

# Touching and Not Touching: The Indirections of Desire

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*L'amour, tel qu'il existe dans la Société,  
n'est que l'échange de deux fantaisies  
et le contact de deux épidermes.  
(Chamfort 1796)<sup>1</sup>*

*Love, as it exists in Society,  
is nothing more than the exchange of two fantasies  
and the contact of two epidermises.*

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## NOTES

NB All translations from French and German, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Poetry citations are given in both original and translation. Citations without page number are from the last-referred page. Sections of this material are adapted from my book *Consensuality* (2009).

<sup>1</sup> This epigraph, the 359<sup>th</sup> of Chamfort's *Maximes et pensées* (1923) [1796], is a familiar notion in French culture; it is cited, for example, by Sartre in his discussion of the caress, Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 130; André Gide, *Corydon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993 [1911, 1922, 1924]), 61; and Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Dunod, 1995 [1985]), 32); NB henceforth, all quotations from Anzieu's *Le Moi-peau* are taken from my translation: Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, tr. Naomi Segal, London: Karnac, 2016; this reference, 10–11.

Of all the senses, touch is the most proximate. To touch is to be close enough to encounter something with one's skin – fingertips or body surface. Yet the desire to touch is conditioned, like all desire, by modes of distance. The wish to overcome distance, to embrace or touch, is stimulated by its impossibility. This essay looks at modes of negotiating or exploiting the indirections of touch. My set of literary examples are in a variety of genres, languages and tones, yet all challenge the possibility of touching, for despite a sustained fantasy of reaching – zooming and hovering – there is no actual stopping-point. In the final sections, contemporary technologies introduce new expediencies of 'the progressive cyborgization of humanity' which,<sup>2</sup> in different ways, replace the violent or loving touch of the hand.

Before we look at how touch is impossible, however, we need to consider, in relation to the context of law, how it is forbidden. In *The Skin-Ego (Le Moi-peau 1995 [1985])*, Didier Anzieu observes that a key turning-point in every child's development is the taboo on touching, which separates the subject from its own and other bodies, and not only precedes but makes possible the oedipal taboo that marks the entry into social relations. If, as Chamfort tells us, love in society is essentially the exchange of fantasies, how might these fantasies prevent rather than enable the contact of the skin?

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Hables Gray. In Joanna Zylińska, ed., *The Cyborg Experiments*, London & New York: Continuum, 2002, 181.

## Touching the Senses

First, let us set the scene. How do we understand the senses, and where is the place of touch in their spectrum? Most human beings have five senses, more or less. Everyday experience is ‘multisensual’,<sup>3</sup> and ‘the senses are not merely passive receptors of particular kinds of environmental stimuli but are actively involved in the structuring of that information.’ I say more or less five, for the history and geography of the senses show that while that total is traditional, it is often disputed, not only for the sake of precision but because of a general feeling that there must be something else.

We have five senses in which we glory and which we recognise and celebrate, senses that constitute the sensible world for us. But there are other senses – secret senses, sixth senses, if you will – equally vital, but unrecognised, and unlauded. These senses, unconscious, automatic, had to be discovered. Historically, indeed, their discovery came late: what the Victorians vaguely called ‘muscle sense’ – the awareness of the relative position of trunk and limbs, derived from receptors in the joints and tendons – was only really defined (and named ‘proprioception’) in the 1890s. And the complex mechanisms and controls by which our bodies are properly aligned and balanced in space – these have only been defined in our own century and still hold many mysteries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Rodaway. *Sensuous Geographies* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Sacks. *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (London: Picador, 1986 [1985]), 68.

One suggestion lists ten basic senses, including four varieties of touch plus two of orientation.<sup>5</sup> Others searching for the proverbial sixth sense cite extra-sensory perception,<sup>6</sup> desire,<sup>7</sup> proprioception defined as ‘our totally intuitive sense of our own bodies’,<sup>8</sup> or more rarefied abilities like that of the skilled wine-taster. Different cultures have more or fewer senses, or lay stress on different aspects. Of three non-literate societies cited by Constance Classen, ‘each has a very distinct way of making sense of the world: the Tzotzil accord primacy to heat in their cosmology, the Ongee to odour, and the Desana to colour.’<sup>9</sup> Words for sensing are also variable, and often clustered: ‘the Hausa have one word for hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, understanding and emotional feeling’;<sup>10</sup> French too, of course, uses one word (*sentir*) for smelling and for both physical and emotional feeling.

However many senses we wish to number, it is interesting that, until recently, they were discussed only in order to be distinguished and separated. Since Aristotle, the senses have been placed in a hierarchical order, dependent either on proximity to the thing sensed or on the difference between human and animal. Thus ‘touch (and thereby

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<sup>5</sup> See Rodaway. *Sensuous Geographies*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> See David Howes, ed. *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 258, 290.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Serres. *Les cinq sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), 57–60.

<sup>8</sup> Gabriel Josipovici. *Touch* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1996), 110.

<sup>9</sup> Constance Classen. ‘McLuhan in the Rainforest: The Sensory Worlds of Oral Cultures’, in *The Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2005), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Ritchie. ‘Fusion of the Faculties: A Study of the Language of the Senses in Hausaland’, in Howes, *Varieties*, 194.

taste) was found in all animals and so became the lowliest sense [... Aristotle] posed a hierarchical order of the senses, from most to least valuable: vision-hearing-smell-taste-touch.<sup>11</sup> Even if animals showed more skills than us with certain senses, theirs were intrinsically the inferior ones. This hierarchy slides into the other, for the last three of these are the 'proximity' or 'intimate senses',<sup>12</sup> devalued because they are deemed the furthest from thought, imagination and memory. As I have remarked elsewhere, these three senses are also the ones in which the nuances of active and passive perception are linguistically the least differentiated. If for sight and hearing we have three verbs:

I look at the picture, I see the moon, I look tired,  
I listen to the music, I hear thunder, I sound  
interested,

for smell, taste, and touch, one verb has to stand in for all these functions:

I smell a rose, I smell burning, I smell funny,  
I taste the soup, I taste a trace of cinnamon, it tastes  
bitter,  
I feel the velvet, I feel the sun on my face, I feel pretty.

But this could be a reason for suggesting that, far from being more blunt, the words we use for the proximate senses 'do more work, convey more variation, carry more weight'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> David Howes, ed. *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2005), 61.

<sup>12</sup> Rodaway. *Sensuous Geographies*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Naomi Segal. 'L'échange de deux fantaisies et le contact de deux épidermes': skin and desire', in *Sensual Reading*, eds. Michael Syrotinski and Ian Maclachlan (Lewisburg and London: Associated University Presses, 2001), 18.

However undifferentiated language seems to think them, recent theory has turned back to these less favoured senses because, actually, they are better at imagining (Baudelaire), remembering (Proust) and of course loving.

Contemporary theory sees the senses as a multiplicity – hence the use of terms like ‘sensorium [...] sense ratio’<sup>14</sup> or ‘sensotypes’.<sup>15</sup> To McLuhan sensing is a ‘kaleidoscope’,<sup>16</sup> to Serres ‘knots’ or ‘an island’,<sup>17</sup> to Howes synaesthesia, the latter defined as a way of ‘short-circuiting the five sense model’.<sup>18</sup> It is the meeting of senses and sensations that most preoccupies current thinking: the ‘pluri-sensorial’,<sup>19</sup> ‘combinatory’,<sup>20</sup> ‘multidirectional [...] intersensoriality’<sup>21</sup> – or, as Didier Anzieu calls it, ‘consensuality’.<sup>22</sup> And, as the rest of this essay will explore, the multiplicity of the senses is most richly focused in the sense of touch.<sup>23</sup> Curiously, whichever way one looks at the lists of senses, touch is almost always found at one end.

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall McLuhan. ‘Inside the Five Sense Sensorium’, in Howes, *Empire*, 43–52.

<sup>15</sup> Mallory Wober. ‘The Sensotype Hypothesis’, in Howes, *Varieties*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Howes. *Varieties*, 167.

<sup>17</sup> Serres. *Les Cinq Sens*, 51–52.

<sup>18</sup> Howes. *Empire*, 292.

<sup>19</sup> Howes. *Varieties*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>21</sup> Howes. *Empire*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Anzieu. *Le Moi-peau*, 127 *et passim*; see also Naomi Segal, *Consensuality: Didier Anzieu, Gender and the Sense of Touch* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> See Serres, *Les Cinq Sens*, 82–84; Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies*, 28, 44–54; Laura U. Marks, *Touch* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p. xiii); and A. Morton Heller and William Schiff, *The Psychology of Touch*. (Hillsdale, Hove & London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991, 1–3).

