Ponty’s reference to “Proustian corporeity as guardian of the past” in the same fragment, Merleau-Ponty here advances the dual temporality within an entity composed of “flesh,” which

\(^{118}\) For the “indestructible” character of the unconscious, see ch.7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. 
consists in the conventional opposition between the past and the present, but of the two distinctive levels of time: consciously perceived time and “indestructible” time (243). A series of his late essays on child psychology can be viewed as his effort to approach this “indestructible,” pre-objective time in life, the time in which, as Merleau-Ponty describes, “visual experience of his own body is altogether insignificant in relation to the kinesthetic, cenesthesic, or tactile feeling he can have of it” (“Eye” 116). Relying on contemporary child psychology, Merleau-Ponty examines a baby’s ability to imitate others without the visual aid, which is the sympathetic ability of mimesis, insisting that “there is initially a state of pre-communication (Max Scheler), wherein the other’s intentions somehow play across my body while my intentions play across his” (“Eye” 119). Pre-communication is not one’s intentional engagement with others, but an a priori openness of one’s body to others over which one does not have any control. Merleau-Ponty thought, just as Walter Benjamin did, that mimesis is based on this intercorporeal relation between two bodies that precedes individuation. In other words, mimesis is a consequence of intercorporeal reactions between bodies. For Merleau-Ponty, the existence of tactile pre-communication is an evidence of “hinge” in the touching-touched relationship. The “hinge” that crosses over the “hiatus” is the “indestructible” element of the organism, wherein the sense of touch is primary.

Central to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is the defense of this “indestructible” element of human perception, whether it is the sense of “depth” in space or the “original past” that precedes chronological time. And this defense is principally made against Cartesian metaphysics, that is, the central principle of the Enlightenment. His notion of flesh is different from an objectifiable body. It is a receptacle of the primordial time and space, where the phenomenon of the tactile chiasm happens. Merleau-Ponty reached this insight into the impersonality of humans through
his examination of modernist artists, in particular, Cézanne and Proust. If “the sensible thing itself is borne by a transcendency,” as he asserts in a working note for *The Visible and the Invisible*, it is the task of the philosopher to approach “the very pulp of the sensible” through the examination of the negative medium (260; 268). Hence, the abstract idea inherent in concrete physical phenomena is the very ground for Merleau-Ponty’s argument against the Cartesian metaphysics, which divides the object from the subject, the visible from the invisible, the touchable from the untouchable. Touching-touched reversibility is the condition of Being. It is simultaneously “indestructible” and fundamental, forming the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological and ontological thought on the tactile body.
Conclusion

If the twentieth century was the age of technology and information, it was also a century filled with discourse about the body. While technology has developed with astonishing speed and has conditioned both mental and physical aspects of human life, the body has been continuously “rediscovered” as a singular evidence of “life.” As I have demonstrated through this study, the Modernist discourse of touch occurred in a fluctuating boundary between the body and technology, or between the organic and the inorganic. Lawrence and the artists in the Stieglitz Circle commonly identified the tactile sense as the invisible and primitive “truth” that is irreducible to scientific facts. Benjamin and Merleau-Ponty found a form of transcendence in human’s tactile sensibility, which constitutes the impersonal within the personal. Although their images and conceptions of touch varied, they all sought to find in tactility a corporeal medium, the Merleau-Pontian “hinge” that “intertwines” the individual with the communal and the present with the past. The Modernist discourse of touch has a close relation to the revolution of form in twentieth century art, literature, and philosophy; it addresses non-perspectival space and the pre-historical past while exposing limitations that are present in the traditional concepts of time and space.

As I indicated in the Introduction, this study is not a comprehensive account of the Modernist discourse of touch. In the next few pages, I would like to consider some of the potential directions I could have taken in my project and open up this study for further exploration. If this study were to be more inclusive, I would surely look into Levinas’s philosophical trope of “caress,” which he investigated some problems in the areas of ethics and
alterity, as well as Luce Irigaray’s and Jacques Derrida’s critical responses to it.\(^{119}\) It would be important to examine Levinas’s contemporary thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, who also emphasized the sense of touch and proximity in their theories of community.\(^{120}\) These considerations would have made excellent cases for comparison with my study of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Also thematically pertinent to the present study is Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s 1921 manifesto “Tactilism,” which proposes the “Art of Touch” and enumerates various “categories” of touch, such as “extremely confident touch” and “almost irritating” touch.\(^{121}\) Marinetti lists tactile objects and circumstances such as “tactile pillows,” “tactile rooms,” and “tactile streets.”\(^{122}\) This brief sample of Marinetti’s categories is sufficient to show that his conception of touch is, unlike Lawrence’s and Stieglitz’s, grounded in urban life and modern culture. Indeed, Marinetti’s manifesto celebrates “the artistic sensibility of mechanization” and glorifies speed. Although Walter Benjamin made merely passing remarks on Futurism in his writings, “Tactilism” might have played a role inspiring his association of modernity and tactility that was discussed in this study. It should be also noted, however, that Marinetti’s appraisal of technology does not

