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Edited by Lorenzo Serini and Marta Vero

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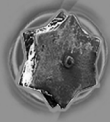
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Technology and touch between Derrida and McLuhan

Raoul Frauenfelder

Abstract

McLuhan's media theory begins with the distinction between a writing and an oral culture that is grounded, in our opinion, in a metaphorical touch. The idea of a touch as immediacy and proximity seems to become the leading metaphor of the communication in electric age.

However, following Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, thus of a close and immediate communication, and his analyses on the figure of touch, we will show a distance at work in the tactile domain, namely the spectral activity of the virtual touch in every contact and every communication.

McLuhan, Aristotle and the ‘Common Sense’

Dealing with McLuhan’s several texts devoted to media, it becomes evident a peculiar and interesting relation between his analyses of technology and a certain metaphysics of touch. We suggest that the idea of touch, as the sense that offers an immediate and absolute proximity, orients the metaphysical distinction McLuhan made between mechanic technology and electric technology.

In our opinion, his condemnation of mechanic technology, namely of alphabetic writing and its technical reproducibility, grounds in a «continuistic haptocenteredness». To achieve this purpose, we recall Derrida, who uses this hyperbolic expression, namely the «continuistic haptocenteredness», in his volume *On Touching-Jean-Luc Nancy* in order to sustain that every eidetic or optical intuitionism has always required the fulfillment of a tactile intuition¹. According to Derrida, traditionally the sense of touch has not designate a single sense, rather a metonym for the entire human sensorium.

This is to say that in the history of philosophy, from Aristotle to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, touch has had a privilege among other senses, a privilege resulting from its ability to offer the grasped

1 Derrida (2005), p. 161.

object in immediate and full intuition. In addition, the extension of its privilege to the entire field of human sensibility is the reason why Derrida prefers to designate the visual or audile, as well as tactile contact, with the term *haptic*, that better describes the synesthetic perception of the world mentioned by Merleau-Ponty as well as by McLuhan².

Therefore the sense of touch becomes the metonymical figure of the whole domain of sensibility, in the wake of what Johann Gottfried Herder claims in his *Philosophical Writings*. There, the latter poses the question: «how are sight and hearing, color and word, scent and sound, connected?» and answers as follows:

not among themselves in the objects. But what, then, are these properties in the objects? They are merely sensuous sensations in us, and as such do they not all flow into one? We are a single thinking sensorium commune, only touched from various sides. There lies the explanation³.

² The term *haptic* comes from the Greek word *haptesthai* and refers to everything relates to the sense of touch or tactile sensations. One of the first thinkers who adopts the Greek term *haptesthai* is Aristotle, exactly in the book *On The Soul (De Anima)* and in *On Sense and the Sensible (De Sensu et Sensibilibus)*. By the way, as Mark Paterson points out, «contemporary psychology would treat those somatic senses of proprioception, kinaesthesia and the vestibular sense as working synergistically, as the inwardly-oriented sensations necessary for feelings of embodiment. *Haptic* could therefore effectively encompass these somatic senses of touch. The term is deployed in various contexts such as art history, aesthetics and architecture, although most frequently in the psychology of perception and engineering, especially the technologies of touch»: see Paterson (2007), p. 4.

³ Herder (1985), p. 106.

As argued by Janine Marchessault, the revaluation of tactility, *synesthesia* and medieval-oral culture is the strategy McLuhan adopts «to counter the reductive and dominating epistemological forms of visual culture in the West»⁴.

Therefore, McLuhan follows the classic philosophical paradigm about touch as a «path to redemption», that is, regaining the balance among senses lost in the western visual culture⁵; a strategy built on the notion of “common sense” inherited by the Thomistic and Aristotelian theory of sensory perception. In effect, in the attempt to exhibit the ontic specificity of media, McLuhan outlines a philosophy of history and, at the same time, the history of the philosophical theories about sensation and perception.

In our opinion, it is still the Aristotelian account of senses that informs McLuhan’s pages; in fact, in *On the Soul* Aristotle discriminates the five senses and encounters some difficulties in establishing a hierarchy among them. One of the main issues concerns the medium of touch, its organ that differs from those of the other perceptual fields.

