

Christof Migone

[published in Flemish translation in journal AS, No. 169 2004, for more info: [www.muhka.be](http://www.muhka.be)]

## The Prestidigitator: A Manual (A Digital Series of Two Times Five)

### 1. index

Of all the senses, I found the eye to be the most superficial, the ear the most arrogant, the nose the most voluptuous, the tongue the most superstitious and inconsistent, and touch the most profound and philosophical.<sup>1</sup>

If we were to trace the endless jockeying for preeminence in the hierarchy of the senses we would remark that various historical periods and various cultures vary widely in how they rank them. The order is constantly in flux, and consequently rarely definitive. Factors affecting the order are as multitudinous as elements constituting the social body. Despite the undeniable import of hands, texts where they appear as the primary object of study read like renegade esoteric epistemologies, sensual eccentricities, perverse poetic divergences, arcane arabesques, doodling philosophies, ... this manual will not be an exception.

The hand in the age of the image seems amputated, no longer able to cover the eyes or the face, overwhelmed by the landscape of speed. Yet, this frenzy of the surface provides the hand its cachet; touch has become synonymous with the genuine, the real, the human. Touch, is nostalgic. Touch cannot be mediatized, technologized, mechanized. Yet this dichotomy is false —or at least simplistic. Touch is present in technology —certainly metaphorically and increasingly physically, and this advance should perhaps be regarded more as a *return to* rather than a progression. Preceding even the low-tech of the pen and paper, the hands played an integral part of how we express and communicate. The language of the hands is intimately tied to the roles the mouth and ear play in the circulation of utterances.<sup>2</sup>

This is a manual of that circulation, but one with missing fingers, it is merely the first shuffle of the cards, it is not a full hand. Prestidigitation pertains to cards and tricks but

---

<sup>1</sup> Denis Diderot, "Lettre sur les sourds et muets" in *Premières oeuvres 2*, 1972 [1751], 99. Translations throughout the text are my own, unless otherwise noted. For cases where I've done the translation, I will provide the original either in the text or in the footnotes. "[...] je trouvais que de tous les sens l'oeil était le plus superficiel, l'oreille le plus orgueilleux, l'odorat le plus voluptueux, le goût le plus superstitieux et le plus inconstant, le toucher le plus profond et le plus philosophe."

<sup>2</sup> The etymology for 'utter' is 'to give out,' 'to put forth' and would thus seem as apt for the tactile as it is for the oral.

also to writing. Of the many illusions performed by the writer, the one which pretends that any text constitutes a full hand is the illusion that this prestidigitator will resist.

## 2. dexter

In the essay "Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics," Jennifer Fisher expands upon the usual definition of the haptic as relating to touch and the tactile by including the "kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses."<sup>3</sup> These additions might seem tautological, or easily subsumed under the rubric of touch, but they do emphasize the idea of position and movement. Fisher further describes the haptic as that which "functions by contiguity, contact and resonance. The haptic renders the surface porous, being perceived at once inside, on the skin's surface, and in external space. It enables the perception of weight, pressure, balance, temperature, vibration and pressure."<sup>4</sup> In other words, touch has that paradoxical property of being both receiver (like the other senses) *and* giver, indeed sometimes it has to reach and provide the touch in order to be touched in turn. This act of the reach, this capacity to be active, to *do*, is most tangible in touch.

In touch, the reach is one through space, it is an outreach. To reach out and touch performs a biophysical function, but it also implies a primordial form of engagement between the individual and its surroundings. Therefore, the role of touch in the social is manifold. John Bulwer in a 1644 tome on manual rhetoric begins a remarkable inventory with this opening phrase "For, with our *Hands*, we...", the ensuing enumeration wonderfully illustrates the hands in their role as actors, as executors. Here goes : "For, with our *Hands*, we..."

Sue, entreat, beseech, solicit, call, allure, entice, dismiss, grant, deny, reprove, are suppliant, fear, threaten, abhor, repent, pray, instruct, witness, accuse, declare our silence, condemn, absolve, show our astonishment, proffer, refuse, respect, give honor, adore, worship, despise, prohibit, reject, challenge, bargain, vow, swear, imprecate, humour, allow, give warning, command, reconcile, submit, defy, affront, offer injury, complement, argue, dispute, explode, confute, exhort, admonish, affirm, distinguish, urge, doubt, reproach, mock, approve, dislike, encourage, recommend, flatter, applaud, exalt, humble, insult, adjure, yield, confess, cherish, demand, crave, covet, bless, number, prove, confirm, salute, congratulate, entertain, give thanks, welcome, bid farewell, chide, brawl, consent, upbraid, envy, reward, offer force, pacify, invite, justify, contemn, disdain, disallow, forgive, offer peace, promise, perform, reply, invoke, request, repel, charge, satisfy, deprecate, lament, condole, bemoan, put in mind, hinder, praise, commend, brag, boast, warrant, assure, inquire, direct, adopt, rejoice, show gladness, complain, despair, grieve, are sad and sorrowful, cry out, bewail, forbid, discomfort, ask, are angry, wonder, admire, pity, assent, order, rebuke, savor, slight, dispraise, disparage, are earnest, importunate, refer, put to compromise,

