

# “LESS THAN TOUCHING”

## NANCY’S PHILOSOPHY OF TOUCH FROM *CORPUS* TO *NOLI ME TANGERE*

Mirt KOMEL

Univerza v Ljubljani, Fakulteta za družbene vede, Oddelek za kulturologijo, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

*mirt.komel@fdv.uni-lj.si*

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### *Abstract*

The article deals with the philosophy of touch by Jean-Luc Nancy, one of the living legends of (post-)structuralism, whom Jacques Derrida in his book entitled *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* baptized as “the greatest philosopher of touch.” Nancy is known and renown as a philosopher who deals with a series of different phenomena, but if there is a *fil rouge* in his work, from the very first writings to the more recent works, it is precisely the issue of touch. Thus, the contribution focuses on the concept

of touch as developed by Nancy from *Corpus* to *Noli me tangere*, namely, from the novel conception of body to the attempt of grasping the elusive object of touch via various philosophical, linguistic, and artistic reflections.

*Keywords:* Jean-Luc Nancy, touch, haptic studies, philosophy, (post-)structuralism.

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**»Manj kot dotik«. Nancyjeva filozofija dotika od *Corpus* do *Noli me tangere***

*Povzetek*

Članek obravnava filozofijo dotika Jeana-Luca Nancyja, ene izmed živečih legend (post-)strukturalizma, ki ga je Jacques Derrida v svoji knjigi z naslovom *O dotiku: Jean-Luc Nancy* poimenoval »največji filozof dotika«. Nancy je znan in poznan kot filozof, ki se ukvarja z vrsto različnih fenomenov, toda če obstaja rdeča nit njegovega dela, od prvih, začetnih spisov pa vse do aktualnih, sedanjih del, potem je to natanko vprašanje dotika. Prispevek se zaradi tega osredotoča na pojem dotika, kakor ga je Nancy razvil od *Corpus* do *Noli me tangere*, namreč od novega pojmovanja telesa vse tja do poskusa zajetja izmuzljivega objekta dotika skozi serijo filozofskih, lingvističnih in umetniških refleksij.

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*Ključne besede:* Jean-Luc Nancy, dotik, haptične študije, filozofija, (post-)strukturalizem.

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Jean-Luc Nancy, the author of many immensely influential philosophical books, who had undergone heart transplantation operation and survived diagnosed long-term cancer, is one of the heroic last-men-standing of (post-)structuralism, together with Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, Etienne Balibar, and others.

The once truly heroic times of structuralism stretch way back to its birth in the 1950s, its explosion in the revolutionary 60s, its spreading in the 70s, its European consolidation in the 80s, and its Americanization in the 90s, which also saw its “post-festum” in the form of what is nowadays labelled as “(post-) structuralism.” Whatever we think—be it affirmative or negative—about (post-) structuralism, one cannot negate that it was one of the most fruitful periods in the history of thinking, which always happens in waves, and as a tide of the sea of spirit, which now touches and overflows the material ground, gradually retracts back. The founding fathers of structuralism are: first and foremost the linguists that followed Ferdinand de Saussure in his endeavor of founding linguistics as a science of language, from Jakobson, Benveniste, Barthes, to Derrida; then Lévi-Strauss with his new approach in anthropology based on linguistics; after him, a new reading of Marx captained by Althusser and a new reading of Freud lead by Lacan; furthermore, a new view on history, knowledge, and power by Foucault; a new philosophy by Deleuze; new literary theories, etc.

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Lacking a better concept, the term “structuralism” encompassed and stuck for all of them; it is a term that was born on the inside, but was used from the outside, from the Anglo-Saxon perspective, in order to intellectually and theoretically—but also academically and geopolitically—segregate this new paradigm of thinking where no-one of the above mentioned ever wanted to be called “structuralist”—and least of all “post-structuralist”—while the trend still goes on with etiquettes like “French Theory,” or “Continental Philosophy” that designates both French and German authors from the English point of view.<sup>1</sup> Anyhow, the “French school of thought” (another name, perhaps the least problematic) with its dozen or so names, had a lot of offspring (cf. Deleuze

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<sup>1</sup> In the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* one can find this problematic definition of “structuralism,” starting with the assertion that it “is the belief that phenomena of human life are not intelligible except through their interrelations. These relations constitute a structure, and behind local variations in the surface phenomena there are constant laws of abstract structure.” (Blackburn 2008, 353)

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2004): from the Althusserian camp came Balibar, Rancière, Badiou; from the Lacanian Miller and Milner, among many others; and from Derrida's school the protagonist of our story, Jean-Luc Nancy.