At a first glance touch does not seem to have a medium, it seems immediate – from this point of view Aristotle looks less naïve than McLuhan and closer to some reflection of Derrida –, but nevertheless an

4 Marchessault (2005), p. 124.

5 Op. cit., p. 125.

imperceptible gap remains between touching and touched, which makes the tactile sensation possible. According to Aristotle, the elusive medium is the flesh, which «is the medium of touch, the real organ being situated farther inward»⁶.

However, this medium differs from all other media of sensation; indeed, Aristotle remarks

there remains this difference between what can be touched and what can be seen or can sound; in the latter two cases we perceive because the medium produces a certain effect upon us, whereas in the perception of objects of touch we are affected not *by* but *along* with the medium⁷.

The similarity between this description and what McLuhan claims about the perceptual relation to television is astonishing:

Television completes the cycle of the human sensorium. [...] In television there occurs an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all the senses simultaneously, rather than that of sight alone. You have to be “with” it. But in all electric phenomena, the visual is only one component in a complex interplay. [...] Television demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being⁸.

6 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 422b22.

7 Op. cit., 423b16.

8 Fiore, McLuhan (1967), p. 125.

Moreover, in *On the Soul*, Aristotle recognizes an additional sense, that is irreducible to the five senses; it is a matter of a reflexive perception: the sense of sensing. However, if each sense must have the perception of perceiving and simultaneously the one of its own sensible, the reason has to be found in the common sense: «But in the case of the common sensibles there is already in us a common sensibility which enables us to perceive them non-incidentally»⁹.

Thus, every sense is twofold, as it refers to something particular and to something common by virtue of «a part common to all the organs of sense; for there is one sensory function, and the controlling sensory organ is one, though differing as a faculty of perception in relation to each genus»; a common part that is strictly related to the tactile domain, as Aristotle argues in *On Sleep*: «this subsists in association chiefly with the faculty of touch»¹⁰. In this context the common sense evoked by Aristotle seems to be the core of a self-perception, because each act of perception provides the living being with a contact with himself, with a feeling of being.

DeKerckhove claims something similar in the first chapter of *The Point of Being*: that point «describes a sensory relationship with the world and to others that is grounded in touch. PB is the feeling of one's

9 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 425a27.

10 Aristotle, *De somno et vigilia*, 455a22-23.

presence in one's own life»¹¹. Moreover, this point clashes with the “Point of Vision”, which dominated the Western culture since the Renaissance and at least until the irruption of electric technologies. Those latter change the ratio among senses, for de Kerckhove as well as for McLuhan, grounding the human sensibility in a tactile common sense¹².

In addition, the tactile sensation is the condition of the sensation of one's own presence in the world; thus, to borrow an expression from de Kerckhove, it is «the very origin of myself»¹³.

Therefore, this account of tactility does not differ from the classics theory of sensibility, even if contemporary thinkers take into account the changes generated by electric technologies. Once again, this is precisely the case of de Kerckhove, according to whom

the only sense in which we can truly trust is touch, because it is through touch that we really exist [*dann er ist da, wo auch wir wirklich sind*]. Through the vehicle of electricity, we are in contact with the whole world. Thus only the rediscovery of proprioception will make it possible for us to trust in our feelings, in the sense not of emotions which accompany us in daily life, but of the much deeper sensation

11 de Kerckhove (2014), p. 10.

12 Moreover, de Kerckhove argues, in the wake of McLuhan, that «The new order of sensibility is informed by a sort of “augmented tactility”, supported and encouraged by electronic technologies. The Internet, besides serving cognitive ends, also acts as a collective and connective limbic system that carries emotions instantly across frontiers, religions and cultures» *ibidem*.

13 Op. cit., p. 11.

of being in the center of our own perception of the world that surrounds us. This form of intercourse with information [...] is rooted in a fully realized proprioceptive sense. It calls on us to transform our personal center of reference [*Bezugszentrum*] into a “point of being”¹⁴.

Consequently, for Derrida, from Aristotle to McLuhan the entire history of the philosophy of perception is fundamentally *haptic* and bounds up with a continuistic intuitionism. This means that touching provides an immediate contiguity and human hands become instruments by means of which the body appropriates itself and the world experiencing the original proximity with it.