In the evolution of the senses the sense of touch was undoubtedly the first to come into being. Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is the sense which became differentiated into the others, a fact that seems to be recognized in the age-old evaluation of touch as ‘the mother of the senses’.<sup>24</sup>

Among the three histories of feral children discussed by Constance Classen, Victor’s faculties were ranked thus: “The sense of smell is first and most perfected; taste is second, or rather these senses are but one; vision occupies the position of third importance, hearing the fourth, and touch the last”,<sup>25</sup> whereas Kaspar Hauser ‘had an almost supernatural sense of touch. The touch of humans and animals gave him a sensation of heat or cold, at times so strong that he felt as if he had received a blow’.<sup>26</sup> More generally, ‘the senses of *Homo sapiens* develop in a definite sequence, as (1) tactile, (2) auditory, and (3) visual. As the child approaches adolescence the order of precedence becomes reversed, as (1) visual, (2) auditory, and (3) tactile’.<sup>27</sup> Indeed in infant development, of humans as well as animals, the stimulation of this sense is so crucial that ‘when the need for touch remains unsatisfied, abnormal behaviour will result’<sup>28</sup> – ‘children need touch for survival’.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ashley Montagu. *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986 [1971]), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre-Joseph Bonnaterre, cited by Constance Classen in ‘The Sensory Orders of “Wild Children”’, in Howes, *Varieties* (1991), 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Montagu. *Touching*, 314-315.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Tiffany Field. *Touch* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003[2001]), 5

The work of Didier Anzieu, and in particular his magisterial *Le Moi-peau* [*The Skin-Ego*], is a psychoanalytic examination of the significance of both physical and psychical touch in creating and maintaining a sense of self in the form of a 'Skin-ego'. In relation to the senses, he notes:

The skin is a surface containing pouches and cavities in which the sense organs – other than those of touch, which are set in the epidermis itself – are housed. The Skin-ego is a psychical surface which links together sensations of various kinds and makes them stand out as figures against the original background of the tactile wrapping; this is the *intersensorial* function of the Skin-ego, which leads to the formation of a 'common sense' (the *sensorium commune* of medieval philosophy) whose basic reference point is always the sense of touch.<sup>30</sup>

Of course 'the human sensorium [...] never exists in a natural state. Humans are social beings, and just as human nature itself is a product of culture, so is the human sensorium'.<sup>31</sup> In infants, the first version of this social interaction is the whole complex of holding, massage, breastfeeding understood as 'reciprocal interstimulation'<sup>32</sup> provided by the mother or primary caregiver.<sup>33</sup> This is never only one-sided: among the Wolof of Senegal, 'when a visitor arrives, male or female, often before any word is exchanged, he or she is handed a baby. This ges-

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<sup>30</sup> Anzieu. *The Skin-Ego*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> Howes. *Empire*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Montagu. *Touching*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> See also Winnicott's theory of maternal 'holding', D. W. Winnicott. 'The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship', in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Karnac, 1962 [1960]): 37–55; and Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, 39 *et passim*.

ture is intended to “mediate” the relation between adults.<sup>34</sup> Touch is ‘a kind of communication between person and world, a corporeal situation rather than a cognitive positioning [...] Touch is direct and intimate, and perhaps the most truthful sense’;<sup>35</sup> it is the sense we use to test the material reality of a thing by direct bodily perception.<sup>36</sup> If, then, ‘the history of the senses has been, essentially, the history of their objectification,’<sup>37</sup> the ‘history of touch is, essentially, a history of resisting objectification.’<sup>38</sup>

### The Taboo on Touching

If touch, as the most intimate of the senses, everywhere seeks survival in subjective reality-testing or love, this quest is rarely fulfilled, or rarely for long. An infant’s reality is its mother’s arms, breast or caress, but once we grow up we enter the less safe world of Chamfort’s social exchange. And growing up begins, even before the laws of Oedipus, with what Anzieu calls the taboo on touching.

The oedipal prohibition (you must not marry your mother; you must not kill your father) is derived metonymically from the prohibition on touching. The taboo on touching prepares the ground for the oedipal taboo by providing it with a presexual foundation. In psychoanalytic treatment it becomes possible to understand at what particular cost – through what difficulties, failures, counter-cathexes

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<sup>34</sup> Howes. *Varieties*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Rodaway. *Sensuous Geographies*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Josipovici. *Touch*, 2, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Carla Mazzio. ‘The Senses Divided: Organs, Objects, and Media in Early Modern England’, in Howes, *Empire*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

or hypercathexes – this derivation has been effected in each case.<sup>39</sup>

But these laws cut more than one way. Familial prohibitions on touch rely on four dualities: ‘Every prohibition is dual in nature. It is a system of tensions between opposing poles; these tensions in the psyche develop force-fields which inhibit some functions and cause others to change their form.’ The first duality refers to both sexuality and aggression:

It channels the pressure of the drives, defines their bodily sources, reorganises their objects and aims, and structures the relations between the two major families of drives. It is clear how this applies to the oedipal taboo. The taboo on touching is similarly-concerned with the two basic drives: do not touch inanimate objects in case you break them or they hurt you; do not use excessive force against parts of your own or other people’s bodies (this prohibition aims to protect the child against aggression, whether its own or that of other people); do not constantly touch your body or other people’s bodies in the areas sensitive to pleasure, for you will be overwhelmed with an excitation you are incapable of understanding or satisfying (this prohibition aims to protect the child against its own and other people’s sexuality). In both cases, the taboo on touching puts the child on its guard against an excess of excitation and its consequence, the surging of the drive.

In the taboo on touching, sexuality and aggression are not differentiated structurally: they are both expressions of instinctual violence in general. The incest taboo, on the other hand, distinguishes between

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<sup>39</sup> Anzieu. *The Skin-Ego*, 159.

them and places them in a relation of inverse symmetry rather than similarity.

How does this taboo, made up of prohibitions and interdictions, take the form of a law? – through repetition, internalisation, and because it creates or consolidates the child's necessary understanding of the difference between inside and outside.

This, the second duality, 'has a double face, one turned outwards (which receives, accommodates and filters the interdictions communicated by other people) and one turned towards inner reality (which deals with the representational and affective representatives of instinctual currents)'.<sup>40</sup> Like the Skin-ego, it creates a psychical boundary.

The earliest interdictions related to touch that are imposed on a child serve the principle of self-preservation: don't put your hand in the fire, don't touch knives or the rubbish or medicines, for this would put your body, or even your life, in danger. Their correlatives are prescriptions of touch such as: don't let go of my hand when you're leaning out of the window or crossing the road. Interdictions refer to external dangers while prohibitions refer to internal ones. Both assume that the child already understands the distinction between inside and outside – without this the taboo makes no sense – and the taboo itself reinforces that distinction. Any prohibition is an interface separating two areas of psychical space, each with its own psychical qualities. The prohibition on touching separates the area of the familiar, which is protected and protective, from the area of the unfamiliar, which is disturbing and dangerous. [...] The

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 160.

taboo on touching helps to differentiate orders of reality that are confused in the early tactile body-to-body experience of infancy: your body is different from other bodies; space exists independently of the objects that populate it; animate objects behave differently from inanimate objects.<sup>41</sup>

To continue the pathway from the taboo on touching to the social, oedipal taboo, Anzieu observes how the latter both inverts and develops the former. Both taboos exist to create the operations of exceptions – which, however, are always underlaid with inhibition.

The oedipal taboo reverses what is learned from the taboo on touching: whatever is familiar (in the original sense of familial) becomes dangerous in relation to the dual instinctual investments of love and hatred: danger resides now in the twin risks of incest and parricide (or fratricide) and the price to be paid is castration anxiety. On the other hand, under certain conditions, the little boy will have the right – even the duty – to do battle against men outside his family, clan and nation, and to choose a wife from outside his family.<sup>42</sup>

The third duality – the two-phase construction of prohibitions – and the fourth – the fact that the taboos affect equally the child and the adult disciplining it – need not detain us here. The key point is that after the blissful, painful demands of primary infancy meet the block of early separation the hardest thing about the joy of touching is how it might be safely rediscovered. To conclude

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 160–161.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Anzieu's discussion, I return to its opening. How, he asks, is the taboo ever to be overridden?

According to the modes of organisation of the psychical economy, what are the effects of tactile stimulation – narcissistic restoration, erogenous excitation or traumatic violence? What comprises the play of tactile interactions in primary communication? In what kinds of case might it be thinkable or even necessary to bring back that play, and in what kinds might it be useless or even harmful? What stimulating or inhibiting consequences for later sexual life arise from the success or failure of the psychical apparatus to create a Skin-ego for itself and then overcome it in favour of a thinking Ego? Why is it that today's psychoanalytic theory tends to lose sight too often of the Freudian (and clinical) finding that psychical life is grounded in sensory qualities? These are the interrelated questions that arise from the necessity of recognising the taboo on touching.<sup>43</sup>

### Images of Non-Touch: Getting Inside the Body of the Other

Let us move now from psychoanalytic theory to a series of instances of the desire to touch and how it is inhibited. These are extended metaphors of the way in which 'psychical life is grounded in sensory qualities'. Like dreams that aim at the fulfilment of wishes but in the end swerve off and forego them, these glimpses at the life of fantasy illustrate how we curb desire and what then becomes of it.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 150.

My first example of the impossibility of touch – a fantasy which, perhaps, can itself never be shared in any direct sense – is the fantasy of being inside the skin of another human being. When Gide looked at a photo of Pierre Herbart, a handsome young friend of Cocteau's whom he met in 1927, he said 'I really think he has the physique that I would most like to inhabit'.<sup>44</sup> We need to distinguish this idea of entry inside the other from a notion of sexual penetration. In the instances that follow, the skin or external appearance of another is not so much the *object* as the *context* for desire, the imagined pleasure of being rather than having. This is the desire to live as another person, don their appearance, in order to do something we cannot imagine doing any other way.<sup>45</sup> Here, for example, is a governess finding herself literally in the shoes of her admired employer:

A strange thing about those shoes was the way in which, when she was wearing them, Mrs. Brock, who was a heavy treader by nature, planted her feet and walked with the same long steps as Lady Grizel, and stood in the same careless, rather flighty way. A lovely sort of fantasy possessed Mrs. Brock as she moved in this new pretty way, this confident way.

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<sup>44</sup> Maria Van Rysselberghe. *Les Cahiers de la Petite Dame. Cahiers André Gide* vol 5 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 205.

