
Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis

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Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis is the latest work to put the philosophy of contemporary French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy into productive dialogue with French cinema. Through her in-depth textual analyses of the films of Robert Bresson, Marguerite Duras and Claire Denis, McMahon successfully employs Nancy's deconstruction of touch as a device of pure immediacy and fusion to reconceptualize the act of cinematic spectatorship as a mutual approach and withdrawal of human and filmic bodies. In doing so, McMahon convincingly reconfigures spectatorship as an activity structured by 'a logic of exposure rather than one of representation' (20).

The introduction of *Cinema and Contact* provides succinct and compelling summaries of Nancy's philosophical deconstructions of touch, vision and subjectivity. Drawing on both her own analyses of Nancy's thinking of touch, as well as that elaborated by Jacques Derrida in *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, McMahon argues that Nancy's deconstruction of touch as both a contact *and* withdrawal from the object to be touched distinguishes it from the fusive models of touch offered by phenomenological film theorists such as Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack. The sense of touch offered by the cinema is never characterised by a pure immediacy. Rather, it is a mode of touch in which the screen is always removed or withdrawn from the grasp of spectators, simultaneously proximate and distanced.

McMahon argues that the films of Bresson, Duras and Denis share an 'aesthetics of withdrawal' (10) that distance touch from the concept of immediacy, propitiously enacting Nancy's model of touch as a contact-in-separation. The following three chapters are organized by filmmaker in chronological order of their work, beginning with Bresson. McMahon puts a Nancean deconstruction of touch in productive dialogue with Bresson's own writings on cinema, in order to argue that Bresson's depictions of the body in films such as *Pickpocket* (1959), *Au hazard Balthazar* (1966) and *Mouchette* (1967) deconstruct Christological ideas of the body and touch as pure presence (36-7).

In the chapter on Duras, McMahon explores films such as *Détruire dit-elle* (1969), *India Song* (1975), *Le navire Night* (1979) and *Agatha et les*

lectures illimitées (1981) through the Nancean theoretical lens of co-existence, as articulated by the philosopher in works such as *The Inoperative Community* (1991). McMahon successfully employs Nancy's thinking of touch as distance and spacing to read Duras's portrayals of romantic couples as unworkable, failed fusions of bodies.

McMahon's discussions of the work of Denis in relation to Nancean philosophy are perhaps the most interesting and fruitful, as they take into account the collaborations and affinities between the director and philosopher. McMahon reads *Beau Travail* (1999) as an exploration of touch as the means through which the political community of the French Legion in Djibouti is both bonded and fractured. McMahon situates her readings of Denis's controversial horror film *Trouble Every Day* (2001) in relation to Nancy's meditations on the figure of the bite in the film as an agent of ontological dismemberment and destruction in his article 'Claire Denis: Icon of Ferocity.' Lastly, McMahon's insightful explication of Nancy's original text 'L'intrus' clearly articulates its relationship to the style and themes of Denis's 2004 film of the same name, taking into account Nancy's written responses to the film adaptation, as well as exploring intrusion as a method of encountering geopolitical and ontological otherness.

An important topic that McMahon does not touch upon in great depth is the implication(s) of Nancean deconstructions of touch and subjectivity in relation to the construction of gender and sexual difference in film. Nancy himself has faced criticism from feminist scholars for his insistence that the body exists as essentially intruded upon and fragmented, without adequately considering the potential impact that this may have for feminist projects seeking to realize women's right to control their own bodies. For example, Diane Perpich notes that:

Nancy's ontology is seemingly at odds with a host of feminist discourses for which bodily integrity is an almost unquestioned good...it is legitimate to wonder whether Nancy's conception of bodies as subject to a law of inevitable, multiple intrusion is not in some ways a very white, masculine move, attached to a horizon and history of privilege that should give feminists and others pause. ¹

McMahon's Nancean analysis of Bresson is instructive in this regard. She notes in her analysis of *Mouchette*, 'Just as mud sticks to the clog, so it clings to Mouchette, signaling a disturbing dissolution of the self, foregrounding the vulnerability of the body which will be pushed to its extreme conclusion in the rape scene' (63). The female body in this film thus experiences contact and withdrawal via experiences of suffering and

violation. We can contrast this female pain with the embodied experiences of a Nancean *techné*, or technicity, undergone by the male protagonist of *Pickpocket*. He is not raped; rather, his subjective dissolution takes place through technical implements of pickpocketing such as clothing. This technical expansion of the self through clothing constitutes a far less painful and destructive exposure to and contact with the world than that experienced by the raped female protagonist of *Mouchette*.

McMahon does point out that the punishments that Mouchette receives (rape and beatings) are 'deeply troubling' and 'politically and ethically problematic' (65), 'exert[ing] a certain pressure upon Nancy's model of touch as spacing and being-in-common' (66). However, in McMahon's discussions of Bresson and Duras especially, the impact of gender and sexual difference on characters' experiences of contact is briefly mentioned, instead of explored in a sustained manner. Further attention deserves to be paid to the gendered dimensions of exposure, bodily vulnerability and being-with in both film spectatorship and in our engagements with Nancean philosophy, as so often the cinematic textures and surfaces of co-existence and engagement with the world are 'threats' (63) that lead to pain and death for women.

Cinema and Contact contributes productively to a growing field of film-philosophy exploring the intersections between Nancean philosophy and cinematic aesthetics. McMahon's work should be of great interest to film scholars looking to introduce themselves to the philosophy of Nancy and the multiplicity of ways that it touches upon and diverges from the embodied and tactile aesthetics of French cinema.

Bibliography

Derrida, Jacques. *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*. Translated by Christine Irizarry. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Translated by Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney. Edited by Peter Connor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

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Perpich, Diane. "Corpus Meum: Disintegrating Bodes and the Ideal of Integrity." *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 75-91.

Filmography

Agatha et les lectures illimitées. Directed by Marguerite Duras (Benoit Jacob Vidéo, 2009).

Au hazard Balthazar. Directed by Robert Bresson (Criterion, 2005).

Beau Travail. Directed by Claire Denis (Artificial Eye, 2000).

Détruire dit-elle. Directed by Marguerite Duras (Benoit Jacob Vidéo, 2008).

India Song. Directed by Marguerite Duras (Roissy Film, 2009).

L'Intrus. Directed by Claire Denis (Tartan Video, 2005).

Mouchette. Directed by Robert Bresson (Nouveaux Pictures, 2004).

Le navire Night. Directed by Marguerite Duras (Les Films du Lonsange).

Pickpocket. Directed by Robert Bresson (Artificial Eye, 2005).

Trouble Every Day. Directed by Claire Denis (Tartan Video, 2003).

Notes:

1. Diane Perpich, "Corpus Meum: Disintegrating Bodes and the Ideal of Integrity," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 85-6. [↵](#)