In other words, the body is thought from the beginning as the place of an immediate and pure self-affection. However, he claims, the pure experience of one’s own living body is only the illusion fostered by the desire of full presence. For these reasons, Derrida states that the philosophical treatment of touch, as rhetorical figure and bodily experience, leads to a ‘metaphysics of touch’, upon which the metaphysics of the life of the spirit is grounded. Here, our aim consist in clarifying that this ‘metaphysics of touch’ provides a basis for McLuhan’s metaphysics of technology.

14 de Kerckhove (1993), p. 167.

«To get rid of the writing machines...»

McLuhan himself sets close boundaries between the human structure of perception and technological changes. He especially points out two moments of significant change. The first turning point concerns the introduction of the phonetic alphabet and its enhancement due to the diffusion of printing technology. Conversely, the second turning point occurs with the advent of electric media.

These changes affected the human sensorium and implied an impressive reorganization of it; in fact, according to McLuhan, they have Midas touch, namely each technology has the power to change many aspects of the society.

For McLuhan, the first change is the irruption of alphabetic writing, which produces the detachment of human beings from the primordial state of existence. Non-literate people live in a tribal world richer than the literate one, because the former is magical and global, people participate in it with all senses and the communication is basically oral. On the contrary, the latter entails the mutual separation of senses and the fragmentation of social life.

Non-literate people live in unitary and harmonious world, where there is no space for individualism and separation. Furthermore, their perception is essentially audile and tactile, or, rather,

senses cooperate each other giving rise to a hyper-aesthetic sensorium. Normally, non-literate people are engaged in a pre-discursive, unconscious and anonymous life, in which senses are inter-connected.

Alphabetic writing acted as detonator in the tribal and synesthetic world of non-literate people. It fragmented the (presumed) original unity of the society, causing the detachment of the individual from the community and the separation of senses. According to McLuhan, this separation of the senses is an illusion provoked by

the goose quill [that] put an end to talk. It abolished mystery; it gave architecture and towns; it brought roads and armies, bureaucracy. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled the parchment page built a city¹⁵.

Yet again, it is a question about touch. However, this time, the touching hand does not have synesthetic implications; rather it marks the world with the goose quill constructing an artificial or secondary world, crossed by lines traced on paper and in the soil. It is the world of the space ordered by maps, architecture, documents, and so forth.

According to McLuhan, alphabetic writing detribalizes human beings, because it is a mechanical

¹⁵ Fiore, McLuhan (1967), p. 48.

technology that breaks the original unity of life in the primeval and tribal world, a world perceived through the «interplay [of senses] in a tactile synesthesia», as he states in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*¹⁶. The balance among the senses changes and the sight becomes the privileged one.

In effect, the sight is the unique sense that allows the detachment from the natural tactile state of life. According to McLuhan, alphabetic writing «abstracts the visual component from the sensory complex» and consequently the eye gains such a perceptual priority up to orients hierarchically the entire human sensorium¹⁷.

In addition, the power of the visual field increases with the invention of printing processes, which gives rise to such an overwhelming privilege of sight that any possible balancing among the senses becomes almost impossible to achieve. For this reason, McLuhan strongly criticizes the extension of the visual-abstractive perception, which anesthetizes the other senses and reverses the native attitude of human sensorium, drastically reducing «our most intimate and interrelating activity, [namely] our sense of touch»¹⁸. By means of the repetition and uniformity of printed writing, the sight, which is the

16 McLuhan (1962), p. 17.

17 Op. cit., 39.

18 McLuhan (1994), p. 107.

«most neutral and objective sense»¹⁹, «diminishes the role of the other senses of sound and touch and taste in any literate culture»²⁰.

His condemnation of writing captures the attention of Derrida, who, in a very short interview of 1982 with Paul Brennan, disagrees with McLuhan's desire «of restoring an oral community which would get rid of the writing machines and so on»²¹.

Here, Derrida clearly reaffirms what he argues in *Signature Event Context*, a paper delivered at a conference at the University of Montreal in Quebec in 1971 and later included in the volume *Margins of Philosophy*, that is: «We are not witnessing an end of writing which, to follow McLuhan's ideological representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations; but indeed a more and more powerful historical unfolding of a general writing of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would only be an effect, to be analyzed as such. It is this questioned effect that I have elsewhere called *logocentrism*»²².

