

At Your Fingertips

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This is an expanded version of a review of *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen (New York and London: Berg, 2005), that appeared in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 1757 (25 August 2006), p. 28.

In the current revival of interest in the senses across the humanities, it is the investigation of touch which seems to offer the largest and most intriguing prospects. This is partly because the sense of touch is the most ambivalent of the senses - assigned by many to the bottom of the sensory table, and yet also thought of as a kind of index-sense, which, in terms like 'feel', 'grasp' and 'tact' provides a way of representing the value of sensitivity itself. Nobody has contributed more to the history of the senses than Constance Classen, who draws deeply on her knowledge of different cultural periods and places for this hugely absorbing anthology of writings about touch. She has assembled here a truly sensational hoard for anyone curious about this, the most pervasive but also the least understood, and, sometimes, the most despised of the senses. The reader is guided through the fascinatingly diverse material by Classen's dexterous touch at the elbow. She is an amiable guide and her introductions and overviews are as fresh and accessible as they are expert.

The book is put together on a sponge-cake principle. The sponge is furnished by substantial essays, skilfully trimmed in order to maximise the number that can be included, from historians, ethnographers, theologians and others, reflecting on different forms of touch. These are mortared together by shorter sections, containing hints and tastes of a more oblique and fugitive kind. Many of the most fascinating surprises and the sweetest solicitations to thought in this volume are to be found in these filler sections, which touch on topics as various as massage, thermal delight, kissing, crocheting, tele-tactility, what ghosts feel like and the connection between laundry and melancholy.

The material is grouped into nine broad headings, namely, Contact, or the social uses and meanings of touch; Pleasure (scratching, tickling, sex); Pain; Male Bonding (military discipline, corporal punishment and other kinds of rough stuff); Women's Touch (needlework and child-rearing); Control (the social inhibition of touch); Uncommon Touch (extraordinary, amplified or imaginary experiences of touch); Tactile Therapies (the King's Touch, massage,

mesmerism); and Touch and Technology (the new experiences of touch emerging from digital technologies). Classen acknowledges candidly that 'the history of touch 'continually overflows the boundaries of any scheme of interpretation' (3). These divisions succeed better in suggesting the range of things that touch can be than in providing a framework for thinking about touch as such.

This is not to say that there no orientating assumptions. One is that modern societies have become ever more "eye-minded" and fearful or contemptuous of touch. The assumption that there has been what Classen calls 'a decline in the importance and accessibility of tactile culture' in modern and modernising cultures is maintained through the anthology with unnecessary and unconvincing rigidity. The theory is that modern societies suffer from an alienation of and hunger for the sense of touch, for which books like this are a remedy. We moderns are represented as clumsy or anxiously allergic to touch, where others, elsewhere or in the past, are comfortably, expressively, richly tactile. It is suggested that we moderns would benefit from being more confident, tolerant and versatile in the arts of touch as they are exercised by Inuits, Amerindians and Japanese. But a different set of extracts could easily have been assembled which told the story in an entirely different way: highlighting, for example, the denigrations and denunciations of touch to be found in writings on the subject from the classical period onwards, along with the severe regulations of tactility to be found in many non-modern societies, and, on the other hand, the ramifying forms of touch and growing privilege given to the forms of touch and tactile values in modern societies. It's good to hear though that not all non-Western cultures are huggy-wise in the way that Classen assumes - Chinese parents used to stuff their babies in padded bags and hang them from hooks to keep them out of the way.

Another assumption is that this cultural anaesthesia is pretty much down to men, who, compared with the nimbleness and tenderness of women, are barging, blundering pachyderms. Touch tends throughout this anthology to be represented in its gentler, tenderer, subtler, refined modes, which are explicitly identified as female - 'the woman's touch'. Hardly any interest at all is shown in touch in its more active, expansive, dynamic, generative or executive forms, as they are found in the realms of use, work, manipulation, measurement, play and sport. This has the effect of relegating or ruling out large areas of what is said to be male tactility, allowing it to be represented almost entirely in inferior or negative forms - as hardness, roughness, leathery numbness, violence, the inhibition or holding back from touch. The vast and complex operations and implications of touch in the realms of use and labour are thus rendered

negligible, as are the forms of productive touch such as those involved in aesthetic work such as musical performance. It's not just the more-than-implicit misandry of this preference for embroidery over engineering that rubs me up the wrong way; it is also that it seems so inattentive to all the more active modes of touch that are so prominent in women's experience. Needless to say (almost), this obtuse and sadly docile distribution of tactile specialities between male and female also manages extravagantly to unremember vast amounts of the male cultivation of touch, especially in its animating involvements with the material rather than the interpersonal realm, among sailmakers, swordsmen, silversmiths, surgeons, sauciers and so, almost infinitely, but here almost invisibly, on.

Classen has decided not to offer any theory or definition of touch, and her anthology is heavily biased in favour of experiences or evocations of touch rather than technical explorations of its nature. This means that psychological investigation and philosophical speculation about touch are irritatingly absent, leaving the book oddly skinless or lacking in integument. Certainly it seems a shame not to include any of the philosophers who have written most influentially and often beautifully about touch, especially those in the phenomenological tradition: de Biran, Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Serres, Irigaray. And Didier Anzieu, one of the most outward-looking of psychoanalysts, makes a sad gap too.

In the absence of such theoretical framing, the abundant muddle of different things that can be thought of as touch, which provides the diverting richness of this collection, also erodes its central demand, that we pay more concerted attention to touch, in an absence of a clear sense of what that means. The more one hears about many different forms and modalities of touch, the more one begins to wonder, and doubt, whether there really is any specifically 'tactile' component at work in toothache, taking off in a plane, tapdancing, testing the bathwater, tracing a tetrahedron, twiddling your thumbs, and saying 'tut'.

Part of this diffuseness comes from the fact that the principal organ of touch, the skin, is the largest and the least localised of the organs (indeed, the other sense-organs can be regarded as territories within its domain). It is also, and more exactly, because unlike the other senses, there is no one medium or waveband for touch, such as sound provides for hearing and light for vision. The sense of sight responds selectively to light frequencies, the sense of hearing to vibrations at much lower frequencies. But there is no such channel in the case of touch, which is to be defined simply as the apprehension of the ways we come up against things. Popular language is perhaps subtler in its

differentiations. Ordinary language tends to reserve the word 'touch' for exploratory, non-instrumental contacts - thus if I refer to touching a hammer, nobody is likely to think I am referring to the experience of driving in a nail, in which I may feel the hammer, but no longer seem to touch it.

Still, just because it provides such a bustling Grand Central of arrivals, departures and connections, *The Book of Touch* must be regarded as the one absolutely necessary book for anyone beginning to think about the sense of touch or seeking to orientate and inform students about what has been made of it. It succeeds magnificently in registering the variety of the ways in which touch appears to and bears upon us. We can easily forgive a book being so much less than the sum of its parts when that less amounts to such a large and opulent sum.