<sup>45</sup> Three 1990s films focus on this structure: Andrew Niccol's *Gattaca* (1997), Anthony Minghella's *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1999), and Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999). In the first two, a male figure takes on the bodily existence of another for reasons of combined envy and desire; coincidentally or not, the other man is played in both cases by Jude Law. The more complex structure of *Malkovich* sees three people (as well as many others) entering the 'Malkovich body'.

Part of herself became Lady Grizel – she absorbed Lady Grizel and breathed her out into the air around herself, and the air around was a far less lonely place in consequence.<sup>46</sup>

It is not always such a pleasant fantasy. Flaubert sent Louise Colet a letter in April 1853, in the early stages of writing *Madame Bovary*, where he complained of the feeling that he was being drawn inside characters he resented:

*Saint Antoine* did not cost me a quarter of the intellectual tension that *Bovary* demands. It was an outlet; I had nothing but pleasure in the writing, and the eighteen months I spent in writing its 500 pages were the most deeply voluptuous of my whole life. Consider then, every minute I am having to get under *skins* that are antipathetic to me.<sup>47</sup>

Gratifying authorship, in this image, is an orgasmic outpouring; painful authorship forces Flaubert to look out from inside the skin of hateful characters. I have explored elsewhere what this seems to mean to Flaubert, and how the intense involvement with characters whose despicable nature is to be somewhat like himself creates the particular demands of an aesthetic of ‘objectivity’ both within and across the gender divide.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Molly Keane. *Good Behaviour* (London: Virago, 2001 [1981]), 20–21.

<sup>47</sup> Gustave Flaubert. *Correspondance II*, ed. J. Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980 [1853]), 297; see also André Gide, *Journal 1887–1925*, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 1245; and Naomi Segal, *André Gide: Pederasty and Pedagogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 118–120.

<sup>48</sup> Naomi Segal. *The Adulteress's Child: Authorship and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 115–122.

In similar vein, Anzieu cites Jean Starobinski: 'Flaubert represents in the body of Emma sensations he has felt himself; and he feels in his own body the sensations he has represented in the carnal subjectivity of Emma.'<sup>49</sup> More generally,

A text is a *chef-d'œuvre* when, out of what his life has left unused and unknown to him [*sic*], the writer creates a work in which the hyper-reality of evocations and the uncanny familiarity of their consequences gives the reader the feeling of entering a dream or living a hallucination which represents, localized at the margin of his own body, an other part of himself.<sup>50</sup>

We shall return in a moment to the fantasy of authorship (especially in Flaubert) embodied in the image of the figure hovering on high, forbearing to come close enough to his – whether the author is a man or not, this is a masculine fantasy<sup>51</sup> – characters and fictional world to represent any fantasy of touching.

The assumption of a false self can prove, like a second skin, difficult to slough off again. Thus Musset's eponymous Lorenzaccio, after years of acting the part of companion in corruption to the duke his cousin whom he wishes to assassinate, recognises with despair that 'vice used to be a garment – now it has become stuck to my

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<sup>49</sup> Didier Anzieu. *Le Corps de l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 119.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>51</sup> Here and elsewhere I distinguish strictly between *gender* (masculinity/femininity, whether located in a body sexed male or female) and *sex*, which is that identification of bodily differentiation by XX and XY or vagina/penis, etc. As social as both these ideas may be, they are differently social.

skin'.<sup>52</sup> The original purpose that motivated disguise is no longer there 'inside' the gestures and actions he has aped too well – indeed, this mimicry seems to prove that he never can have been the innocent he thought. An act of futile and suicidal murder is, after this realisation, 'all that remains of my virtue'.<sup>53</sup>

Whether motivated by 'virtue', curiosity or a more sinister end, the desire that assumes the costume of another's identity will, like Lorenzaccio's, find the garment hard to remove – like the psychological tearing of the early fantasy of a 'common skin' with the mother.<sup>54</sup>

For we need to think about what that desire to get inside a beloved person actually is: it may appear to be the ultimate reaching and touching, but this never happens. What is it we imagine getting to when we 'get there'? The protagonist of Sartre's story 'Intimité' [Intimacy] complains about the incompleteness of her husband's love:

He loves me, but he doesn't love my guts, if you showed him my appendix in a jar, he wouldn't even recognize it, he's always groping me but if you put the jar right in his hands he wouldn't feel anything inside himself, he wouldn't think 'that's hers', you should love everything about a person, their oesophagus and their liver and their intestines.<sup>55</sup>

Is there in fact a contradiction between wishing to get into the other and imagining what we would find there?

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<sup>52</sup> Alfred de Musset. *Lorenzaccio* (Paris: Bordas, 1976 [1834]), 118.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>54</sup> Anzieu. *The Skin-Ego*, 44–48 *et passim*.

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *Le Mur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), 107.

Maybe people don't love those bits because they're not used to them, if they saw them the way they see our hands and arms maybe they'd love them; in that case, starfish must love each other better than we do, they stretch out on the beach when it's sunny and pull their stomach out to take the air, and everyone can see it.<sup>56</sup>

A similar idea about the 'insides,' though in a more sadistic tone, underlies David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988). It is, of course, possible by such techniques as X-ray, ultrasound, MRI or CAT scans – or, more impressively by the motion-picture use of endoscopy – to 'see inside' our own or other people's bodies (on the normal ignorance of the inside of one's own body, see Fisher, Leder, Jacques-Alain Miller).<sup>57</sup> But, though twenty-first-century biotechnological advances have raised the stakes, as my final section will show, this imagery of what Paul Virilio calls the third, '*transplantation revolution*' is not so very new.<sup>58</sup> In 1996, artist Mona Hatoum made the video *Corps étranger* [*Foreign body*], which moves from a caressive journey across the surface of her skin to take the viewpoint of an endoscopic camera inserted, in turn, into her throat and cervix and revealing her oesophagus, intestines and other viscera. However, as Laura Marks

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>57</sup> Seymour Fisher. *Body Consciousness* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1976 [1973]); Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Extimité,' trans. Françoise Massardier-Kenney, in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse*, eds. Mark Bracher et al. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994): 74–87.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Virilio. *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose (London & New York: Verso, 1997 [1995]), 51.

points out: “The question of identification in this tape is perplexing [...] Hatoum can “afford” to treat her body as an object; the effect of this work would be quite different if it were performed with any body but her own.”<sup>59</sup> A comic version of the intra-body story can be found in the form of a promiscuous gift in Robbie Williams’ music video *Rock DJ* (2000), where the tattooed and muscular star, singing on an island-stage encircled by skating or ogling models, fails to interest the girl [Lauren Gold] even after removing the last garment, so he takes his striptease to its logical conclusion by ripping off skin, guts and buttocks and finally, rocking still, duets with her in just his bones. A traditionally tragic one is the obsession of Musset, whose Lorenzaccio we have already seen lamenting the impossibility of separating mask from flesh, with reaching below the surface to expose inner corruption. In an image from the opening scene of *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle* [*The Confession of a Child of the Century*] (1836), the protagonist discovers his adored mistress’s infidelity by peeping under a table-cloth; disillusioned, he embarks on a period of debauchery and observes:

The fatal idea that truth is nakedness was in my head now all the time. I said to myself: the social world calls its face-powder virtue, its rosary religion, its trailing cloak propriety. Honour and morality are its two chambermaids; in its wine it laps up the tears of the poor in spirit who believe in it; it walks with lowered eyes while the sun is high; goes to church, parties and meetings; and in the evening, it undoes

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<sup>59</sup> Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 190.

its robe and reveals a naked bacchante with the feet of a goat.

But talking like this just made me loathe myself; for I sensed that if the body is underneath the clothing, the skeleton is underneath the body.<sup>60</sup>

Nakedness may seem to be ‘a lure to intimacy and proximity’,<sup>61</sup> but the inside or underside, the real nakedness of self or other, is nothing but more body, unknown but surely incapable of speaking a final truth. There is no ‘ground’ of love, just as there is no ground of truth. Or if there is, as Anzieu reminds us, it belongs to the surface, not to the depth:

Ever since the Renaissance, western thought has been obsessed with one epistemological notion: the idea that we acquire knowledge by breaking through an outer shell to reach an inner nucleus or kernel. This notion is now exhausted, after having achieved some successes and also created many serious dangers – after all, it was *nuclear* physics that led scientists and the military to the point of atomic explosions. As early as the nineteenth century, neuropsychology called a halt to this, though it was not much noticed at the time. The brain is in fact the upper and frontal section of the encephalon; the cortex – the word means bark or shell in Latin and entered the vocabulary of anatomy in 1907 – denotes the outer layer of grey matter that caps the white matter. We are faced with a paradox: the centre is situated at the periphery. [...] what if thought were as much a matter of the skin as of the brain? and what if the

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<sup>60</sup> Alfred de Musset. *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973 [1836]), 111–112.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. ‘Naked’, in *The Prosthetic Impulse*, eds. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006), 194.

Ego, now defined as the Skin-ego, had the structure  
of a wrapping?<sup>62</sup>

### Images of Non-Touch: Zooming and Hovering

In my next section I want to follow the process of a double fantasy of *not* reaching that elusive and frustrating ‘inside’. This is the fantasy, common in nineteenth-century French poetry – but not only there – of zooming and hovering. These two movements or positions, however contrary they may look or feel, form a single continuous gesture, the motion-above that is flight. One example is Baudelaire’s poem ‘Élévation’, in which, in a series of vivid images of movement, the poet imagines his ‘spirit’ leaping up away from the earth and speeding ‘avec une indicible et mâle volupté’ [with an ineffable, virile delight] towards ‘les champs lumineux et sereins’ [bright serene fields]. But in the last two lines, motion is suddenly replaced by another spatial relation. Happy is he:

– Qui plane sur la vie et comprend sans effort  
Le langage des fleurs et des choses muettes !<sup>63</sup>

– who hovers over life and understands with ease  
the language of flowers and silent things!