Moreover, Derrida is not the first one who claims that McLuhan's theory of media is ideologically oriented. Other thinkers, especially in the context of the first reception of McLuhan's work in France,

19 *Ibidem*.

20 Op. cit., 84.

21 Derrida, Brennan (1982), p. 42.

22 Derrida (1988), p. 329.

ascribe an ideological attitude to him²³. For example, Jean-Marie Benoist has already noted that such an interpretation of «the electronic media restore a space of plenitude and presence», extending those logocentric effects to the whole human world²⁴.

In the same way, one year later, Edgar Morin points at the «euphoric ideology» supporting the analyses on the re-tribalized global village and on the return to an oral community²⁵.

The restoring of the oral dimension is emphasized by Walter J. Ong, according to whom human being became aware of the distinction between orality and literacy «only in the electronic age, not earlier». In this particular case

contrasts between electronic media and print have sensitized us to the earlier contrast between writing and orality. The electronic age is also an age of “secondary orality”, the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence²⁶.

Whereas the originary orality or “primary orality” pertain to those who have never come in contact with writing in the strict sense. Anyway, if on the one hand, in *The Medium is the Massage*,

23 Apropos the French reception of McLuhan in the late 1960s and early 1970s, namely the cultural phenomenon called *macluhanisme*, see particularly Genosko (1999), pp. 1-18, 40-48.

24 Benoist (1968), p. 4.

25 Morin (1969), p. 18.

26 Ong (1982), p. 2.

McLuhan argues that the writing hand «put an end to talk. It abolished mystery; it gave architecture and towns; it brought roads and armies, bureaucracy. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began»²⁷.

On the other hand, according to Derrida, the gesture of McLuhan, who wishes to get rid of writing technology in order to restore an original dimension of perception, meaning and society, recalls the logocentric myth that goes back to Plato and Rousseau, among others.

In fact, McLuhan describes a world, the electric one, where writing machines are not necessary. Moreover, he announces the end of writing as the return to the native dimension of human being, a dimension of purity and mutual embrace with the external world. Under this point of view, his anthropology is very close to that of Rousseau, who compares the soul, altered in society by changes – even by the changes concerning the constitution of the body – to the statue of Glaucus, which is disfigured «by time, seas and storms» and, therefore, hardly recognizable²⁸.

For McLuhan, non-literate people are as the statue of Glaucus before the disfiguration inspired by writing and civilization. As regards the respective positions about writing, they both declare the end of

²⁷ Fiore, McLuhan (1967), p. 48.

²⁸ Op. cit., p. 11.

the book's age. However, for McLuhan the end of the book is not an effect of dissemination, it is not the recognition – if we can still speak of ‘recognition’ in this context – of a writing in general, of arche-writing (*archi-écriture*)²⁹. Quite the contrary, for McLuhan, «the end of the book is the beginning of television», as suggested by Gary Genosko³⁰.

Therefore, McLuhan repeats the gesture of the *Phaedrus*, where writing is condemned by Plato as a merely secondary supplement of speech³¹. Neither the shift from the first orality to the second one, nor the enlargement of the tribal sensibility by means of touch as “common sense” place McLuhan outside the history of Western metaphysics. Rather,

²⁹ Rodolphe Gasché remarkably notes that Derrida does not attempt to invert the hierarchy between speech and writing. On the contrary, Derrida aims to find the structural law that accounts for the necessary contamination of presence, life, speech, and so on, with their opposite. Gasché explains: «To deconstruct the ethico-theoretical hierarchy of speech and writing [...] is to construct the signifying structure or system of referral that accounts for both exclusion and contamination. The name that Derrida gives to this infrastructure, or rather, as we shall see, duster of infrastructures, is that of the arche-synthesis of “writing” or more properly, general writing or *arche-writing*» see Gasché (1986), p. 273. See also Facioni, Regazzoni and Vitale (2012), pp. 15-28.

³⁰ Genosko (1999), p. 41.