As we can see, everyone had his own *maître*—to employ the French term that designates “master” and “teacher” at the same time—, a *maître* of thinking who is necessary for this most liberal of activities, thus depicting the perhaps most fundamental paradox of philosophy: in order to have freedom of thought, one necessarily needs the conceptual constraint of a teacher, or, to put it briefly, in order to master philosophy, one needs a master of philosophy, a “master-teacher,” a *maître*. And Jean-Luc Nancy is most definitely such a *maître* who enables one's own thinking *with*—and not *against*—others, a figure of connections, crossroads, commons, etc., an author whose regular references include not only classical philosophers, but also many of those from the “enemy camp,” whom his more notorious colleagues usually like more to “deconstruct & destroy” than to “think & rethink.”

206 And this is precisely the stance that I want to hold towards Nancy himself while re-thinking his philosophy of touch as developed from *Corpus* to *Noli me tangere*, from his first, novel experimental conception of body to the attempt of grasping the elusive object of touch via a series of philosophical, linguistic, and artistic reflections.

## I.

Nancy graduated in philosophy in 1962 and after teaching in Colmar became assistant at the Institute of Philosophy in Strasbourg in the revolutionary year 1968. In '73, he received his Ph.D. with a dissertation on Immanuel Kant and German idealism under the supervision of Paul Ricoeur and was afterwards promoted to *Maître de conférences* at the Strasbourg University for Humanistic Sciences. In the 1970s and 80s, he was guest professor at many renowned European and American universities, and in 1980, he and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe organized a conference dedicated to Derrida and politics at the International Cultural Centre of Cerisy-la-Salle with the title *Les Fins de l'homme (The Ends of Man)*, a collaboration that was the springboard for

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the *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique*.<sup>2</sup> In 1987, he received his *Docteur d'État* from the University of Toulouse-Le-Mirail under the supervision of Gérard Granel and under the tutelage of Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida with a work published in 1988 as *L'Expérience de la liberté* (*The Experience of Freedom*), an investigation of the singular experience of freedom that is first and foremost “in-finity of thinking” (cf. Nancy 1988). However, his own personal and professional “experience of freedom” came to a stop due to serious medical issues—a heart transplant and a cancer diagnosis—that prevented him from teaching, but not from thinking, since many, if not all of his most known writings are dated from this last period, including *L'Intrus* (*The Intruder*), a personal and philosophical reflection on his own experience of heart transplant published in 2000 (cf. Nancy 2000b).

Nancy's first two books—both from 1973—, *La Remarque spéculative* (*The Speculative Remark*) and *Le Titre de la lettre* (*The Title of the Letter*, in collaboration with Lacoue-Labarthe), are about Hegel and Lacan, and precisely show, in both instances, what I meant above with the statement that Nancy is a “thinker-with:” a critical reflection on the “speculative concept” of *Aufhebung* in Hegel (cf. Nancy 1973a)<sup>3</sup> and the first serious study of Lacan's concept of signifier as a meta-linguistic *la lettre* (cf. Nancy 1973b), which were and still

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<sup>2</sup> The *Center for Philosophical Research of Politics* was dedicated to a purely philosophical, non-empirical analysis of politics, based on the assertion that philosophy itself—even if pure ontology—is always already marked by politics. This center had guested many important names, such as Claude Lefort and Jean-François Lyotard, but it had to close its doors in 1984 due to certain reasons that were addressed publicly by the two co-founders under the title “*Chers Amis: A Letter on the Closure of the Political*” (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1997, 143–147).

<sup>3</sup> Hegel was introduced in France especially thanks to the famous series of lectures held in Paris by Alexandre Kojève entitled *La Philosophie religieuse de Hegel* (*Hegel's Religious Philosophy*), later published under the title of *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*), focusing on an interpretative reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (cf. Kojève 1980), and followed by many of the most prominent intellectuals of the period: André Breton, Brice Parain, Eric Weil, Georges Bataille, Henry Corbin, Jacques Lacan, Jean Hyppolite, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Wahl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Leiris, Patrick Waldberg, Pierre Klossowski, Raymond Aron, Raymond Queneau, Robert Mariolin, Roger Caillois, Taro Okamoto, Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt.