Birds and other flying things are a central passion of Romantic poets: Hugo’s verses are full of swans, doves, butterflies, eagles and other avatars of the poetic ‘songeur

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<sup>62</sup> Anzieu. *The Skin-Ego*, 9–10.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Baudelaire. *Les Fleurs du mal*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marcel Ruff (Paris: Seuil, 1968 [1857]), 46.

ailé' [winged dreamer]<sup>64</sup> or his loved ones. In Baudelaire they are the counterfactual aspect of a fascination with claustrophobia that focuses on the lowering skies and tide of roofs of 1850s Paris. For this reason, as we see in all these poems, flying never reaches a goal. Vast skies are framed in the city by windows or balconies, and swans paddle in dust; over the ocean, albatrosses soar only to be snared and mocked; even the last voyage of death cannot be imagined except as anti-climax: 'La toile était levée et j'attendais encore' [the curtain had gone up, and I was still waiting].<sup>65</sup>

The excitement of the poem is, rather, in the repetition of take-off – what Leo Bersani calls 'a kind of vertical leap of consciousness'<sup>66</sup> – that is rehearsed in a cluster of prepositions or verbs of precipitation. Zooming as a fantasy cannot be separated from the moment of departing from the ground. Birds take off by generating enough airflow to create lift or dropping onto an existing gust of wind. Aeroplanes build up speed by taxiing, again relying on headwind or high-lift devices to set up the first upward motion. Dumbo proves he is no ordinary elephant by becoming the staple of drunken imaginings. Freud identifies the dream or fantasy of flying as a typical phenomenon, especially in children:

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<sup>64</sup> Victor Hugo. *Les Contemplations*, ed. Léon Cellier (Paris: Garnier, 1969 [1856]), 339.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Baudelaire. 'Le rêve d'un curieux' [The dream of a curious man], in *Œuvres complètes*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Leo Bersani. *Baudelaire and Freud* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1977), 24.

why do so many people dream of being able to fly? The answer that psychoanalysis gives is that to fly or be a bird is only a disguise for another wish, [...] a longing to be capable of sexual performance. [...] Whenever children feel in the course of their sexual researches that in the province which is so mysterious but nevertheless so important there is something wonderful of which adults are capable but which they are forbidden to know of and do, they are filled with a violent wish to be able to do it, and they dream of it in the form of flying, or they prepare this disguise of their wish to be used in later flying dreams. Thus aviation, too, which in our days is at last achieving its aim, has infantile erotic roots.<sup>67</sup>

And Kafka's 'Wunsch, Indianer zu werden' [Wishing to be a Red Indian] (1913) traces in a single breathless if-only sentence a centaur-like zooming that loses spurs, reins, ground and, by the fifth line, even the horse. Something of the same fantasy surely underlies Anzieu's 1992 description of himself: 'I have formed with my superego a couple united in the way a horseman is with his mount – and I don't know exactly which of us was the man and which the horse.'<sup>68</sup> As in Kafka, the imagined unity of two such different creatures out of their more complex inter-

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<sup>67</sup> Sigmund Freud. 'Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood' [Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci], trans. James Strachey, in *The Pelican Freud Library* vol. 14, eds. James Strachey and Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1910]), 219–220; for a difference between this motif in the two sexes, see Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [Die Traumdeutung], trans. James Strachey, in *The Pelican Freud Library* vol. 4, eds. James Strachey and Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1910]), 516–518.

<sup>68</sup> Françoise Parot and Marc Richelle, eds. *Psychologues de langue française* (Paris: PUF, 1992), 257.

dependence as master and servant – elsewhere, Anzieu calls the horse, like free association, ‘man’s most noble conquest’<sup>69</sup> – actually means that one of the two must disappear. There is here a defiant endorsement of the castration complex that I will return to.

In his analysis of the creative process, *Le Corps de l'œuvre* [*The Body of the Art-work*] (1981), Anzieu identifies creativity as ‘the illusion of lightness,’<sup>70</sup> and ‘take-off’ or ‘lift-off’ [*décollage*] as its essential first stage: this is what transforms creativity, a predisposition, into creation, an activity: ‘most creative individuals are never creators; what makes the difference, as Proust says of Bergotte, is the take-off.’<sup>71</sup>

The wish to zoom is, as ‘Élévation’ shows, not an aim towards a goal. Once Anzieu gets on to the five stages of creation, he leaves *décollage* behind. But in this study of what purport to be the bodily sources of creativity, we can see how intensively (and traditionally) he sites the possibility of creation in a model of the male body. Thus even if the ‘anchoring’ of word or code in the body or emotions is one of the feminine aspects of creation, as is the sense of ‘being penetrated by a strong idea or by a project she feels as firm inside her’ (!),<sup>72</sup> these exceptions only serve to confirm the essential masculinity of the creator. Indeed take-off in this theory is something akin to the moment

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<sup>69</sup> Didier Anzieu. *Contes à rebours* (Les Belles Lettres-Archimbaud, 1995 [1975]), 7.

<sup>70</sup> Didier Anzieu. *Le Corps de l'œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

when the foetus, female by default in its earliest stages, receives the hormone that makes it male:

why does an individual, whom one knew to be gifted, whether he thought this of himself or not, suddenly or at the end of a long incubation, begin to write, paint, compose, find formulae, and in this way have an impact on readers, spectators, listeners or visitors? Why does he fly forth while others remain on the ground?<sup>73</sup>

The fantasy of flying is gratuitous, purposeless, either an act of sheer undirected joy or the premise for something else. (In this, we can contrast it with the weighted, awaited object of Rilke's poem 'Der Ball', which rises in order to fall.)<sup>74</sup> To soar like Superman is a simple phallic image – but take-off is a rather more complicated one. As the metaphors from Baudelaire, Kafka and Anzieu suggest, the desire to fly forth is a wish to gain by losing. It is all about positive separation, but – as the terms show in both French and English – it is also a risk of ungluing or unscrewing, of removing, of being separated.<sup>75</sup> If what can

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>74</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke. *Neue Gedichte* and *Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1974 [1907, 1908]), 158–159.

<sup>75</sup> I am grateful to a number of correspondents on *francofil* who answered my query in January 2006 about the term 'décoller' having the underlying meaning of 'ungluing'; in this transitive form, it dates back to 1382, but the intransitive form used by Proust and Anzieu was introduced ca. 1910. Edward Forman noted: 'I remember from old war movies that the speed you have to reach before taking off in a plane is referred to in English as the "unstuck speed"'. The most extreme version of this unsticking is escape velocity, the speed required, in physics, to take an object out of the orbit of its source gravitational field. A composition of that name by Benjamin Wallfisch was premiered on 2 September in the 2006 BBC Proms.

fly is the phallus rather than the man, who is he when he is no longer anything but his desire to desire? The boyish bravado – ‘I’m youth, I’m joy [...] I’m a little bird that has broken out of the egg’, cries Peter Pan when challenged by Hook<sup>76</sup> – that dreams of sexuality in the form of flying is dealing with the fear of castration by a kind of preemption; but then what becomes of the self that feared?

This explains, I think, the Baudelairean insistence that ‘les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seuls qui partent / Pour partir’ [the only true travellers are those who leave for the sake of leaving]:<sup>77</sup> the fantasy of soaring or zooming is simply the fantasy of taking off without any next stage. Or rather, what it leads to is a corollary that is also almost directly its obverse. Let us now examine the second fantasy of sexual desire: that of hovering. If we return to the ending of ‘Élévation’ where the poet, once on high, uses his position to drift overhead understanding the language of silent things, we find that Baudelaire’s term is ‘planer’, to hover or glide. Anzieu’s term, borrowed from Proust, is ‘survoler’: to fly above. Both images describe a relationship of stable superiority, a God’s-eye view, conferring knowledge rather than pleasure, an ability that Baudelaire suggests is something like hearing the unvoiced speech of the inanimate (flowers as *bijoux indiscrets* born to blush unseen?) but which Victor Hugo and others would present as reading the world as a book – even though as writers they have created the thing they read.

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<sup>76</sup> J. M. Barrie. *Peter Pan and Wendy* (London: Pavilion, 1988 [1911]), 135.

<sup>77</sup> Baudelaire. ‘Le voyage’, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 123.

As fantasies, authorship and hovering are closely allied, then. They both confer a divine privilege – but over something that is only *fantasised* to have preexisted the leap. In a letter of 1852, after all, Flaubert defines the presence of the author in the text as being ‘like God in the universe: everywhere present and nowhere visible.’<sup>78</sup> It is the logical corollary of his distaste for entering ‘under’ his characters’ skin. Of course, our image of what it might be like to be God is drastically conditioned by our longing, unseeing viewpoint ‘from below’, and it is this tyranny of the unseen divinity that the aspiring author longs to assume. The author-fantasy is a wish to be immortal *vis-à-vis* a toyshop of mortal objects we can scorn and ironise – characters, readers, pottering about far below.

In fact, of course, the ones who actually are immortal (since they have never lived) are the characters: Flaubert’s compulsion to ironise stupid Emma or Charles is surely an expedient based on envy. These infants of his wishful mastery are actually the easiest things in the world to master – impossible not to master. But they are also attempts at mastering readership (Emma embodies this, since she lives and dies by reading), and readers are much harder to control. The wish to be immortal, which the children of our imagination do not even have to form, so inconceivable is it for them to die, is something that only flesh-and-blood people can have, and they have it by seeking virtual readers who will agree to make them virtual writers. Nothing could, perhaps, seem further from

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<sup>78</sup> Flaubert. *Correspondance*, 16.

the body that makes it possible to have desires at all. But that would be misleading.