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Fisher, "Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics" in Parachute 87, Montréal, 1997, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Fisher, 6.

plight our faith, make a league of friendship, strike one good luck, take earnest, buy, barter, exchange, show our agreement, express our liberality, show our benevolence, ask mercy, exhibit grace, show our displeasure, fret, chafe, fume, rage, revenge, crave audience, call for silence, prepare for an apology, give liberty of speech, bid one to take notice, warn one to forbear, keep off and be gone; take acquaintance, make remonstrance of another's error, weep, give pledge of aid, comfort, relieve, demonstrate, persuade, resolve, speak to, appeal, profess a willingness to strike, show ourselves convinced, present a check for silence, promise secrecy, protect our innocence, manifest our love, enmity, hate, and spite; provoke, hyperbolically extoll, enlarge our mirth with jollity and triumphant acclamations of delight, note and signify another's actions, the manner, place, and time, as how, where, when, etc.<sup>5</sup>

The hands are so often called to action in our daily lives that they often go unnoticed. Upon reading such a list one realizes that the hands are our synecdoches; they do everything for us, they *are* us. They also seem to be multisensorial, as Henri Focillon states in his essay "In Praise of Hands," the hands are "eyeless and voiceless faces that nonetheless see and speak."<sup>6</sup> Another author enamored with hands, Marc Le Bot, would seem to contradict Focillon with his assertion that "because the hand is deaf, blind, and dumb, it is devoted to action. Hearing, sight, words keep their distance with respect to objects. The hand, touches, grasps, shapes them."<sup>7</sup> I would contend, however, that these are not contradictory positions, but mere instances of a surplus of metaphors. As with Bulwer, there's an overdetermination at play by which hands are found to be the only executors of our actions. In fact, it is often difficult, and perhaps not helpful, to distinguish the senses. In contrast, a synaesthetic perspective would assert that the senses complement each other, they extend each other, they render a picture of our environment.

---

<sup>5</sup> John Bulwer, *CHIROLOGIA: or the NATURALL LANGUAGE of the H A N D. Composed of the Speaking Motions, and Discoursing Gestures thereof. Whereunto is added CHIRONOMIA: or, The Art of MANUALL RHETORICKE. Consisting of the Naturall Expressions, digested by art in the HAND, as the chiefest Instrument of Eloquence, BY HISTORICALL MANIFESTO'S, EXEMPLIFIED Out of the Authentique Registers Of Common Life, And Civill Conversation, 1975 [1644], 8-10. This is the full title to the first part of the book, the full title to the second part is the following:*

*CHIRONOMIA:  
Or,  
The Art of  
Manuall Rhetorique.  
WITH THE  
Canons, Lawes, Rites, Ordinances,  
and Institutes of RHETORICIANS,  
both Ancient and Moderne, Touching the artificiall managing of the HAND  
in Speaking.*

*Whereby the Naturall Gestures of the  
HAND, are made the Regulated  
Aceffories or faire-fpoken Adjuncts of RHETORICALL Utterance.*

<sup>6</sup> Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms of Art*, tr. Charles B. Hogan and Georges Kubler, 1989 [1934], 157.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Le Bot, *La main de dieu, la main du diable*, 1990, 45. "Parce que la main est sourde, aveugle, muette, elle est vouée à l'action. L'ouïe, la vue, les mots se tiennent à distance des choses. La main, elle, les touche, elle les prend, les modèle."

Bulwer was a follower of Francis Bacon, he sought the pre-Babelian universal language, the utopic language of Nature. His focus on hands was part of a general emphasis on muscles and their ability to effect movement. With respect to muscles, Bulwer thought that he had pinned down the source of "pure language." To answer critics who would rather point to the more standard choices, *mind and soul*, he would retort that a man without the power to move "would degenerate into a Plant or Stock."<sup>8</sup> Of further note, Bulwer's attention was not only on hands but also on the face, and as such his project constitutes an interesting entry in the theory of affects. Now let us pose the question: Is movement verifiable, qualifiable, and quantifiable by itself? If yes, it would be akin to a kind of body memory. Does this type of memory function like a prototypical language or is it precisely the opposite? Beyond language.