³¹ Apropos see also the pages Derrida devotes to the notion of sign and to the exteriority of writing in general in *Of Grammatology*. He explains the subordination of writing in the Western metaphysical tradition – from Plato to McLuhan, we could say – to the presence of the pure and living speech. In this context writing is just a secondary technics of inscription and registration of the originary full and living word, namely of *logos*; whence he claims that «The system of language associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced. This logocentrism, this *epoch* of the full speech, has always placed in parenthesis, *suspended*, and suppressed for essential reasons, all free reflection on the origin and status of writing, all science of writing which was not *technology* and the *history of a technique*, itself leaning upon a mythology and a metaphor of a natural writing» Derrida (1976), p. 43.

McLuhan repeats the Platonic gesture concerning the condemnation of writing and follows Aristotle's description of tactility.

Even the McLuhanian theory of an audile-tactile space seems to be nothing more than a re-statement of the phenomenological intuitionism – closer to Merleau-Ponty than to Husserl – with all its theological implications, as we will see.

Haptocentrism in electric technologies

Under these circumstances, that is, with the breaking of the originary and tribal world, «we no longer feel the same, nor do our eyes and ears and other senses remain the same»³². As McLuhan argues

the interplay among our senses is perpetual save in conditions of anesthesia. But any sense when stepped up to high intensity can act as an anesthetic for other senses. The dentist can now use “audiac” – induced noise – to remove tactility. Hypnosis depends on the same principle of isolating one sense in order to anesthetize the others. The result is a break in the ratio among the senses, a kind of loss of identity³³.

³² McLuhan (1962), p. 24.

³³ *Ibidem*. For a definition of audioc see also Gordon (2010), p. 110: «In dentistry, a device called an audioc consists of headphones bombarding the patient with enough noise to block pain from the dentist's drill; in Hollywood, the addition of sound to silent pictures impoverished and gradually eliminated the role of mime, with its tactility and kinesthesia».

Technologies of the electric world allow the reawakening of the anesthetized touch. According to McLuhan, they «dethrone the visual sense and restore us to the dominion of synesthesia, and the close interinvolvement of the other senses»³⁴.

In fact, we suggest that a certain haptocentrism orients McLuhan's characterization of electric technology in *Understanding Media*, where he claims that electricity «offers a means of getting in touch with every facet of being at once, like the brain itself. Electricity is only incidentally visual and auditory; it is primarily tactile»³⁵.

Moreover, it should be noted that the tactile quality of electric technologies has to be intended as a synesthetic sense; thus, the tactility «is the interplay of the senses, rather than the isolated contact of skin and object»³⁶. Electric media retribalize the literate people, extending the human sensorium in «a global embrace» that «abolish both space and time» and constructing a global village, where electric technologies extends the contact among human beings by means of a widespread touch³⁷.

This is the reason why we propose to connect the *haptic* relation to media with McLuhan's

34 McLuhan (1994), p. 111.

35 Op. cit., p. 249.

36 Op. cit., p. 314.

37 Op. cit., p. 3.

attempt «to restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations», as noted by Derrida in *Signature Event Context*³⁸. In our opinion, the haptocentric interpretation of technology leads to the idea of an interconnected world, where all distances disappear.

Television is the medium that McLuhan uses to explain how he intends the embrace with electric technology. When McLuhan argues that television is a medium essentially *haptic*, rather than merely visual, he intends that the body is fully involved with television and that the relation with it is literally «empathic»³⁹. For McLuhan, the whole human being with all its sensorium is entangled in the perception of television. Like all electric phenomena, television requires the intertwining of all senses simultaneously, a tactile synesthesia that allows the perceiver to be ‘with’ the medium.

Therefore, a continuistic postulation informs McLuhan’s interpretation of television.

In fact, the relation to television is «immediate participation in depth», hence, it that does not admit any delay or separation⁴⁰. For this reason, we suggest that, in connection with technologies in general and media of communication in particular, he is haunted by the same «continuistic postulation» that Derrida

38 Derrida (1988), p. 20.

39 McLuhan (1962), p. 39.

40 McLuhan (1994), p. 325.

finds at work in the phenomenological account of *haptic* experience.

We borrow the expression «continuistic postulation» from Jacques Derrida's *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Here, he claims that this postulation is

what makes the haptical[...] cling to closeness; what identifies it with the approach of the proximate (not only with “close vision” but any approach, in every sense and for all the senses, and beyond touch); what makes it keep up with the appropriation of the proximate⁴¹.