Like Anzieu, Sartre uses the term 'survol' [flying over/overflying] in describing how Flaubert in fantasy rises up above the rest of the human race who have made him feel abjectly despised: after climbing in fantasy to the top of a high tower from which giant-like position he can despise everyone, there is a sort of rush of motion and 'whether he has been snatched up from the earth or the futile planet has dropped by itself into the abuses of space-time infinity, the fact is that he finds himself *in the air*'.<sup>79</sup> Or again, 'all of a sudden, panting and sacred, he rises up above his torturers, above Nero himself: how small they look, these instruments of his glory. He hovers and looks down, from the ether, at the rag he has left behind in their hands'.<sup>80</sup> The rag, like the skin of flayed Marsyas, is the bodily thing left after the fantasy has disembodied him. But we should not forget that it is the bodily thing that produces the fantasies.

Here is another, less human but also less agonised version of hovering. Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894), whose poems are suffused with a fulsome remembrance of Réunion, the Indian Ocean island where he spent his youth, writes of jungle scenes in which the apparent peace of sleep contains the coiled menace of animal violence: far-off lions or elephants slumber in the noonday heat, a tiger

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<sup>79</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *L'Idiot de la famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857* vol 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 1185.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 1177.

‘falls asleep, its belly in the air, and dilates its claws’;<sup>81</sup> and the jaguar dreams, a proper Freudian *avant la lettre*, that it is plunging ‘its streaming nails / Into the flesh of terrified, bellowing bulls.’<sup>82</sup> His birds are nobler: his albatross, unlike Coleridge’s or Baudelaire’s (and contrast the vulnerable swans of Mallarmé or Rilke: some poets like their zoology classically uncomplicated) does not plunge to earth but ‘tranquil amidst the terror’ of a violent storm on high,<sup>83</sup> ‘approaches, passes and disappears majestically’. It is in ‘Le Sommeil du condor’ [‘The sleep of the condor’], however, that the full fantasy of hovering – the coexistence of extreme power with extreme stillness – is clearest.

The condor is a member of the vulture family. It is supposed to have various peculiarities: to be able to go for long periods without feeding and to flush pink when emotional; but the aspect that has made most impact, and was noted by Darwin, is its ability to hover for long periods without apparently flapping its wings. Leconte de Lisle’s poem begins, like Baudelaire’s, with vivid prepositions of flight, and then observes ‘Le vaste Oiseau, tout plein d’une morne indolence’<sup>84</sup> [the vast Bird, filled with gloomy indolence] gazing down upon the map-like panorama of America. As night rolls in like a tide from the east, it waits ‘comme un spectre, seul, au front du pic altier’ [alone,

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<sup>81</sup> Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lisle. *Œuvres*, vol 2: *Poèmes barbares*, ed. Edgard Pich (Paris: Société d’édition « Les belles lettres », 1976 [1889]), 175.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>83</sup> Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lisle. *Œuvres*, vol 3: *Poèmes tragiques ; derniers poèmes*, ed. Edgard Pich (Paris: Société d’édition « Les belles lettres », 1977 [1884, 1886]), 67.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

like a ghost, atop the lofty peak], until at last the darkness covers it. Then,

Il râle son plaisir, il agite sa plume,  
 Il érige son cou musculueux et pelé,  
 Il s'élève en fouettant l'âpre neige des Andes,  
 Dans un cri rauque il monte où n'atteint pas le vent,  
 Et, loin du globe noir, loin de l'astre vivant,  
 Il dort dans l'air glacé, les ailes toutes grandes.<sup>85</sup>

He groans out his pleasure, shakes his plumage,  
 erects his muscular, hairless neck,  
 and soars up, whipping the acrid snow of the Andes;  
 with a hoarse cry, he rises to where the wind cannot reach  
 and, far above the black globe, high above the living star,  
 he sleeps in the icy air, his great wings outstretched.

This is, of course, a fantasy of phallic absoluteness: permanently tense, permanently relaxed – the ballet of male desire. But, as we have already observed, the ideal relies on failure: not simply on the logical impossibility of this fusion of extremes, but also on a different, psychological impossibility. In relation to Baudelaire's sudden switch from zooming to hovering, Leo Bersani observes:

The emergence of an erotic esthetic will also involve the eroticizing of knowledge. But in early poems such as 'Élévation' and 'La Beauté', the sexual imagery is merely juxtaposed with the epistemological claims. In 'Élévation', the description of the poet's spirit plunging beyond the confines of the 'starry spheres' suggests sexual penetration [...], but this erotic 'rising up' seems to have no effect on the nature of the poet's comprehension of 'the language of

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 167.

flowers and of silent things'. An effortless serene understanding is unaffected by the erotic energy of the leap into understanding.<sup>86</sup>

My own view is that these contraries are disconnected in a rather different way. The erotics of the flying fantasy is three-fold. If we trace it in reverse, the end-point of hovering stands both for the *survol* of superior knowledge, control from on high, and for the erectile tension that has become a sort of immortality or grace. Before this, the effort of desire is expressed in the fantasy of zooming, reaching-towards. Before even this, the initial movement is a taking-off, the initiative of excitement that lifts. Each one of these actions is, separately and together, a tracking-forth of the excitement of castration. Like 'escape velocity', the most extreme and deathly version, or the aimless aim of going into space of Vincent, the protagonist of *Gattaca*, they are all fantasies of distance. To rephrase this in terms of laws: he cannot command (know) where he desires, and he cannot desire and know in a single movement: desire is inevitably failure.

In Anzieu's citation from Proust, the relation of take-off to hovering that represents Bergotte's creativity is a sort of zigzag: 'In order to travel in the air, it is not the most powerful automobile that is needed but one which is capable, by sheer ascensional force, of ceasing to run on the ground and cutting across the line of its horizontal speed with the vertical.'<sup>87</sup> Bergotte's talent may be nothing very

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<sup>86</sup> Bersani. *Baudelaire and Freud*, 25.

<sup>87</sup> Marcel Proust. *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs. A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol 1, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris: Gallimard, 1954 [1918]), 554.

special in itself, despised by family friends in Rolls Royces, but it has this capacity: ‘from inside his modest machine which had at last ‘taken off’, he hovered above them [*les survolait*].’<sup>88</sup> Carefully examined, the first motion is horizontal, the second vertical, the third again horizontal, but no longer moving forward, for the relation of superiority is not directional but static. It is all about separation. This knowledge is, *pace* Bersani, still erotic, but an erotics of distance, coolness born out of heat.

### Penthouses and Drones: ‘Power Without Vulnerability’

The whole point of the fantasy of hovering is its inability to touch. The fact that it must not come to an end means that it is, effectively, all end.

Two further kinds of example suggest themselves. The first is our contemporary relation to verticality – ‘being above’ – in one kind of static position: the fascination with high buildings and how it is to live or stand in them. A couple of centuries ago, the contrasts of urban living were the opposite. In Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* (1835), the eponymous protagonist demonstrates his gradual loss of income and status by moving ever further up the floors of the *pension* Vauquer, having settled into the smallest, least appealing top-floor apartment by the start of the novel. Anyone who has lived in a Paris *chambre de bonne* knows what this feels like. In Baudelaire, being in the eaves with a balcony view over Paris means he can see or imagine or

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 555; cited in Anzieu, *Le Corps de l'œuvre*, 17.

both, 'par-delà des vagues de toits' [beyond a sea of roofs], characters he can pretend to pity in a burst of poetic projective identification.<sup>89</sup> In this, as in much else (not least his fascination with urban weather), Baudelaire's writing marks the late Romantic turning-point that inverts 'bohemian' abjection into creative pride.

In our day the highest place in a city-centre building is more likely to be a penthouse, the badge of wealth rather than poverty. High-rise has two different meanings, as – to take London as an example this time – the unloved social housing of the 1960s is discarded in favour of the Gherkin or the Shard.<sup>90</sup> But the topography of urban life has two vocabularies. Walking through the cityscape may be represented in one way in Baudelaire's or Benjamin's *flâneur*,<sup>91</sup> in another in the peregrinations of Breton and

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<sup>89</sup> Baudelaire. 'Les Fenêtres' [Windows], *Petits poèmes en prose*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 174.

<sup>90</sup> This change is argued, for example, in Stephen Graham, 'Luxified Skies: How Vertical Urban Housing Became an Elite Preserve', *City* 19, no. 5 (2015): 618–645. The risks of vertical social housing were starkly demonstrated by the Grenfell Tower disaster of June 2017, see Andrew O'Hagan, 'The Tower', *London Review of Books* 7 June 2018, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n11/andrew-ohagan/the-tower>; yet many residents of Grenfell had appreciated the combination of verticality and home explored by Richard Baxter in 'The High-Rise Home: Verticality as Practice in London', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 2: 334–352.

<sup>91</sup> Baudelaire's essay 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' [The painter of modern life] first appeared in 1863 but the idea of the *flâneur* harks back to Paul Gavarni's sketch of 1842 and Edgar Allan Poe's tale 'The Man of the Crowd' of 1840; in 1903 Georg Simmel picked up the image in his 'Die Großstadt und das Geistesleben' [The Metropolis and Mental Life] and Walter Benjamin developed the Baudelairean version of Paris in his *Passagen-werk* [Arcades Project] in the 1920s and 1930s.