### 3. handshakes

Or language beyond meaning. One of the difficulties Bulwer had with respect to the muscles was to account for the involuntary movements, "the twitches, tics, swellings, and contractions that do not seem to express meaning or that cannot be performed at will."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Bulwer here neglected to consider that the involuntary pulses of the heart muscle and the involuntary air exchanges effected by the lungs seem to be necessary for us to even consider ourselves to the basic level of Plant or Stock. But of greater interest is the fact that the involuntary and incomprehensible movements would seem to fall into a uncategorizable nether of behavior unwilled *and* unnatural. The incapacity to assimilate everything renders the utopic project moot, it creates an outside (not matter how small) which constantly jars any attempt to universalize. This is madness. Madness is that twitch, tic, swelling, contraction which disrupts, it is the nonsequitor par excellence, as Jonathan Strauss states: "[The mad self] is unspeakable and unspeaking, existing elsewhere than in its expression. It expresses itself only as a gap or an interruption. [...] The mad self is, in short, a refusal of sublimation. It is for this reason that Hegel speaks of it as an obstruction to totalization."<sup>10</sup>

Gérard de Nerval's allegorical tale *La main enchantée* (The Bewitched Hand) is of a mad hand, a hand behaving unlike a hand, or at least unbeknownst to the person whose body it is attached to. Eustache, the protagonist, has to settle a matter of honor and seeks the help of Maître Gonin, a bohemian who dabbles in magic, to guarantee his success with the duel. When Gonin applies the magic ointment on the hand, Eustache "felt an electrical

---

<sup>8</sup> The information on Bulwer was culled from Stephen Greenblatt, "Toward a Universal Language of Motion: Reflections on a Seventeenth-Century Muscle Man" in *Choreographing History*, 1995, 25-31.

<sup>9</sup> Greenblatt, 30.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Strauss, *Subjects of Terror: Nerval, Hegel, and the Modern Self*, 1998, 84.

commotion in his whole arm [...] his hand seemed numb yet it twisted and stretched several times cracking its articulations, as with an animal upon waking; then he felt nothing, and the circulation seemed to come back to normal.”<sup>11</sup> This Edgar Allan Poe-like scene predestines others where, after the success of his bout, the hand continues on its violent destiny indiscriminately. This results in Eustache’s arrest and subsequently, his death sentence. Now, we learn of Gonin’s devious plan as he reads to Eustache from his Albert Le Grand magician’s manual:

HEROIC MEANS BY WHICH CRIMINALS CAN GAIN ACCESS INTO HOUSES

One takes the cut hand of a hanged man, which must have been bought prior to death. [...] Then [once dehydrated] one uses the hand as a chandelier [...] and in all places one ventures, with it in front of us, bars fall, locks open, and all persons in our path remain immobile. This hand, thus prepared, is called by the name ‘Hand of Glory.’<sup>12</sup>

When we get to the moment of the execution, the possessed hand, of course, remains active. Its lifeline already unhinged from the fate of Eustache by the spell. The hangman sees life twitching at the end of the dead man’s arm and in fright, cuts it off at the wrist. At which point the hand “makes a prodigious leap and falls, all bloody, in the middle of the crowd which parts in absolute horror. Then, the hand using the elasticity of its fingers starts making leaps and [...] soon finds itself at the foot of the bohemian’s abode. Then, it uses its fingers again, like a crab, to clutch onto the uneven surface and fissures of the wall, and it climbs up to the aperture where the bohemian awaits.”<sup>13</sup>

Gloriously bewitched hand; mad uncontrollable hand; hand amputated, possessed and willed by an other. We find a comparable case in Germaine Dulac’s *La Coquille et le Clergyman*, where the Clergyman, as the lead, is often seen performing the familiar walk of the somnambulist, arms outstretched in front of him, pulling him uncontrollably towards transgressive desires. Antonin Artaud’s script makes this

<sup>11</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie. La main enchantée*, 1924 [1832], 123. “Eustache ressentit dans tout le bras une sorte de commotion électrique qui l’effraya beaucoup; sa main lui sembla comme engourdie, & cependant, chose bien étrange, elle se tordit & s’allongea plusieurs fois à faire craquer ses articulations, comme un animal qui s’éveille; puis il ne sentit plus rien, la circulation parut se rétablir.”

<sup>12</sup> Nerval, 134-5.

MOYEN HÉROÏQUE DONT SE SERVENT LES SCÉLÉRATS POUR S’INTRODUIRE DANS LES MAISONS  
On prend la main coupée d’un pendu, qu’il faut lui avoir acheté avant la mort, on la plonge, en ayant soin de la tenir presque fermée, dans un vase cuivre contenant du zimac et du salpêtre, avec de la graisse *spondylis*. On expose le vase à feu clair de fougère & de verveine; de sorte que la main s’y trouve, au bout d’un quart d’heure, parfaitement deséchée & propre à se conserver longtemps. Puis, ayant composé une chandelle avec de la graisse de veau marin & du sésame de Laponie, on se sert de la main comme d’un martinet pour y tenir cette chandelle allumée; & par tous les lieux où l’on va, la portant devant soi, les barres tombent, les serrures s’ouvrent, & toute les personnes que l’on rencontre demeurent immobiles.