Consequently, the haptic becomes the sense coextensive with all other senses and the metonym for an immediate, intuitive and full contact with beings. According to Derrida, the «continuistic *haptocentric* intuitionism» is a «dominant tradition» in the history of philosophy, at least until Husserl and Merleau-Ponty⁴². It is a «*tactilist*» or «*haptocentric*» tradition that produces several effects even beyond phenomenology, and the analysis of McLuhan's theory of media is only one among the possible examples of this pervasiveness.

For example, Merleau-Ponty insists on the *haptic* relation to the external world. In fact, he states that the sense of touch allows to communicate with the world. Moreover, in a striking analogy with McLuhan, Merleau-Ponty argues that the *synesthetic* experience

⁴¹ Derrida (2005), p. 124.

⁴² Op. cit., p. 300.

produces the collapse of the limits between senses. *Synesthesia* is not an exceptional phenomenon, rather «*synesthetic* perception is the rule»⁴³. For both of them, in the pre-objective relation to the world, «the senses intercommunicate»⁴⁴.

Spiritual Touch

In addition, we suggest that the conclusions of Merleau-Ponty and McLuhan's metaphysics of touch are in a certain sense far from a material touch. Actually, both analyses culminate in a mystical touch that frees itself from the material surface or volume of the medium. In case of communication the technological medium, mechanical or electrical, is erased in favor of an immediate contact between the sender and the receiver. The same happens in case of perception, when the body as material medium vanishes in relation to its object.

Communications and contacts are carried by *haptic* transparent media. For Derrida, this is to say that in metaphysics of touch they are «experienced as an absolutely pure auto-affection, occurring in a self-proximity that would in fact be the absolute reduction of space in general»⁴⁵.

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 266.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Derrida (1973), p. 79.

McLuhan explicitly states that, in *haptic* relation to technology, the space between the body and the medium is reduced «in the mash» by means of a sensuous communion. Moreover, he remarks that electric technology promises «a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity»⁴⁶.

The idea of a communion between the human sensorium and the world is surprisingly similar, if not identical, to that employed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In fact, here, he describes the relation between touching and touched literally as a communion:

in the same way I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red. Just as the sacrament not only symbolizes, in sensible species, an operation of Grace, but is also the real presence of God, which it causes to occupy a fragment of space and communicates to those who eat of the consecrated bread, provided that they are inwardly prepared, in the same way the sensible has not only a motor and vital significance, but is nothing other than a certain way of being in the world suggested to us from some point in space, and seized and acted upon by our body, provided that it is capable of

46 McLuhan (1994), p. 80.

doing so, so that sensation is literally a form of communion⁴⁷.

McLuhan transfers the theological attitude, shown in Merleau-Ponty's description of tactile experience, in the field of media technology.

In that respect, it is clearly evident also the inspiration he draws from Teilhard de Chardin, who is explicitly quoted in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*⁴⁸.

Their relation deserves a particular regard, because it explains the increasingly spiritualization of tactile experience that occurs in McLuhan's work and in those who follow the path traced by him. That is the case of Derrick de Kerckhove, who introduces the idea of an augmented tactility in order to describe the ever-increasing proximity between human beings.

This idea of augmented and immaterial contact is the target of Cathryn Vasseleu's critique; in fact, in the article *Touch, Digital Communication and Ticklish*, she argues that McLuhan's account of electric technology is «characterized by the disappearance of all senses of distance in a proliferation of contacts involving multiple senses»⁴⁹. However, the multiplication of contacts seems to be theologically oriented. It does not concern the material, corporeal

47 See Merleau-Ponty (1962), p. 246.

48 About the theoretical relation between McLuhan and Teilhard de Chardin it is helpful to recall the articles published on "Wired" by Cobb Kreisberg (1995). See also Lamberti (2000), pp. 133-136.

49 Vasseleu (1999), p. 153.

and finite dimension, rather it is immediate co-participation, immaterial contact, as testified by the proximity to de Chardin. McLuhan quotes de Chardin's book *Phenomenon of Man* defining its author as a "Romantic biologist".