Aragon in the 1920s or the *situationnistes* forty years later,<sup>92</sup> and in a third way in the last half of the twentieth century in the theoretical writings of Roland Barthes and Michel de Certeau.<sup>93</sup> In all these versions, it is not so much a question of the adventures of the urban wanderer as of the textuality of spatial movement. Thus Certeau writes of walkers ‘whose bodies follow the downstrokes and cross-strokes of an urban “text” which they write but cannot read.’<sup>94</sup> The walker traces shapes – but far above his or her puny movements, the tourist looking down from on high (Certeau was writing in 1980 from the 110<sup>th</sup> floor of the World Trade Center) possesses a New York that is a ‘city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is taking off

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<sup>92</sup> See Louis Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* [*The Paris Peasant*] (1926); André Breton, *Nadja* (1928); and Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* [*The Society of the Spectacle*] (1967).

<sup>93</sup> The text of Barthes’ ‘Sémiologie et urbanisme’ [Semiology and the urban] was a lecture given in Naples in 1967 and first published in 1971; Certeau’s ‘Marcher dans la ville’ [Walking in the city] first appeared in *L’Invention du quotidien* [*The Practice of Everyday Life*] vol 1, in 1980.

<sup>94</sup> Michel de Certeau. ‘Marcher dans la ville’ [Walking in the city], in *L’Invention du quotidien* [*The Practice of Everyday Life*] vol 1, ed. Luce Giard (Paris: Gallimard, 1990 [1980]), 141. Certeau goes on to give a brief history of this fantasy of living on high at the ‘top’ of a city, from medieval maps to Manhattan. Of course this fantasy goes back to antiquity, and aspirations to build and stand high have been associated with overweening ambition from Babel to Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* (1892), just as the verticality of gaze or aim are analysed in such texts as Foucault’s *Surveiller et punir* (1975) and Peter Sloterdijk’s *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* (2009). In *Consensuality*, I mark the importance of the positioning of Princess Diana at the meeting-point of the upward and downward gaze: ‘a double-facing skin between the feudal and the modern modes of the exercise of power’ (118).

into the air'.<sup>95</sup> The walker writes, the viewer from above reads; one traces and is traceable, Dedalus creating the labyrinth, while the other becomes 'a voyeur',<sup>96</sup> or more precisely 'a god's eye'. He concludes (whether thinking directly of Flaubert or not): 'to be nothing but this point of vision, that is the fiction of knowledge'.

Hovering is intrinsically different from standing or living on high, however. I have characterised it as castratory because, ultimately, the bird or machine hovers alone isolated from its point of origin; there is not even a tightrope suspended in the air as, terrifyingly, in the recolonisation of the Twin Towers in Robert Zemeckis's *Man on Wire* (2015). This version of looking-down is always 'commanding'. The obvious corollary of the condor – that patient predator – is the modern bomber-plane. Its association with death may be suicidal, like that of Yeats's Irish airman in 1919, driven on high by 'a lonely impulse of delight',<sup>97</sup> very similar to that of Saint-Exupéry's heroes experiencing 'the mysterious labour of a living flesh',<sup>98</sup> or it may be homicidal like that of Marinetti, who writes in *The Battle of Tripoli* (1912) of the pleasure of bombing without needing to dirty his hands. But ultimately it goes out beyond the flesh, representing the extreme 'clean' violence of the *survol*: brains without bodies.<sup>99</sup> In 1921, with remarkable prescience, Marinetti wrote of the possibility – like Kafka's

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<sup>95</sup> Certeau, 'Marcher dans la ville', 139.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>97</sup> William Butler Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Dent, 1990), 184.

<sup>98</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. *Vol de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931), 23.

<sup>99</sup> See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (London, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993). 90, 213, 387.

Red Indian fantasy – of the violence of hovering imagined at the furthest extreme from bodily presence:

Phantom-aeroplanes laden with bombs and without pilots, remote-controlled by a ‘shepherd’ aeroplane. Phantom-planes without pilots which will explode with their bombs, which can also be guided from the ground by an electric control-panel. We will have aerial torpedoes. One day we will have electric war.<sup>100</sup>

As I hope I have shown, anticipating the tactics of today’s aerial bombardment, and the very reverse of our contemporary suicide bombers, these masculine fantasies of desire are both self-separation and separation from the other. Consummation, it seems, is neither sought nor achieved; but there is no loss either, because the ‘other’ – land viewed from above, flowers and other silent things – is actually much too far away to be heard, seen or touched. This is the fantasy of the drone: violence without sacrifice; or rather, a body without a sense of touch.

In a remarkable article on the recent film *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, 2015), Derek Gregory writes:

As soon as the Wright brothers demonstrated the possibility of human flight, others were busy imagining flying machines with nobody on board. In 1910 the engineer Raymond Phillips captivated crowds in the London Hippodrome with a remotely controlled airship that floated out over the stalls and, when he pressed a switch, released hundreds of paper birds on to the heads of the audience below. When he built the real thing, he promised, the birds would

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<sup>100</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. *L’Alcova di acciaio* [*The Steel Alcove*] (Milan: Serra e Riva, 1985 [1921]), 121.

be replaced with bombs. Sitting safely in London he could attack Paris or Berlin.<sup>101</sup>

But, Gregory warns:

Remoteness [...] is an elastic measure. Human beings have been killing each other at ever greater distances since the invention of the dart, the spear and the slingshot. The invention of firearms wrought another transformation in the range of military violence. And yet today, in a world shrunk by the very technologies that have made the drone possible, the use of these remote platforms seems to turn distance back into a moral absolute.

He cites a veteran of Bomber Command saying: ‘The good thing about being in an aeroplane at war is that you never touch the enemy. [...] You never see the whites of their eyes’. Similarly, the pride of the US Air Force is in having weapons that endow it with ‘power without vulnerability’. This is a logical corollary to the converse pride of the suicide bomber for whom the willingness to die through killing (or kill through dying) is an internalised ethical demand. Yet ethics creep back in because not touching here is dependent upon seeing – not the whites of their eyes, but an eerily silent, grainy image of people moving on the ground, up on a screen in which the bright production values of videogame are absent but the manipulative possibilities seem the same.

Why is the protagonist of *Eye in the Sky* a woman (Col. Katherine Powell, played by Helen Mirren)? Because

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<sup>101</sup> Derek Gregory. ‘How a Hollywood film reveals the reality of drone warfare’, *The Observer*, 9 April 2016, 33.

questions about the morality of not-touching need to be asked and by implication these are questions of gender (not sex, gender). In another possible antidote to the fantasies of masculinity embodied in zooming and hovering, I want to cite a BBC Radio 4 broadcast of 29 November 2015, 'Twenty-first century war poet'. In this 'first-person' programme, airforce veteran and poet Lynn Hill describes her experience of working with drones. 'The plane is physically in those countries [but] you can pretty much operate a drone from anywhere and they chose Las Vegas'. She goes on to explore the situation she found herself in: 'whatever faults you have as a person, the drone programme intensified it [...] sometimes I didn't care and then I felt guilty that I didn't care, and I wanted to care [...]; I was depressed [...] "they serve up poison like entrees at Blueberry Hill: I'll have the crazy, with a side of numb, please"'

As far as the body is concerned, Hill speaks of the drone operators as sharing 'this removal from war' yet, in relation to the remote black-and-white image of a soldier falling, of being able to 'taste it and hear it'. Part of her reaction to the guilt and craziness is grammatical: how names are used in the military, how people avoid the complicity of the pronoun 'we'; she sometimes refers to herself in the masculine (as 'a good airman or a bad airman'), though in reasserting her humanity she moves from the masculine to the universal: responding to the usual definition of a drone as 'an unmanned aircraft' she says: 'No, no – I'm the man behind the drone [...] I'm the human: I have feelings, I have fears, I have opinions, I have thoughts, and if I'm flawed, the drone is flawed,

but if I'm moral and ethical, then the drone is going to be moral and ethical'. But the main bodily imagery she uses is tied to her femaleness: 'I've been living with the war inside of me all this time [...] it sits with me and it grows'; and then, in a connected fluid image of 'contamination': 'I ask myself questions, like how telling these stories are [*sic*] keeping the experiences alive in me: I wondered if when I gave birth or breastfed my baby, was I pouring into her the war that still lives in me'?

### Teletactility, or 'Intimacy Without Proximity'

'Teletactility' is a term cited by Claudia Benthien from Stahl Stenslie;<sup>102</sup> 'tactile telepresence' is Paul Virilio's term;<sup>103</sup> another commonly found is 'telehaptics'. They all mean touching at a distance, or 'relationships of immediate proximity giving way to remote interrelationships'.<sup>104</sup> These terms first arose in the 1990s, and are uttered in varying tones of excitement or horror. For the rise of the posthuman – though a complete surprise to my doctor when I told her I was working on it yesterday – is by now a familiar trope in cultural and political theory.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Claudia Benthien. *Skin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002 [1999]), 221–234; she cites Stahl Stenslie, 'Vernetzung des Fleisches', *Die Zukunft des Körpers I*, *Kunstforum* 132: 178–187.

<sup>103</sup> Virilio. *Open Sky*, 105; see also 10, 39, 45, 105 *et passim*.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> The term 'posthuman/ism' carries with it, of course, all the positive and negative ambivalences of 'human/ism'; it also overlaps somewhat with 'transhuman/ism', which is itself weighted with the many uses of the prefix 'trans'. For discussions of the difference, see Joanna Zylińska, ed., *The Cyborg Experiments* (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), 107.