<< Cette main ainsi préparée reçoit le nom de main de gloire.>>

<sup>13</sup> Nerval, 142. “Elle fit un bond prodigieux & tomba sanglante au milieu de la foule, qui se divisa avec frayeur; alors, faisant encore plusieurs bonds par l’élasticité de ses doigts, & comme chacun lui ouvrait un large passage, elle se trouva bientôt au pied de la tourelle de Château-Gaillard; puis, s’accrochant encore par ses doigts comme un crabe aux aspérités & fentes de la muraille, elle monta ainsi jusqu’à l’embrassade où le bohémien l’attendait.”

explicit, the agency of deed is located not in his reason but at his fingertips: “It would seem that the fingers of both his hands were seeking a neck” (*Il semble que les doigts de chacune de ses deux mains cherchent un cou*).<sup>14</sup> The hands of Eustache and of the Clergyman, hands remote-controlled, detached, extended, present an apt subtext by which to read the following sections—more instances of uncanny encounters, and others where it is of a touch that lingers, haunts.

#### 4. finesse

The kinaesthetics of the hand which Fisher pointed to, find kinship with kinematics via its prefix *kine* –motion. Cinematics and tactility might seem antithetical at first, but the secret ingredient of the audio-visual experience is the tactile. Bill Viola alludes to this implicit ingredient in the following (although he does revert to the optic with the last two lines):

camera breaks from the eye

camera as nose

camera as ear

camera as hand

cameras as insect

camera as consciousness

camera as microscope

camera as telescope<sup>15</sup>

In Julia Loktev’s first feature film, a documentary entitled “Moment of Impact,” her father is barely beyond a “plant or stock” (as Bulwer would say) due to a car accident. The film portrays how this impact is forever enacted, how the singular wound if deep enough becomes plural, how one is always slipping an ‘s’ at the end of the ‘Moment’ in the title. There is a harrowing moment in the film where Julia is off-screen behind a camera which is feeding its image live into the television. She asks her dad, who is in the shot, to view himself on the monitor, and then she extends her arm towards him and he grabs hold and their fingers interlock. This rare moment of connection, of communication seems to be aided by the monitor’s capacity to have the father view himself doing, to see his actions reflected in real time. The neural damage which has truncated his response to stimuli is temporarily abated by the closed circuit television set-up. This exteriorization of the body, or even its effacement, permits a self-awareness of place which bypasses the torpor.

<sup>14</sup> Antonin Artaud, “La Coquille et le Clergyman” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III, 1978 [1927], 23.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Viola, “Note, 1980” in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 1995, 52.

This moment has similarities with an autoscopic (out of body) experience and even more poignantly, an autistic one. In the instance of the latter, the diagnosis is at the other end of the scale from somebody who has suffered severe head trauma, the autistic suffers from overstimulation and thus effects a shutdown. Nonetheless, the resulting behavior can be strikingly similar, Donna Williams' account in *Nobody Nowhere* and its sequel *Somebody Somewhere* provides numerous parallels.<sup>16</sup> For Williams, her self is strictly a concept inscribed from outside, "I saw me in the mirror and put my hands against her hands."<sup>17</sup> Or similarly, "He kissed me -or perhaps I should say he kissed my face, as I wasn't in it at the time."<sup>18</sup> Such dissociative states where her limbs, her insides, her whole body constitute the backstage of a play she is not directing, are never anything less than painful, for her "All touch is pain."<sup>19</sup> Williams is remarkable because she has been able to recount the story of her self, herself, a self which was all mask, all surface —a nonself, a mad self. She has imploded and exploded Merleau-Ponty's notion of double sensation, his example being when two hands of a same self touch and the self realizes that the hands oscillate between sensations of touching and being touched. Here there is a mal- on non- functioning reciprocity which paradoxically amplifies the phenomenological stakes.<sup>20</sup> The reflexivity of Merleau-Ponty's proposition here is not directed back, inward, but outward, towards an other. Imploded and exploded. Like Rimbaud, Williams has conjugated her "I" into the third person, she has written from, into and out of the gap. The gap has written her.