The latter is the witness of the retribalization of human lives in the electric age. Indeed, according to de Chardin

Through the discovery yesterday of the railway, the motor car and the aeroplane, the physical influence of each man, formerly restricted to a few miles, now extends to hundreds of leagues or more. Better still: thanks to the prodigious biological event represented by the discovery of electro-magnetic waves, each individual finds himself henceforth (actively and passively) simultaneously present, over land and sea, in every corner of the earth⁵⁰.

Humans, or better, their spirits relate in close connections, which are grounded on a «mysterious coincidence»⁵¹.

De Chardin manifests an enthusiasm for

the cosmic membrane that has been snapped round the globe by the electric dilation of our various senses. This externalization of our senses creates what de Chardin calls the *noosphere* or a technological brain for the world.

50 Teilhard de Chardin (1959), p. 240.

51 *Ibidem*.

Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain⁵².

For this reason, in an article appeared on “Wired”, Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg outlines the character of the world described by Teilhard de Chardin; according to him, the world is a «global ecosystem [...] a superorganism with a whole much greater than the sum of its parts»⁵³, that is to say, every single being – living or not – is «beautifully connected in one vast, pulsating web of divine life»⁵⁴.

This idea is very similar to that of ‘global village’ elaborated by McLuhan for the first time in *Understanding Media*, where he points to the role electric technologies play in the simultaneous presence of the human being in every single place of the world. Teilhard de Chardin and McLuhan seem to share the same theological perspective, which invite us «to interpret the implosion of the contemporary world as the suggestive electric reconfiguration of the mystical body»⁵⁵.

A theological turn in the analyses of media that becomes evident in the well-known interview McLuhan grants to *Playboy*; when he clearly argues that «Psychic communal integration, made possible

⁵² McLuhan (1962), p. 32.

⁵³ Cobb Kreisberg (1995).

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ Lamberti (2000), p. 134 (our translation).

at last by the electronic media, could create the universality of consciousness foreseen by Dante when he predicted that men would continue as no more than broken fragments until they were unified into an inclusive consciousness. In a Christian sense, this is merely a new interpretation of the mystical body of Christ; and Christ, after all, is the ultimate extension of man»⁵⁶.

The theological implications of the figure of touch are the object of an entire chapter of *On Touching* devoted to the “Tender” - playing with the double meaning of the French word *tendre*, “tender” as well as «head towards something»⁵⁷ – where Derrida highlights the theological foundations of the haptocentric metaphysics rooted in the notion of incarnation, of communion between touching and touched as well as between signifier and signified – broadening the discourse about the theological scaffolding that sustains the McLuhanian theory of writing and communication. What is at stake here is a metaphorical use of the tactile figure in media theory, in the case of McLuhan as well as of de Kerckhove.

To get down to the rhetorical use of touch that emerges from the analyses of McLuhan, we trace out these two fundamental implications: on the one

⁵⁶ McLuhan (1969), p. 72.

⁵⁷ With regards to this issue see Saghafi (2014), pp. 473-490.

hand, it transforms the communications technologies in diaphanous media, merging the perceiver with themselves. On the other hand, it allows *haptic* relations that connect people in absolute proximity, both temporal and spatial.

That is the reason why we call into question this rhetorical touch – and the continuistic postulation that justifies it – following what Derrida states in *On Touching*.

Tele *Haptology*

To be more precise, we propose that the «intuitionistic-continuistic logic of immediacy»⁵⁸, which haunts the metaphysics of touch and technology, does not work. In fact, as Derrida remarks, there has never been a continuity of spaces or perceptions or senses; therefore, «*there is never any pure, immediate* experience of the continuous, nor of closeness, nor of absolute proximity, nor of pure indifferenciation»⁵⁹.

Writing or the materiality of the medium do not interrupt the primeval immediate contact with the world. For this reason, the McLuhanian distinction between mechanical technology and

58 Derrida (2005), p. 129.

59 Op. cit, p. 125.

electric technology demands a radical revision, since, contrary to what McLuhan claims, we contend that there is not a rupture between them.

In fact, we suggest that this distinction is the result of his hapto-logocentrism, that subordinates the technology to the power of oral communication and of touch as the sense of presence and immediate continuity.