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\(^{119}\) The image of “caress” appears in *Time and the Other* (1948) and *Totality and Infinity* (1961).

\(^{120}\) In her 1984 essay, Irigaray criticizes Levinas’s sublimation of touch as well as his views of women implicit in his rhetoric and metaphors.

\(^{121}\) See Libertson’s study on the image of proximity in the three French theorists, Levinas, Blanchot, and Bataille.

\(^{122}\) All the quotations from Marinetti’s “Tactilism” are from an unpagenated translation online.

\(^{122}\) In the spirit of Marinetti’s “tactile” art, Erik Conrad presides at “tactilist theatre.” See his official website for detailed description of his past and present exhibitions.
Contradict his vitalistic inclination. Like the Modernists I examined, he subscribed to the ultimate value of “life”: “Intensify the communication and the fusion of human beings. Destroy the distances and the barriers that separate them in love and friendship. Give fullness and total beauty to these two essential manifestations of life: Love and Friendship.” While negating nostalgic escapism, Marinetti believed in the spiritual characteristic of touch. In this regard, he had much in common with the Modernists I have examined; they all essentialized the discourse of touch through its vitalistic associations.¹²³

By limiting the scope of this study to Western modernism, I do not by any means intend to suggest that the discourse and image of touch is restricted to the West. As a Japanese native, I am aware of many examples appropriate for the study of touch in Japanese Modernism. Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, for example, would surely make an excellent case for the analysis of touch in Modernist literature.¹²⁴ His early story “The Tattooer” (「刺青」1910) sensitively depicts the character’s fascination with and fear of tattooing, while A Portrait of Shunkin (『春琴抄』1933)

¹²³ Lawrence was greatly influenced by Futurism. See Harrison.

¹²⁴ Kōtarō Takamura (高村光太郎、1883-1956), a Japanese Modernist poet and sculptor, would be another strong candidate for this hypothetical project. He created a famous sculptural work, “The Hand,” in 1918, and wrote “The World of Touch” (「触覚の世界」) in 1928. Takamura’s contemporary, Sakutarō Hagiwara (萩原朔太郎、1886-1942), should also be examined in this light. His poems and essays are filled with his obsession with touch as well as the image of the hand. Interestingly, he is yet another Modernist who found “tactility” in Cézanne’s pictures. Hagiwara states that Cézanne “tries to bring out in painting, through three dimensional space, the feelings of shape, weight, and touch inherent in the object” (109).
describes the blind heroine’s tactile conception of her environments. However, a simple juxtaposition of Tanizaki and Western Modernists would dismiss their different cultural and religious backgrounds, of which Tanizaki himself was highly conscious. In his essay *In Praise of Shadows* (『陰影礼賛』1933-34), he describes how Chinese and Japanese people love “the glow of grime” that “comes of being touched over and over again,” and asserts that “Westerners attempt to expose every speck of grime and eradicate it, while we Orientals carefully preserve and even idealize it” (30). Tanizaki believed that there is no strong fear of dirtiness in the East while Western civilization has a propensity to exclude “impure” objects. This different sensitivity to dirtiness results in the different cultural positions on touch in the East and the West. Although I believe that a study of touch in Japanese Modernism would productively question the neutrality or universality of the Western discourse of body, it would require a different set of cultural and historical premises than the ones I set for the present study in its Introduction.  