In a sense the gap seems to be the default setting. For instance, the prologue sequence of Bergman's *Persona* features a boy whose hand first reaches for the camera and then, in a reverse-shot reaches for a giant projection of a woman's face. The hand caresses, but the caress is mimicry, it gestures a caress but it does not touch. The face fills the shot, it is larger than life, yet ungraspable. It is beyond reach not only because it is a mere image but also because it is undefinable, it keeps fading in and out between two faces. Two persons make up *Persona*, the nurse and the patient, Mrs. Vogler (the mother of the boy). The entire film stages a fading between these two characters. The forces at play in this fading are foreshadowed in the prologue.<sup>21</sup> The prologue sequence prominently

---

<sup>16</sup> A worthwhile essay on this subject is Anne Fleche, "Echoing Autism: Performance, Performativity, and the Writings of Donna Williams" in *The Drama Review* 41, 3 (T155) Fall 1997, 107-121.

<sup>17</sup> Donna Williams, *Somebody Somewhere: Breaking Free from the World of Autism*, 1994, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic*, 1992, 86.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *Nobody Nowhere*, 177.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, 1945, 109.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 1994, 198-213. Chion undertakes a detailed study of this sequence in these pages and it is of interest but ultimately flawed if one wishes to understand the Manichean symbolism which sets the stage for the rest of the film. Granted, Chion's project is focused on the interrelationship between the image and the sound in this sequence. Yet, whenever he attempts to interpret the significance of these relationships, it is in isolation from the rest of the film. This is, however, a prologue (which would function as an epilogue just as well) and as such, viewing it as self-contained severely limits the analysis. In fact, Chion marks the end to the prologue when the credits begin, but the credit sequence itself is very much part of the prologue and not without significance.

features hands and related imagery: hands washing hands and body, hands contorting together (also miming washing), a tarantula, hands nailed with spikes through the palms, spiked fences, hands of cadavers, hands enucleating and eviscerating a sheep (nod to Dali and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*), and the scene of the boy reaching for the camera/mother. The whole sequence is largely shot in close-ups and this concords with the concept of a haptic function in cinema which we will examine in the next section. Michel Chion very succinctly captures this characteristic of the prologue when he states that "the film stock itself trembles like a tactile surface."<sup>22</sup> Lastly, in the first scene following the credits, the nurse is being briefed on her new assignment: Mrs. Vogler, famed actress who loses her grip on reality during a performance where she was playing Electra. As her assignment is being read, there is an abrupt pan and close-up on the hands of the nurse. They are clasped together behind her back, and rubbing together anxiously. The question being asked here is: How is one able to handle oneself? The ontology of the self is the question lurking not far behind. Handling oneself, having a grasp on reality, getting a grip, being in touch with ourselves—could we posit the hands as performing an ontological function?

## 5. pinchers

Gilles Deleuze's study of Robert Bresson's film *Pickpocket* (1959) leads him to posit touch as an element which qualifies the audiovisual: "The hand doubles its function of prehension (of object) with a function of connection (of space); but, from this point, it is the whole eye which doubles its optic function with one appropriately 'haptic,' which follows Riegl's formulation that there is a kind of touch which is specific to the gaze. In Bresson, the opsigns (*opsignes*) and the aursigns (*sonsignes*) are inseparable from the tactsigns (*tactisignes*) which perhaps negotiate their relations."<sup>23</sup> Already as a title, *Pickpocket*, alludes to the role of protagonist the hands play; *to pick* and *to pocket* are characteristic activities of the hand. The film is parceled according to a tactile perspective, thus to our eyes it seems always partial, never peripheral. Surreptitiousness here is not only part of the plot, it is also part of the frame. Deleuze mentions that Bresson "dethrones the face" with this fragmentary practice, and indeed the face fades from the foreground.<sup>24</sup> But that is only one factor, for the face in Bresson

---

<sup>22</sup> Chion, 213.

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps*, 1985, 22. A reference to the work of Alois Riegl is also made in relation to the same subject in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 493 and 573n26. "La main double sa fonction préhensive (d'objet) avec une fonction connective (d'espace); mais, dès lors, c'est l'oeil tout entier qui double sa fonction optique avec une fonction proprement <<haptique>>, suivant la formule de Riegl pour désigner un toucher propre au regard. Chez Bresson, les opsignes et les sonsignes sont inséparables de véritables tactisignes qui en règlent peut-être les rapports."

<sup>24</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 1: L'image-mouvement*, 1983, 153. "C'est la construction d'un espace morceau par morceau, de valeur tactile, et où la main finit par prendre la fonction directrice qui le revient dans <<Pickpocket>>, détrônant le visage. La loi de cet espace est <<fragmentation>>."

is also blank, effaced, expressionless. It does not give itself away, and thus we can only surmise the intentions of the character by assessing the action (tactsigns) and analyzing the dialogue (aursigns).