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are regarded as the distinctive trademarks of a “hyper-structuralist” approach.<sup>4</sup> Nancy’s stance towards both: reading with, but a critical reading, an inherent reading that tries to push the thing at stake even further than the original author intended or was able to, a push towards the limits of a paradigm, and of thinking itself—a small excess of thinking, an almost intangible reminder that thinking is not something that is given for granted or grounded once and forever—, but first and foremost a thinking *with*, not *against*.

For instance, Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* as *the* “speculative remark” that marks the crucial center of his philosophical system, understood as a mastodontic self-development of spirit in nature, art, religion, and philosophy, where each phase abolishes the previous one by incorporating it in its own logic, until we reach the absolute spirit, which in turn incorporates all the previous stages, their concepts, and contradictions—except for one, namely the concept and contradiction of *Aufhebung*, as if everything can well be dialectically *aufgehoben*, but the dialectics of *Aufhebung* itself: “*aufheben* does not capture itself, it does not close in itself and thus avoids its own identification; *aufheben* insists, persists, moves beyond itself, goes out of itself, slides through the text, untouched, so to speak, not preserved nor eliminated.” (Nancy 1973a, 58) *Aufhebung* can, therefore, function as a synonym for Hegel’s dialectics, and at the same time the name for Hegel’s error that shows, paradoxically, the exit from Hegel’s system—an opening at the very point of foreclosure, the explosive in the middle of the cement that holds the system together, and the outer border of conceptuality itself that cannot be conceptualized but on the inside.

This struggle, an almost neurotic obsession to find an exit from the “Platonic cave” in general and “Hegel’s system” in particular, which politically coincides with the search for an exit from the post-war capitalistic ideology of the period, is one of the distinctive hallmarks of structuralism (cf. Milner 2002), where each and every author proposed his or her own way out—Althusser’s was

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4 Jean-Claude Milner states that there are two reasons why Lacan can be considered “hyper-structuralist,” one derived from the general public perception, and the other more pertinently posed as a question of paradigm: first, due to his infamous *Séminaires*, which were public performance-lectures; and second, due to his appropriation of the linguistic “sign” and its complete replacement by the concept of “signifier” (cf. Milner 2002).

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*révolution*, Badiou's *événement*, Derrida's *deconstruction*—, including Nancy, who at a certain point of his thought gambled everything on the concept of *corpus*.

## II.

*Corpus*, a philosophical and linguistic experiment in thinking the body, since for Nancy *corpus* evokes, first and foremost, a plurality of meanings: *corpus* as a body, as bodies in singular and plural, any-body but also this-body, this-body-here, but also infinitely more and less than a or any body, like, for instance, the bodies of atoms (*corpora*), a *corpus* of texts, a military *corpus*, the body-politics, etc.: “The *body*, this is how we invented it. Who other in the world knows it?” (Nancy 2000a, 8) The body is something that “we,” the Westerners, have invented as we invented the “soul,” the “mind,” the “spirit;” either we affirm the latter against the former as Plato did (cf. Plato 1997) or reverse the relation by affirming the former against the latter as Nietzsche did (cf. Nietzsche 2011), but in both instances we miss the point—as we miss it if we simply affirm the plurality of meanings of the body against a meaning that is one and only, or vice-versa, by evoking *corpus Christi* and the *hoc est enim corpus meum*.

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This initial linguistic saturation of the phenomenological body has one primary purpose: to destitute the immediacy of the body, to show how the body matters, but not as mere matter, not as something biological or physiological, and especially not as something certain and assured, as opposed to soul, spirit, mind:<sup>5</sup> “The body is a stunned, shattered certitude. Nothing more proper, nothing more foreign to our old world. [Corps est la certitude sidérée, mise en éclats. Rien de plus propre, rien de plus étranger à notre vieux monde.]” (Nancy 2000, 9) A proper body, a foreign body—

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5 From this perspective, one could say that Nancy's initial attempt is directed against Merleau-Ponty and, at the same time, also a further development by the former of what the latter did in his two major works, namely: in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, where consciousness is inherent to a sensory world, “the system in which all truths cohere” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, xiii), and in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where he moves towards the concept of “flesh” denoting “what has no name in any philosophy” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139).