I have limited my discussion to the Modernist discourse of touch in the present study. What, then, happened to tactility after Modernism? While Modernists privileged the sense of touch as being antithetical to the technological and visual culture, the postmodern era saw the gradual incorporation of touch into the sphere of technology. Walter Benjamin’s concept of cinematic tactility rightly foresaw the technological condition of perception in the postmodern era. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan emphasizes the interplay of the senses in the experience of new media by insisting that television is a “tactile” medium: “The TV image is … an extension of touch” (354). The title of his book *The Medium is the Massage* (1967) self-parodies

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Ken’ichirō Sasaki describes tactility as a key element in the Japanese sensibility through his study of classical Japanese literature. His work is yet another evidence that the “ocularcentric” structure is not as dominant in the Japanese tradition as it is in the West.
his early thesis that “the medium is the message,” provocatively suggesting the somatic aspect of new media.\textsuperscript{126} In his monumental works on media produced in the 1960s, McLuhan analyzed technological media as extensions of human perception.

In the twenty-first century, McLuhan’s “new media” is no longer new. The recent development of “haptic technology” converts touch into information and made possible to use it in an instrumental manner. Medical and psychological interventions utilize the sense of touch to affect real change in patients. Industrial robots are equipped with tactile sensors. Computer gadgets such as “I Pod Touch” and video games like Nintendo’s Wii incorporate tactile processes in their programs. “Haptic technology” makes virtual reality more real and more physical, ultimately collapsing the distinction between the virtual and the real. These examples attest that, among the sense perceptions, touch is regarded as the last frontier of science and that, in recent decades, science has begun to explore this final frontier of human sensoria.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{126} Although in McLuhan’s theory the body is always mediated by technology, his use of the concept of “touch” is not irrelevant to the organic Modernist image of touch. His 1962 work \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy} describes Cézanne as a painter who “was giving tactile values to the retinal impression” (83). This description suggests the latent Modernist discourse in McLuhan’s theory. The relationship between nature and technology in McLuhan’s theory is thus subtler and more complicated than it seems.

\textsuperscript{127} The 2008 anthology \textit{Human Haptic Perception} edited by Martin Grunwald collects together both cutting-edge papers on haptic science and an intellectual history of touch, suggesting a possibility of collaboration between the humanistic approaches and the scientific approaches.
However, these scientific investigations and technological devices take touch either as a physical phenomenon or as a set of signs that could be processed as information. They do not ultimately dissipate the phenomenological ambiguity of touching. Jean-Luc Nancy’s tenacious philosophical exploration of touch in recent decades shows that this mode of perception is still open for further philosophical and literary examination. For Nancy, the contemplation of touch is foundational for mature thought about ethics and aesthetics, especially regarding boundaries and limitations: “To touch is to be at the limit, touching is being at the limit—and this is indeed being itself, absolute being. If there is something rather than nothing, it is because there is this limit made body, these bodies made limit, and exposed by their limits. Absolutely. Thought must touch on this” (206). Even if the modern body is thoroughly mediated by technology, it is still necessary and meaningful to consider what sort of “limitation” constitutes body.

Thoughts on touching involve ethical questions on various levels. What distinguishes intimate touching from erotic touching? How could one touch others gently and sympathetically? What kind of touching would disturb and irritate others? How is touch culturally and historically codified or decodified? And how are the issues of gender, race, and class related to the act of touching? Why are the acts of touching, kissing, and hugging just body languages in some countries but serious harassments or even crimes in other countries? Who are touchable and who are not? What are the elements that regulate the manner of touching? Who are permitted to or are forbidden to touch others? These questions cannot be answered in a uniform manner. Culture, society, nation, gender, race, class, among many other elements, decide the signification of touch in a multi-layered way.

After all, one should ask whether touching can be reduced to social and cultural codes. I believe that elements of contingency always intervene in both the experiences of touching and of
being touched. The word “contingency,” indeed, derives from the Latin word *contingere*, which means “to happen” and “to touch,” and has the same Latin root with the word “contact.” This suggests an innate affinity between the Western notions of “touching” and “happening.” While touching constitutes an event, a true event touches us. As Proust describes in several famous scenes, hidden codes of involuntary memory touch the protagonist Marcel only by chance. Unlike codified touching such as handshaking, chance touching productively destabilizes the sense of reality and the perception of physical boundaries. The Modernists that I have examined addressed this epiphanic character of touching; they believed that the sense of touch challenges the traditional Western concepts of time and space as well as the static relationship between the subject and the world. It is true that Modernist concepts of primitiveness, femininity, and infancy were often associated with the sense of touch in politically incorrect manner, at least, from today’s point of view, but the Modernist discourse and image of touch not only have historical significance but also suggest the ways in which we consider the status of body in a world thoroughly mediated by technologies and information. I hope that my study has contributed to illuminating neglected aspects of physicality in the Modernist period and will help to inspire further study of tactile physicality.
Bibliography


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