It turns out that the dialogue further detracts the attention from the visual, in *Pickpocket* the mouthing of the dialogue is not the same as our hearing of the dialogue. In other words, the sync is anything but. It is unhinged —asynchronous.<sup>25</sup> This effect, jarring because of its rarity, creates situations where the “characters speak as if they were hearing their own voices reflected by another.”<sup>26</sup> But who is this other? It would seem that the viewer is the only other in the position to reflect. The particular gap created by asynchronicity is reminiscent of instances of a delay between the voice and the ear hearing its own voice —the cause of stuttering.<sup>27</sup> Bresson causes a kind of stuttered hearing.

To return to the tactile, let us now examine two films by Werner Herzog for additional instances of visual grabs and grips, of touch cinema. In *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), following much tension and anticipation, the encounter between the Jivaros and Fitzcarraldo portrayed by Klaus Kinski takes place on his boat in a hushed silence. It consists entirely of, at first the mutual touching of hands and then, of the Jivaros’ hands further exploring Fitzcarraldo’s body. The sensuousness of the scene is entirely contained in the touch (though admittedly Klaus Kinski’s eyes are as compelling in this scene as they are throughout the film). With *Woyzeck* (1979), hands enter the theme of nature versus science. Where science is the rational, human advancement over a base, incontinent nature. Woyzeck, the protagonist (also played by Klaus Kinski) is haunted by demonic voices, cracks his knuckles, and relieves himself wherever and whenever he needs to. His hands lead the way of a body who cannot afford the luxury of virtues afforded by the upper classes. Ultimately, he cannot contain his jealousy, his hands become lethal, as with Dulac/Artaud, his hands sought a neck to wring.

## 6. shhhhhhhhhh!

A hand covering the eyes, an index finger to the mouth shushing, fingers plugging the ears or the nose, ... our hands perform their role as censor just as admirably as their

---

<sup>25</sup> A brilliant illustration of sync/async was Pierre Huyghe’s video projection piece *Dubbing* (1996) for *Premises: Invested spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, & Design from France, 1958-1998*, Guggenheim Soho, 1998. Documented in pages 288-291 of the catalogue. In the piece we see, for the duration of a feature-length film, the dubbing cast in a sound studio lip-synching to the film (the “actual real” film) they are watching, but that we do not see.

<sup>26</sup> Deleuze, 1985, 315.

<sup>27</sup> For an extended examination on stuttering, consult Benson Bobrick, *Knotted Tongues: Stuttering in History and the Quest for a Cure*, 1995.

sensuous one. Yet, aside from the aforementioned scene in *Fitzcarraldo* we haven't even begun to delve into the tactile desires. The mere mention of the middle finger and one already enters the terrain of the ignoble. In Buñuel's *L'âge d'or*, the hand and its digits are metonymic with base desire, with doing it in the mud, with carnal lava boiling over. But all fulfillment is thwarted, the unbridled passions are constantly repressed by force, by interruptions, by the admonishing call to proper manners. Although, as Allen S. Weiss points out, the normative exigencies are not the only forces at work, the peripeteia of the young couple should also be seen as "an integral aspect of the logic of perversion."<sup>28</sup> As they embrace in the garden scene, the young woman asks her lover: "Where did you put your hand?" (*Où as-tu mis ta main?*), the hand then moves from a space below the frame where their crotches would be, to her cheek, and shortly thereafter descends again into that elliptical space of below-the-waist. Earlier in the film, when the Mother asks her daughter, "*Tu as la main bandée?*," not one Québécois would have missed the allusion to masturbation, for 'bander' not only refers to 'bandage' but is also synonymous with erection in Québécois French. The appearance and disappearance of the bandage on the finger function as traffic lights negotiating libidinal flows. The bandage functions as an icon of sublimation if one reads it as an impediment to masturbation or, if the deed had already been indulged, as a curative measure to curtail further fingering. The bandage can also function as a marker of desublimation (of the 'mad self') if it is present to mark an excess of masturbation, such as an *overabundance of* that the finger has sprained or 'swelled' (in keeping with Bulwer's list of unassimilables, alongside twitches and tics).

The dysfunctions of Carol (Catherine Deneuve) in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) also trace the line of the finger towards the sex. Carol is a manicurist who spirals into a vortex of agoraphobia. As she descends into mutism, the walls of her apartment crack, the sidewalks crack. At work, she accidentally cuts a customer at the cuticle, blood pours out, the customer screams. Carol ends up barricading herself into her apartment, murdering all intruders: the young man who has been pursuing her and then the lecherous landlord. The outside, however, is never extractable from her existence, the hallway becomes a corridor of hands grabbing and fondling her. Her claustrophilia is disturbed by an encroaching outside, but also an outside within her. Her fear of touch and intimacy are heightened to the extreme, but there is a hint of desire. Her repulsion is as much with herself as with others, she is trapped. By the end, she is prostrate under her sister's bed (of note, Donna Williams writes that she spent a lot of her childhood sleeping under her bed).