étrange *corps étrangers*—“strange foreign bodies,” as Nancy puts it, means that a body is not something given, clear, homely, but rather something strange and foreign, “‘the body’ is our naked anxiety [‘le corps’ est notre angoisse mise à nu]” (Nancy 2000, 10)—and “how naked we are!” he cries afterwards—, when we want to affirm our bodies against meaning, religion, ideology by denuding ourselves, by making our bodies seen to the point where exhibitionism coincides with voyeurism, and both with “pornoscopia.” (Do I really need to give the example of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tinder, and other social media?)

210 If we can't get to the body through a mere opposition with the soul—as Descartes did, about whom Nancy wrote in his *Ego sum* (cf. Nancy 1979), and in other writings—, how, then, can we grasp what is bodily in the body? Nancy's solution: the body is always already outside itself, and the soul, or mind, or spirit is the way how the body goes beyond itself, out of itself, an out-of-itself-ness of the body—spirit not as an external foreignness, but rather as an inner one where, however, one can come back to oneself only through the experience of another body that goes through the same externalization. Here, one cannot not think about Nancy's *L'Intrus*, the already mentioned essay about his experience of heart transplantation (cf. Nancy 2000b). And this self-realization of the body through the other—and its own otherness—has no way of abolishing the outer-ness of its own experience, no *Aufhebung* of the body into the concept is possible, so that the body is, structurally speaking, in the final analysis, the same as *Aufhebung* itself: the body is the embodiment of *Aufhebung*.

### III.

If we say “body” and its “other,” we eventually also say “sexuality,” a body that is marked by sexual difference through the incision of the signifier, the latter precisely the topic of Nancy's *Le Titre de la lettre*, while the former the title of a lecture he has given at the centenary of Lacan's birth: *L'« il y a » du rapport sexuel* (*The “There Is” of the Sexual Relation*), the accent on the question of the *il y a* in Lacan's “there is no sexual relation:”

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Sexual difference [la différence sexuelle] is not a difference between two or more things, where each would exist as ‘one’ (one sex): it is neither a difference in species, nor a difference between individuals, nor a natural difference, nor a difference in grade, nor a cultural difference or a difference in gender. It is the difference *of* sex [la différence *du* sexe] inasmuch as it differs from itself. Sex is, for every living sexual being, and in all senses, a being that differs from itself: a differentiating as differentiating itself in concordance with all the plurality of elements and complex becoming denoted by ‘man/woman,’ ‘homo/hetero,’ ‘active/passive,’ etc. And differentiating (itself) inasmuch as the species thus multiplies the singularity of its ‘representatives.’ (Nancy 2003a, 30–31)

Nancy’s *différer* echoes the logic of Derrida’s *différance*: sex is at the same time that which is differed, and that which differs, a difference that anticipates its own parts, the principle of differentiating, the differentiation itself—before we arrive at its different entities. The problem being—and here Nancy apparently follows Lacan rather than Derrida—that the very principle of differentiation is always already marked with sexual difference, is always already “sexualized,” inasmuch as “sexuality” is precisely the name of the difference par excellence:

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Sexuality is not a special kind of species in relation to the genus of relation, but rather it is the relation that has its integral extension or exposition in sexuality. We could say: sexuality relates that which is at stake in the relation [le sexuel rapporte ce qu’il en est du rapport], but its relation [*rapport*, here meant both as “rapport” and as a “report”]—its balance and its story—does not totalize, and does not close. (Nancy 2003, 26)

Again, as we can see, there is a structural equivalence between, on the one hand, the body, which is the corpoReal (if I’m allowed to coin a new term combining the French word for the “body”, *corps*, and the Lacanian concept of the Real) embodiment of the impossibility of a conceptual *Aufhebung*, and, on the other hand, sexuality that marks the body with this impossibility, which is, in the final analysis, why the Lacanian *il y a du rapport sexuel* is supplemented

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and must be thought together with its scandalous counterpart of *il n'y a pas du rapport sexuel*.<sup>6</sup>