Not everyone looks cheerfully to a world in which we 'have in common a sustained commitment to work out the implications of posthumanism for our shared understandings of the human subject and of humanity as a whole' or in which we should be able to realise 'the cybernetic dream of creating a world in which humans and intelligent machines can both feel at home'.<sup>106</sup> The notion is as divisive as every new step in our way of conceiving ourselves. Some theorists get lost in the 'ecstatic pronouncements and delirious dreams' of a state of being in which the body is obsolete or even erased, in which the 'cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities'.<sup>107</sup> Apart from increasingly familiar developments in biotechnology, genetics and robotics (which I shall return to below), such dangerous possibilities are most consistently represented in the performance art of Stelarc:

I'm much more interested in what happens between states, between people – not so much at the boundary but *between* boundaries and to question what constitutes boundaries, to undermine them altogether. [...] [Virilio] sees the skin as a boundary. On the one side is the bounded self and on the other there is the world. He found it very disconcerting when I started inserting electronic objects,

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<sup>106</sup> Respectively: Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity 2013) 46; and N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 239.

<sup>107</sup> Respectively: Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman*, 193; Donna Haraway. 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1984) reprinted in Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 154.

like STOMACH SCULPTURE, into the body.<sup>108</sup> The point where technology invades the body is the point where hysteria is usually generated.<sup>109</sup>

The revolutionary dissolution of boundaries or 'edges', and the fixity of the skin as a guardian of the inside/outside dynamic of the self, understood as both a material and a psychical entity, is much exaggerated by the advocates of posthumanism, however. The idea of the skin has never been one of impermeability, as witness Anzieu's 'double face', Paul Schilder's body image, Freud's mystic writing-pad or discussions of sweat and other indices of porosity in the cultural histories of Benthien, Jablonski or Connor.<sup>110</sup>

But Stelarc makes a larger claim for one of his other art experiments:

A hollow body is a host body. So in this way the body is not simply a site for a psyche but becomes a host for a sculpture.<sup>111</sup> In the performance FRACTAL FLESH for Telepolis, people in other places could remotely access and actuate a body. People at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Media Lab in Helsinki and the Doors of Perception Conference in Amsterdam were connected to my body, located in Luxembourg. We

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<sup>108</sup> Stelarc's habit of referring to his body as 'the body' is noted by four different writers, in Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 51, 59, 87, 187. Obviously it is not casual, but could be seen as much as an aggrandisement as an anonymisation of his self.

<sup>109</sup> Stelarc, interviewed in Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 117.

<sup>110</sup> For 'edges', see Smith and Morra, *The Prosthetic Impulse*, 3, 6. For other discussions, see Benthien, *Skin*, 37–43; Nina Jablonski, *Skin* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 2006), 39; and Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 21–22.

<sup>111</sup> On the spatial context of sculptures, see Segal, *Consensuality*, 125–141.

had video screens at either end, so I could always see the face of the person who was programming my body movements, and they in turn could always see the results of their choreography. These images were always superimposed so we could see each other. That created a kind of intimacy without proximity and it gave you the sense of being 'possessed' by that remote agent.<sup>112</sup>

'Possessed' is a good word: as we see below in a quotation from Sartre, it was much used by men for a kind of proximity without intimacy, the fantasy of 'possessing' a woman – always a paradox, since it was their body part that took the risk of a temporary stay inside her boundaries. It still commonly refers to ghosts and should by rights refer to foetuses: the thing inside another thing, like an occupying army or Freud's all-purpose, mistranslated concept of *besetzen*. Here it suggests a momentary but powerful suspension of autonomy on the part of the artist. What it surely does not suggest is intimacy.

Let us return to where this essay began – the sense of touch, and its place at the extreme of the senses. Steven Connor refers to touch as a 'mastersense' and Tiffany Field calls it 'the mother of the senses'.<sup>113</sup> In these two images, we see first the hands that deploy and manipulate and second the hands that care and caress. In the world of the posthuman, what does each of these become? – prosthetics and cybersex.

The prosthetic use of technology is not simple 'enhancement', as disability researchers in a range of fields have

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<sup>112</sup> Stelarc, interviewed in Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 119.

<sup>113</sup> Connor. *The Book*, 185; Field. *Touch*, 76.

eloquently argued. Vivian Sobchack is impatient with the ubiquity of a metaphor that she lives with in material earnest, and contradicts Marquard Smith's assertion that 'the discourse of prosthesis [...] can be located in [...] the deeply ideological subject of "passing"', by describing how she often reveals 'as a marvel what the prosthetic leg is cosmetically supposed to hide (that I have a prosthetic leg)' because she takes pride in how gracefully it enables her to 'get about [her] world with a minimum of prosthetic thought'.<sup>114</sup>

In a less nuanced debate we are all cyborgs endowed with prostheses: indeed the Gordian knot of the posthuman is often sliced with the observation that technology can be equated with culture,<sup>115</sup> for it is what assists the body in fulfilling its 'natural' existential projects. Stelarc summarises: 'Technology is not simply external. **Technology is what defines being human.** It's not an antagonistic alien sort of object, it's part of our human nature. It constructs our human nature.'<sup>116</sup> This goes as far back as Aristotle, and enters neo-modernity with Mar-

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<sup>114</sup> Marquard Smith. 'The Vulnerable Articulate' in *The Prosthetic Impulse*, eds. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 2006), 50; Vivian Sobchak, 'A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor and Materiality', in *The Prosthetic Impulse*, eds. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 2006), 33, 38.

<sup>115</sup> See also Julie Clarke, 'The Human/Not-Human in the work of Orlan and Stelarc', in *The Cyborg Experiments*, ed. Joanna Zylińska (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), 37–38; Neil Badmington, ed., *Posthumanism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

<sup>116</sup> Stelarc, cited in Gary Hall, *Para-Site*, in *The Cyborg Experiments*, ed. Joanna Zylińska (London & New York: Continuum, 2002), 139, emphases Stelarc's.

shall McLuhan's 'extensions of man'.<sup>117</sup> Thus even if, at times, 'our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert', it is also true that 'bodies and technologies function in a self-feeding relation where transformations in the one produce transformations in the other, which in turn feed back on both'.<sup>118</sup> And our contemporary 'transplantation revolution' has married a general envy of pregnancy to a continuing fascination with other kinds of hybridity and grafting – the 'intruder' heart that interpolates the donor's feelings,<sup>119</sup> the criminal's hands attached to the concert-pianist's wrists, Frankenstein's rough sewing of body parts – we are never short of opportunities for the uncanny. On the other hand ... robotics has invented appendages that are more like the sentient fingertips than they are themselves. Stelarc describes an ambidextrous hand whose fingers and thumb bend both ways and thus offer left and right capabilities simultaneously, or an extended arm which has 11-degree manipulation: each finger splits open to produce further fingers which can lift and grip.<sup>120</sup> The MIT robot 'Cog' can turn a crank or swing a pendulum, and other early robots take the analogy with human touch much further:

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<sup>117</sup> Cited in Zylinska, *The Cyborg Experiments*, 1–3.

<sup>118</sup> Respectively: Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 152; and Grosz. *Naked*, 188.

<sup>119</sup> The epithet refers to Nancy's 'Intrus', but the donor's feelings are picked up from a 2016-2017 Spanish TV series called *Pulsaciones* (translated as *Lifeline*).

<sup>120</sup> Stelarc, in 'Zombies, Cyborgs and Chimeras', Youtube video, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqtiM1hK6IU>.

Tactile sensors are devices attached in various ways to robotic grippers, to aid in the grasping and manipulation of objects. These sensors are specifically designed to calibrate accurately the force of the robotic device's grasp so that, for example, the machine uses enough force to pick up and move an object without crushing it in the process. [...] This way of conceptualising touch is derived from scientific understandings of the skin. [...] In fact, function (tactility) and materiality are inextricably linked in this understanding of touch, so that sensing requires a skin-like materiality to enable a skin-like quality of touch.<sup>121</sup>

When Hans Moravec imagined his 'robot bush' in the 1980s, he described its structure:

Noting both the power and the limitations of human hands, Moravec invents his robot bush as an extraordinarily dexterous entity. He moves from a general account of the robot's capacities to an 'actual design', describing the robot's structure as a 'large branch that splits into four smaller ones, each half the scale' (Moravec 1988: 104). This branching and splitting extends to twenty levels, from an initial meter-long trunk that is ten centimeters in diameter. The aptly named 'bush' ends in a trillion tiny 'leaves'.<sup>122</sup>

Not only does it enjoy 'skin-like qualities' but it far exceeds them, for this robot can "see" through touch: 'if our bush puts its fingers on a photograph, it will "see" the image

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<sup>121</sup> Claudia Castañeda. 'Robotic skin: The Future of Touch?', in *Thinking Through the Skin*, eds. Sara Ahmed & Jackie Stacey (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 226. In this and the next two quotations, Castañeda is citing Hans Moravec's *Mind Children* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 105.

<sup>122</sup> Castañeda. 'Robotic skin', 225.

in immense detail simply by feeling the height variations of the developed silver on the paper. It could watch a movie by walking its fingers along the film as it screened by at high speed.<sup>123</sup> Thus might touch and sight, the two extremities of the sense-spectrum, bizarrely meet.

But what of care and the caress? We have already glimpsed the power of maternal holding and tending; let us proceed into adulthood. In the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty we discover two passages in which the caress exemplifies the psychology of the self-other encounter. For Sartre in *L'Être et le néant* (1943) desire is always that of a body for another body, through which both discover themselves as flesh:

Everyone is disappointed by that famous saying: '[love is] the contact of two epidermises'. Love is not meant to be mere contact; it seems that only man can reduce it to a contact, and when that happens it loses its true meaning. The caress is not a simple floating touch [*effleurement*]: it is a *fashioning*. When I caress another person, I bring forth [*fais naître*] their flesh by my caress, with my fingers. The caress is that set of rituals that *incarnates* the other. [...] The caress creates the other as flesh both for me and for themselves. [...] It reveals the flesh by divesting the body of its action, splitting it off from the possibilities that surround it [...]