---

<sup>28</sup> Allen S. Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Excess*, 1989, 170.

Polanski's Carol does not know what to do with her hands, her desires fester into pathology. She learns to draw blood, but does not know how to satisfy herself. Consequently, the space of her desire becomes one of confinement. In Rebecca Horn's film *Dreaming Under Water* (1975) the space is also long and narrow, echoing not only the corridor of protruding hands in *Repulsion* but also the corridors in Bergman's *The Silence* and Kubrick's *The Shining*. A series of films where corridors are oneiric conduits—one is reminded here as well of Borges and his statement that the most terrifying labyrinth is one in a straight line. In the words of Lucy Lippard, Horn's *Dreaming Under Water* "is about a place, an elegantly claustrophobic interior (also inner) space defined by the activities that 'take place' in it [...] In the first exercise, Horn, in gigantically elongated 'gloves' extending her fingertips to several feet (she has used them in previous works –such as the 1972 performance *Finger Gloves*), moves slowly down an empty, narrow room scratching the walls on both sides; the sound is eerie, harsh, repellent both associatively (fingernails on blackboards) and actually in its identification of confinement."<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, in Horn, the prosthetic hands are able to command the space (or they perform an attempt to), whereas in Polanski the space becomes the hands which invade Carol. Her space is receding, her screams are swallowed, her confinement is from the inside out.

## 7. handcuffs

The language of desire as spoken by the hands is the domain of the perverse. It shows weakness of character, as Krafft-Ebing put it "every masturbator is more or less timid and cowardly."<sup>30</sup> It is an act whose use-value is nil, it impedes more productive forms of behavior. Thomas Lacqueur's "Credits, Novels, Masturbation" links this demonization to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' deep suspicion of the novel form. Fiction reaches its apogee with the novel, and "the imagination is a uniquely vulnerable faculty of the mind, a weak link."<sup>31</sup> The imagination and masturbation, both are bounded only by excess. They are not the domain of the visual; they involve spaces that are convoluted, folded,... bandaged. In other words, only faintly visible, if at all. They are palimpsests, in places elliptical, in others overabundant—layered to the point where fiction swallows reality. This is where the manual becomes a deranged one, of no help. Not the Rosetta Stone, but the flux of the subjectile. From the tactile and the projectile to the subjective. It shoots out in all directions, missing the target every time. As Derrida

---

<sup>29</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: feminist essays on women's art*, 1976, 293.

<sup>30</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1965, 287.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Lacqueur's "Credits, Novels, Masturbation" in *Choreographing History*, 1995, 125.

asserts in his essay on Artaud's drawings, the subjectile is what defies and exceeds translation.<sup>32</sup>

Two cases of frottage culled from the journal of the perpetrator, John W., contain the above mentioned properties:

45 W 2 Tu on way down on 42 I realize my sex problems unabatedness and solution need urgency after a while standing I my hand to her skirt hem inside up between thighs to pubes panties inside grasp vulva my fingers feeling juicy lips. She resists good-naturedly; I do not try to hold it. Evening downtown 42 entering woman ahead her skirt inside my hand attempts to go unsuccessfully.<sup>33</sup>

However distasteful these accounts are (for Carol, every man was a John W.), they are nevertheless a perfect example of a language of movement and desire translated to the logogrammatical. In the transition from event to account, it incurs truncations, ellipses, excesses, perhaps exaggerations, and results in a palimpsest. An activated, fluctuating palimpsest. A site where the hand that created it, is never finished with it. As with the ellipses in Céline, this writing is a shorthand which eschews the finality of the sentence. A text spilling over at a frenzied pace, a text sweating profusely its corporeality.

## 8. signatures

The Harrow in Kafka's "The Penal Colony" tells us that language and writing are not always activities of an intellect dissociated from the body. Writing is an imperative prone to impaling. André Leroi-Gourhan's study on the hands of Gargas found that the hands with truncated fingers depicted on the cave walls were not mutilated (for the purpose of sacrifice or due to injury) but were proto-syllabic; they were made by different combinations of folding fingers. His hypothesis is that they were representations of the signs one made when hunting —where silence is paramount.<sup>34</sup> While Leroi-Gourhan successfully disproves the heretofore de facto mutilation hypothesis, the theme of violence cannot be similarly discarded. Language is violent in two inextricable manners: it imposes a normativity, and it expulses any excess. With this model, language is double-edged, with the speed of a dagger and the threatening bulk of an iceberg. William Burroughs: "If I really knew how to write, I could write something that someone would read and it would kill them."<sup>35</sup> Language forges a path, cuts a wound, the result is never fully erasable (the palimpsest).