How can we, then, speak—or write—about such a sexualized body that cannot be *aufgehoben* into a concept? That is precisely what is at stake in Nancy's *Corpus* as a philosophical and linguistic experiment in thinking the body, or rather, as he himself puts it, "writing the body:" "Writing not *about* the body, but rather writing *the* body. Not corporeity, but rather the body. Not the signs, images, codes of the body, but rather, again, the body. [Soit à écrire, non pas du corps, mais le corps même. Non pas la corporéité, mais le corps. Non pas les signes, les images, les chiffres du corps, mais encore le corps.]" (Nancy 2000, 12) This is, or at least was, Nancy adds, the "program of modernity," whereupon nowadays there is no program anymore, just television programs where one can watch a multitude of bodies—and corpses—from whence "a necessity, an urgency" emerges, demanding that peculiar "writing the body" that pushes it to the extreme: "It is in this manner that the body is again on the limit, on the extreme: it comes from a distance, and the horizon is its multitude that is arriving. [De cette manière encore, le corps est en limite, en extrémité: il nous vient du plus loin, l'horizon est sa multitude qui vient.]" (Ibid.) And as the "body is on the limit, on the extreme," so must "writing the body" be extreme: "Writing: touching the extremity [Écrire: toucher à l'extrémité.]" And Nancy's question, and challenge, is precisely: "How therefore to touch the body, instead of signifying it or making it signify? [Comment donc toucher au corps, au lieu de le signifier ou de le faire signifier?]" (Ibid.)

The question is clear, critical, punctual—the answer not so much, at least at first, since instead of the Lacanian "letter" (*la lettre*) we are first given the Derridean "writing" (*écriture*), which, however, structurally holds the same

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<sup>6</sup> Lacan, in book XX of his seminars entitled *Encore*, develops the concept of *jouissance* ("pleasure"), as opposed to mere *plaisir* (both meaning "pleasure" in English, German, and other languages), in order to demonstrate the conditions of possibility for a sexual relation that is, at the same time, possible and impossible: possible, if reduced to *plaisir* (as described by Freud with the "pleasure principle"), but at the same time impossible if practiced through the excess of *jouissance* (again with Freud: the "beyond of the pleasure principle"); both theses have their ontological basis in Lacan's reading of Plato's *Parmenides*, from which he tried to extrapolate the logic of non-relationship between being and non-being (cf. Lacan 1998).

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place: “Writing isn’t signifying [Écrire n’est pas signifier],” which is the same as if saying that Lacan’s concept of signifier is not the same as the Derridean concept of “writing.” Furthermore: “We ask: How are we to touch upon the body? Perhaps we can’t answer this ‘How?’ as we’d answer a technical question. [On a demandé: comment toucher au corps? Il n’est peut-être pas possible de répondre à ce ‘comment’ comme à une demande technique.]” Meaning: “the question of ‘touch’ is not a technical question, is not a question of “touching,” but something else, namely: “But, finally, it has to be said that touching upon the body, touching the body, *touching-happens* in writing all the time. [Mais ce qu’il faut dire, c’est que cela – toucher au corps, toucher le corps, toucher enfin – arrive tout le temps dans l’écriture.]” Identifying “touching” with “writing” allows to re-pose the question of “touching the extremity.” “Maybe it doesn’t happen exactly *in* writing, if writing in fact has any side. But along the border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing nothing *but* that happens. Now, writing takes its place at the limit. So, if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but *touch*. [Cela n’arrive peut-être pas exactement dans l’écriture, si celle-ci a un ‘dedans’. Mais en bordure, en limite, en pointe, en extrémité d’écriture, il n’arrive que ça. Or l’écriture a son lieu sur la limite. Il n’arrive donc rien d’autre à l’écriture, s’il lui arrive quelque chose, que de toucher.]” And the final point is of the utmost importance: “More precisely: touching the body (or some singular body) *with the incorporeality* of ‘sense.’ And consequently, *to make the incorporeal touching*, to make of meaning a touch. [Plus précisément: de toucher le corps (ou plutôt, tel et tel corps singulier) *avec l’incorporel* du ‘sens’. Et par conséquent, de *rendre l’incorporel touchant*, ou de faire du sens *une touche*.]” (Ibid., 12–13)

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As we can see, the concept of touch as developed from the reflection on the body understood as *corpus*, is Nancy’s answer to—and a step forward from—both Derrida and Lacan, at least as far as the relation between language and the body is concerned. And that is why he returns to it over and over again in his works that followed *Corpus*, especially by playing on the double meaning of the word *sens*, that works in French and many other languages (English, Italian, Spanish, etc.): *sense* pertains to the “senses” as the “sensorial,” but *sense* also means “meaning”—and touch touches precisely this extremity where both senses of sense make sense of the body and language at the same time.

#### IV.

In the year 2000, at the turn of the century and the millennia, Derrida published his *Le Toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy (On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy)*, dedicated to his friend and his philosophy of touch, whom he held in such high regards that he baptized Nancy nothing less than “the first great thinker of touch.”