We challenge this argument quoting Derrida, who regards «the increasingly powerful historical expansion of a general writing» as the tool to undermine the logocentric scaffolding that is the mere effect of the dissemination of writing in general⁶⁰. In effect, Derrida interprets the dissemination of communications technology in the electric world as the boundless extension of writing, or better still «the overwhelming extension» of writing⁶¹. According to him, media of communication are still writing machines, even if they do not employ the alphabetic writing.

Therefore, even if McLuhan defines television as the best example for the tactile and non-literate relation to media, Derrida argues that television is a writing machine, like any other telecommunication technology. Derrida supports this argument through the example of the tape recorder, which «is writing

60 Derrida (1988), p. 20.

61 Op. cit., p. 42.

too»⁶². According to Derrida, this means that writing technology has always been present «even when we wrote by hand, even during so-called live conversation»⁶³.

Hence, contrary to McLuhanian argument, the «goose quill» or «the hand that filled the parchment page» do not break the unity of tribal world; rather, they are haunted by virtuality as well as face-to-face interactions, mail, telephone, television, World Wide Web, recording technologies and so on.

Even in what McLuhan calls «scribal mode», namely the manual writing, there are some examples, such as manuscripts or letter, that breach the immediacy and closeness of the relation between the sender/receiver and the medium.

This means that electric technology does not restore the immediacy of pure communication, which remains a logocentric myth; rather, the proliferation of distances and virtual relation shows the intrinsic expropriation proper to each kind of tele-communication.

This condition leads to the opposite of the global village, exposing communications and the communities to the risk of the absolute loss of meaning, tradition, historicity and unity. Nevertheless, the exposition of the living communication to its other, namely to death – that is to say the inscription

62 *Ibidem*.

63 Derrida (2002), p. 38.

of a distance between the sender and the receiver – is the transcendental condition of possibility for any communication. Therefore, communications are always delayed, or, rather, forms of telecommunication implying the sending of the message to a remote addressee.

For this reason, Derrida claims that any technology is a tele-technology, whereby it is constituted by «an irreducible *virtuality* [...] tele-technological differance»⁶⁴.

Even if, grounding in the continuistic postulation, the metaphysics of touch supposes to have nothing to do with virtuality, it happens exactly the opposite. Thus, as well as communication technologies, the contact is essentially haunted by a virtual dimension; ergo, it has never been immediately present. Philosophy simply resists to the irruption of virtuality into the presumed full and living contact; in fact, as Derrida remarks, «one spontaneously has the tendency to believe that touching resists virtualization»⁶⁵.

However, he recognizes the irreducible role of such a spectral presence as the condition of possibility for touching; in particular, he deals with this notion of virtual touch at the end of *On Touching*, in the «Postscript», where he claims that, rather than being an adjunct, the virtual touch is already presupposed in the material or physical contact.

64 Derrida (1994), p. 238, n. 12.

65 Derrida (2005), p. 300.

In this direction goes Martin McQuillan, who, discussing this «Postscript», emphasizes the undeniable virtualization of touch. In order to express the idea of a virtual touch, he uses the neologism: «tele-haptology» that clearly takes into account the distance that essentially haunts the *haptic* experience; for that reason McQuillan argues that «touch is from the beginning a virtual experience»⁶⁶.

Therefore, touch becomes the metonymical supplement working the pure contact as its prosthetic technology; it is always a «supplementary touch», a tactile experience that shows its technical origin, as noted by Derrida, especially in the light of the development of the «virtual technologies of touch»⁶⁷.

What is at stake here is the possibility to think the relation between technology and perception, or better the refinement of the Freudian «magic writing pad» and «the topography of the bodies» in the light of the dissemination of distances⁶⁸.

Conclusion

In conclusion, McLuhan's distinction between an electronic age, which restores the original oral communication among human beings, and a

66 McQuillan (2009), p. 86.

67 *Ibidem*.

68 Derrida (2005), p. 301.

mechanical age, which detaches those beings from the world changing their sensibility, grounds on an idea of touch that is completely metaphysical. This means that communication has never been pure and immediate; such an idea is only a myth, as Derrida argues. In fact, touch does not resist to virtualization, because it is haunted by the virtual from the beginning; therefore there has never been an immediate contact or auto-affection, neither with one's own body nor with other bodies.

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