In the caress what caresses the other is not my body as a synthetic form in action, but my fleshly body which creates the flesh of the other. By means of pleasure, the caress is able to create the body of the other both for them and for myself as a *touched* passivity, in the sense that my body becomes flesh in

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 227.

order to touch their body with its own passivity – in caressing itself against it rather than caressing it. This is why the gestures of lovemaking have a languor that one might almost call studied: it is not so much that we *take hold of* [*prendre*] a part of the other's body but that we *bring* our own body up against the body of the other. Not so much pushing or touching, in an active sense, but *placing up against* [*poser contre*]. [...] By *realizing* the other's incarnation, the caress uncovers my own incarnation to me. [...] I make the other person taste my flesh through their own flesh in order to make them feel themselves being flesh. In this way *possession* is revealed as a *double reciprocal incarnation*.<sup>124</sup>

Here, sexual desire brings the body to the fore in a way that its everyday existence, a means of enacting projects in the world, cannot. It creates two selves of flesh. It does this because of the peculiar 'impenetrability' of the other's body, the caress being closer than an *effleurement* but further off than a penetration: a placing-up-against that slides briefly along the smoothness of the other's otherness. Unlike the appropriativeness of knowledge, sport or art, however, desire creates, through the caress that makes them flesh, an encounter of two bodied freedoms. What I want when I love, according to Sartre, is to be 'the object by whose proxy the world exists for another; in another sense, I am the world. Instead of being a *this* standing out against a background of world, I am the object-back-ground against which the world stands out'.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *L'Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 430–431.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 409–410.

In Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published notes collected as *Le visible et l'invisible* (1964), in the essay on 'Interlacing – the chiasm', we find a striking paragraph inserted in the middle of a discussion of the 'solipsistic illusion' of the bodied subject:<sup>126</sup>

For the first time, the body no longer couples with the world, it intertwines with another body, applying itself carefully to it with its whole expanse, tirelessly sculpting with its hands the strange statue which, in its turn, gives everything it receives, cut off from the world and its aims, occupied with the sole fascination of floating in Being together with another life, making itself the outside of its inside and the inside of its outside. And then at once, movement, touch and vision, applied to the other and to themselves, head back to their source and, in the patient, silent work of desire, commence the paradox of expression.<sup>127</sup>

In the 'careful' image of the statue, this scene echoes something of Sartre's concept of the caress making the self and other into flesh, but turns it aesthetic. The key term is 's'appliquer', which appears both in reference to the person of the lover working on the 'strange statue' of the other's life and also to the senses working among themselves. The ending of this passage seems just about to point forward to a development of the 'paradox of expression' – but it never happens, the argument at that point turning elsewhere. What this paradox might be, though, is an *active* relation of consensuality that would supplement Sartre's passive one.

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<sup>126</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Le Visible et l'Invisible* (Paris : Gallimard, 1964), 186.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

Bearing in mind these notions of what the direct caress is, let us turn to the indirection of cybersex. Virilio inserts it into his theory of 'the law of least action', as '*the couple that was the driving force of history [...] entering divergence mode*',<sup>128</sup> and identifies it as a new version of the *survol* or safe sex:

As with the nozzle on the jet engine of a machine capable of breaking the sound barrier, everything comes together in long-distance love, thanks to the power of ejecting others, to this ability to ward off their immediate proximity, to 'get off on' distance and make headway in sensual pleasure the way jet propulsion propels the jet. So, just as the supersonic aircraft's take-off enables it to *overfly* Mother Earth and the geography of the continents, so the 'remote manipulation' of jet-propelled love allows partners to *overcome* their reciprocal proximity without risk of contamination, the electro-magnetic prophylactic outdoing by a long shot – and how! – the fragile protection of the condom.<sup>129</sup>

Another way of thinking about cybersex is by analogy with the idea of the 'haptics' of cinema. This concept looks not at 'technologies that attempt to reproduce the sense of smell (for example, Odorama) or touch (for example, the Power Glove) – in effect, movement-image strategies for evoking smell and touch – [but at] how audiovisual media evoke these other senses within their own constraints'.<sup>130</sup> It works against the dominance of vision as the primary filmic sense, not by pretending to overcome or supersede

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<sup>128</sup> Virilio. *Open Sky*, 111, 108.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>130</sup> Marks. *The Skin of the Film*, 131.

it but by examining what it does other than present or represent things to our eyes. Cybersex is similarly, perforce, a mediation and thus a perversion or inversion of touch.

As such it potentially creates 'new kinds of tactile experience', abolishing the 'distinction between near and far senses'.<sup>131</sup> But how could this work? Benthien cites Stahl Stenslie's description of his *Cyber SM-Projekt* of 1993:

The communications system places the emphasis on the conveyance and the reception of a sensual contact. If I touch my own body, I am at the same time also touching the other participant. [...] Above all, I have to do to myself what I want the other person to feel. This turns my own body into a self-referential object of communication. There is no possibility of forgetting oneself or of hiding behind the actions one is performing. If I touch my genitals, the other person will notice that I am touching them. Such a one-on-one transfer of stimuli creates a direct, immediate, almost intimate form of communication.<sup>132</sup>

Almost intimate? Benthien questions the collapse of touch into 'communication': 'the entire setup rests on the idea of pushing a button or using a keyboard, except that now it is the body itself that is used in this way';<sup>133</sup> but I would like to raise a different problem, one implied by her use of the generic definite article favoured by Stelarc, and which precisely hides its presumptions in and behind an apparent anonymity – 'the' body. Of course there is no

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<sup>131</sup> Benthien. *Skin*, 223, paraphrasing Derrick de Kerckhove, 'Touch versus Vision', in *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*, ed. Wolfgang Welsch (Munich: Fink, 1993).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

‘the body’; and the sexualised body is precisely animated in its potential for difference. This difference does not depend on morphological specifics of sex/gender or anything else, but it does depend on you being not-me. If I have breasts and a clitoris and I touch those and you feel this touch on your chest and penis, in what sense are we feeling the same thing? The fascinating implication of this version of cybersex is that there is no longer any heterosexuality – or there is only heterosexuality, and thus no homosexuality. How can I ‘incarnate the other’ if I am no longer caressing ‘another person’?

This is illustrated more powerfully in the discussion by Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb of a scene in ‘Burning Chrome’, a story by William Gibson published in 1986, which ‘reflects some of the desires that drove researchers to introduce sensitivity to prosthetic and paralyzed limbs’: the protagonist Jack has a prosthetic arm whose covering is ‘a medium of sensual pleasure. [...] Through this skin prosthesis, the meaning of feeling slips from the sense of touch to affect, emotion, and communicated sentiment’.<sup>134</sup> The story refers to a real-life invention by prosthetic engineer John Sabolich called the ‘Sense-of-Feel’ [SOF] system. The SOF ‘draws on memories of ‘warm feeling’ (love) communicated through hand-to-hand contact’;<sup>135</sup> to do this it requires training:

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<sup>134</sup> Both these quotations: Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb. ‘On the Subject of Neural and Sensory Prostheses’, in *The Prosthetic Impulse*, eds. Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 2006): 125–154, 128.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Abstraction is an important part of this process. Temperature sensation is delivered in isolation from other types or qualities of sensations that are conducted through touch – such as texture, tickle, itch, numbness, position sense, and pressure (pressure is delivered to the Sense-of-Feel prosthesis not by thermophiles but through electrodes). Sensations are parsed in this system. Touch in itself is reduced to the abstraction of one of its aspects, temperature, which is in return reduced to warmth as a synecdoche of the ‘feeling’, a euphemism for love.

Cartwright and Goldfarb take these observations a step further:

We might ask, what does the Sense-of-Feel hand feel like to the wife of the Sabolich client? Had she learned to incorporate the mechanical prosthesis into their relationship as fetish? Is this new prosthesis a model that offers the surface texture of flesh to her hand, and will Sabolich design a model that can also communicate warmth back to her hand on contact? Might the simulation of warmth involve mechanisms for stimulating blood flow to the surface of the ‘skin’ on stimulation so that the hand can radiate the meaning of warmth? We might also ask how important it is that this example relies on the beloved as the object that communicates ‘warmth’ to the sensory hand. Can the client discern between different degrees of physical and semiotic intensity – say, between the warmth of love and the heat of anger or between the heat of a body and that of a burning flame?<sup>136</sup>

They rightly, and startlingly, describe these as ‘hypothetical questions about fleshing out what it means for a

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 132.

partner to be incorporated as a prosthetic of feeling'. And indeed, where else do we find such a searching inclusion of the object of the desiring touch as themselves a subject? Not in either of the albeit touching quotations I have given above from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty – and certainly not in the disappointing version of the caress found in the writings of Lévinas.<sup>137</sup> Does being the object of desire always make us a prosthetic to the other? Is touch, in other words, never reciprocal after all?

Virilio talks of 'the coming insemination of *emotional prostheses*', Badmington of '*cyborg envy*'; but Paula Rabonowitz warns us that 'posthumans always lie'.<sup>138</sup> As long as we have bodies that seek intimacy as well as autonomy, we will, it seems, never be naked.

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<sup>137</sup> See the discussion in Segal, *Consensuality*, 184–187.

<sup>138</sup> Virilio. *Open Sky*, 95. Neil Badmington. 'Posthumanist (Com)Promises: Diffracting Donna Haraway's Cyborg Through Marge Piercy's *Body of Glass*', in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 85; Paula Rabinowitz. 'Soft Fictions and Intimate Documents: Can Feminism be Posthuman?', in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 44.

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