By a happy historical coincidence, the English translation of Derrida’s *On Touching* and *The Book of Touch* edited by Classen came out in the same year of 2005, a year that can very-well mark the birth of haptic studies, a field dedicated to the study of touch through a combination of anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, film studies—but first and foremost philosophy. Philosophy had its own long tradition of thinking the senses where, however, the senses of sight and hearing always prevailed as the “more theoretical senses” (as Hegel, for instance, puts it in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*), not to mention the Ancient Greek *theoria*, or the Christian *vox* of conscience.<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that Derrida originally published his book in the year 2000, but it was actually a reworking of an earlier essay from the beginning of the 1990s, itself published as *On the Work of Jean-Luc Nancy* in English as the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Modern Critical Theory* dedicated to Nancy. The interesting thing is that Derrida’s interpretation of Nancy’s work as the first haptic philosophy came well before the later explicitly addressed the issue of touch in his later works, most prominently and explicitly in his “essay on the resurrection of the body” from 2003 entitled *Noli me tangere*—a title given not without irony, at least if we think it as being addressed to Derrida’s take on his philosophy.

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7 It is in this sense indicative that Derrida, who in his own “linguistic turn,” as developed in *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, put forward the thesis that not only linguistics, but all metaphysics is “phonocentric” due to the linking of the problem of “presence” with the phenomenon of the “voice” (cf. Derrida 2011), revisited his own theory in *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* through a detailed reading of the history of the philosophy of touch from Plato and Aristotle to Husserl and Heidegger, and from Merleau-Ponty onward, culminating in Nancy’s philosophical *corpus*, and especially in *Corpus* itself. Derrida thus proposed a thesis denouncing the whole history of metaphysics—especially phenomenology—as being essentially “haptocentric,” i.e., centered on the anthropomorphized and hierarchized conception of touch linked to the human hand as the privileged organ of touching (cf. Derrida 2005).

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Nancy here develops a new, original theory of touch based on his previous reflections on the issue of the body from the *L'Intrus* and *Corpus* onwards (and backwards). Thus, as *Corpus* starts with the *hoc est enim corpus meum*, so does *Noli me tangere* begin with the resurrected body of Jesus Christ as rendered in the New Testament, more precisely in the scene where the resurrected Christ first appears to Mary Magdalene (John 20: 1–18):

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” – “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead

to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”<sup>8</sup>

It is a telling fact that this scene has taken on a name of its own: past and contemporary usages of *Noli me tangere* are similar to the *Last Supper* or the *Crucifixion of Christ* in the sense that it has acquired an almost independent currency in Christian iconography. However, Nancy’s interpretation of this scene is part of his larger project of a “deconstruction of Christianity” (cf. Nancy 2005)—“a movement of analysis [...] and at the same time of displacement and transformation” (Nancy 2003b, 10)—, i.e., a secular or non-confessional re-appropriation of the issue of the body and—especially—touch.

216 A re-appropriation because one can find already before the text of the *New Testament* similar usage of the motif, like, for instance, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Oedipus, just before his apotheosis, addresses his daughters Antigone and Ismene in the same vein as Jesus addresses Maria Magdalena, namely, with the words “Follow me, but do not touch me”—the only difference being philological: in *Oedipus at Colonus* the more rare Greek verb *πασω* is used, meaning more “touching the surface,” while the *χαπτω* of the Greek original *New Testament* means not only “touch” but also “refrain” or “stop” (a meaning that is lost in the Latin Vulgate since *tango* has a strong meaning of “touching” and “touching” only). And a re-appropriation that states that the motif of *Noli me tangere* perhaps played on the larger issue of touch, as can be discerned, among other things, also from the many, many secular examples inspired by the scene.<sup>9</sup>

However, and in order to do justice to Nancy’s own stance towards philosophical thinking, I want, at this point, to make a juxtaposition between two scenes: the first, in which Jesus Christ stops Mary Magdalene from touching him with his *μή μου ἅπτου* command, and the other, the almost perfect reverse scene featuring Doubting Thomas, who is invited by Jesus Christ to place a finger in his wound (John 20: 24–29):

Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into

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his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Both scenes, the one featuring Mary Magdalene and this one with Doubting Thomas, respectively evoke contradictory tendencies regarding the issue of doubt and touch. In the first passage, the desire to dissolve doubt through touch is stopped by a gesture that itself pertains to the domain of touch; the gesture is complemented by the sentence “do not touch me” that not only provides certainty but also demonstrates a peculiar relation between touch and language. In the second passage, the discursive doubt articulated by Thomas’ questioning the resurrected body of the Christ is shattered through a silent, speechless, penetrating touch: certainty achieved at fingertip. Due to their dramatics it is no coincidence that both scenes can be found in religious iconography, renaissance paintings, theater pieces, movies, etc., where they appear not only as representations of faith and doubt colliding with the realm of the senses, but also as allegories of a certain fragility of sense-certainty. Moreover, in the Mary Magdalene scene, touch is dismissed as a source of doubt, while language, embodied in the phrase *Noli me tangere*, provides its counterpart, faith’s certainty; while in the doubting Thomas scene touch functions as a source of empirical certainty that has to supply not only what the subjects sees and hears, that is, the resurrected body of Christ, but also, and more importantly, the meaning of his words, touch thus functions as a supplement to language. Therefore: on the one hand there is the scene of the proverbially doubting Thomas touching Jesus’ wound to empirically check the evidence provided by his eyes and ears, while on the other hand there is the scene of the resurrection in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and does *not* permit her to touch him, but rather demands a leap of faith: “Faith consists in seeing and hearing where there is nothing exceptional for the ordinary eye

and ear. It knows to see and to hear *without tampering*.” (Nancy 2003b, 22) Faith demands belief without tactile corroboration, for it is precisely touch with its direct tactility that expunges the truth, which is by definition something intangible.

218 The opposition, here, runs between the untouchable and the touchable, the realm of the intangible and the realm of the tangible, with touch itself marking the dividing line, and that is why Nancy can say that the *μή μου ἅπτου*—in any variant or language we take it: from the Latin *Noli me tangere* to the English “Do not touch me”—does not only address or represent the issue of touch here at stake, but rather embodies touch itself with its own haptic quality: “To say it in one word and to make a word-play out of it—difficult to avoid—‘do not touch me’ is a phrase that touches, that cannot not touch, even outside all context [Pour le dire d’un mot et en faisant un mot – difficile à éviter – ‘ne me touche pas’ est une phrase qui touche, qui ne peut pas ne pas toucher, même isoler de tout contexte];” or, simply put, “do not touch me,” even if we take it outside any given social, cultural, religious context, “touches,” since it “announces something of touching in general where it touches at the sensible point of touching [Elle *énonce* quelque chose du toucher en général ou elle touche au point sensible du toucher],” at that sensible point where both meanings of *sens* coincide, at that “point that it constitutes par excellence (it is *the* point of sensibility) and that is constituted in it as the sensible point [à ce point sensible qu’il constitue par excellence (il est en somme ‘le’ point du sensible) et à ce qui en lui forme le point sensible];” and this point is precisely “the point where touch does not touch, must not touch in order to exercise its touch (its art, its tact, its grace) [Or ce point est précisément le point où le toucher ne touche pas, ne doit pas toucher pour exercer sa touche (son art, son tact, sa grâce)],” best exemplified in the way in which art can touch us up to “the point where the space without dimension that separates that which touch brings together, the line that divides touch from the touched and therefore touch from itself [le point ou l’espace sans dimension qui sépare ce que le toucher rassemble, la ligne qui *écarte* le toucher du touché et donc la touche d’elle-même].” (Nancy 2003b, 25)

Sensibility from the regime of the touchable, corporeal, bodily, and sense from the regime of the untouchable soul, spirit, mind, concept ... both

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coincide in touch as the sense of sensibility: sensibility can make sense only on the presupposition of the sense of tact, which is the condition *sine qua non* for a sensorial being (since without touch no other sense is possible).

This haptic point where “touch must not touch” in order to exercise its power (or rather: “art, tact”) is why, in contrast and conversely at the same time, the *sensibility of sense* and the *sense of sensibility* (in one word: *sense*) is in linguistic and philosophical accordance with itself, since *sense* does not mean an either-or of body or mind, but rather both at the same time, namely, the *bodily activity of making sense* and the *thinking activity of sensing*.

And this insistence on the haptic experience—on the *intangible meaning of touch* and the *tangible meaning of sense*—can perhaps show us a way out of the debacle we find ourselves in within this senseless word, where by dissolving all distance—through contemporary communication touch-technology promising more “contact” (*con-tact*)—we have also, so it seems, dissolved closeness itself. “Keep in touch” is, therefore, not a phrase to be used lightly.

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