---

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Forcener le subjectile" in *Antonin Artaud: Dessins et portraits*, 1986, 57.

<sup>33</sup> Louis London & Frank Caprio, *Sexual Deviations*, 1950, 371.

<sup>34</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan, "The Hands of Gargas: Towards a General Study" in *October* 37, 1986 [1967]. tr. Annette Michelson.

<sup>35</sup> William Burroughs in Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 1995, 89.

Hands are at the frontlines, the avant-garde even, of our engagement with the environment. They are integral to sets of systems we have developed to engage with our surroundings. The hands are not only the transmitters, transducers, transistors of those systems, they are also, fittingly, the tools with which these systems developed. It seems that hands are "this portion of the body which cannot not make signs."<sup>36</sup> Yet, as I have been intimating throughout, hands can also make gestures that exceed the sign. The prehension of the hand not only results in apprehension, but also in incomprehension. Glossolalia, glossography... glossogestus? If one takes one definition of the glossa as any tongue-like structure, perhaps the length from shoulder to fingertip could be seen as analogous to the tongue. An exterior tongue, a mouthless tongue, a wagging member that moves about, glossogestus.

The synaesthetic confusion here is intentional, as intimated earlier it becomes difficult to discern differences as soon as one gets below the surface. Robert Schumann might be a good example to further synaesthetic confusion. Schumann, composer and pianist, had a paralytic finger. He referred to this finger as *mein betäubter finger*, and *betäubt* can be translated as "numb", "anesthetized," "stupefied," "stunned", or "deafened."<sup>37</sup> This immobility, however, is peculiar, for he would say when piano playing became unbearably painful because of it, that "it came to such a point that whenever I had to move my fourth finger, my whole body would twist convulsively."<sup>38</sup> So, an immobility replete with movement. Perhaps this numb finger functions in ways similar to the hand in Nerval's *La main enchantée*, but in this case the finger is not the actor possessed but is the director pulling the strings. Schumann was haunted by this finger, he tried to use a chiroplast —also known as the 'cigar mechanism,' or more critically dubbed by Wieck, his teacher, as the 'finger-torturer'. Mechanical contraptions to exercise (mostly to stretch) the fingers were not uncommon to pianists of the time; though speculations remain whether Schumann stuck to the available models or extrapolated from them to build his own torturer, his own harrow.

In relation to Schumann's pathology, Deleuze & Guattari speak of "a note that pursues you, a sound that transfixes you."<sup>39</sup> To entrance, mesmer, hypnotize; seems the tortured Schumann finger also performs this role: a finger that pursues you, a digit that transfixes you. Returning to Focillon, he concludes his essay in praise of hands by formulating the following contradiction: "The mind rules over the hand; hand rules over

---

<sup>36</sup> Le Bot, 51. "Elle est ce morceau du corps qui ne peut pas ne pas faire signe."

<sup>37</sup> Peter, Ostwald, *Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius*, 1985, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Schumann in Ostwald, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol.2. tr. Brian Massumi, 1983, 350.

mind"<sup>40</sup> I would be prepared to agree, but only in a paraphrase which complicates the symmetry: The mind rules over the hand; when the hand rules, it unrules the mind and the body.

The hands remember; they also dismember.

#### 9. For, hands are

For, hands are... *clammy, slippery, murderous, dexterous, guileless, guilty, left, right, tied up, clumsy, coordinated, complicit, diddlers, masturbators, fingerers, pokers, plodders, prodders, squeezers, squirters, poppers, scratchers, strokers, screechers, wagglers, dialers, doodlers, data inputers, clickers, thumb nosers, stranglers, wagerers, gesticulators, manipulators, wavers, handlers, punchers, caressers, grabbers, thumpers, idlers, fingerprinters, fingerprinted, friskers, frottagers, nailed, dirty, innocent, verbose, gossipers, riddled, jointed, elegant, nervous, impatient, amputated, stubby, bulbous, clenched, clutchers, fists, rocks, paper, scissors, hurlers, hunters, shushers, deviants, guides, possessed, demanding, ringed, tattooed, tobaccoed, arthritic, ambidextrous, ambagious, lepers, sculptors, carnivores, signers, slappers, wrestlers, musicians, writers, scribblers, triggerers, cuffed, articulated, cracked.*

#### 10. fingertips

Here, I have not discussed what hands physically produce: materials, goods, gifts. Nor the sounds they make: claps, slaps, snaps, cracks (save in passing). Nor Deleuze & Guattari's smooth and striated in relation to the haptic; nor the choreography of arms, hands and fingers; nor the depth of touch, the porousness of affect; nor the dieresis of the tactile into a left and right hand; nor lefthandedness; nor hand transplants due to firecracker accidents; nor signers, music conductors, umpires; nor the role of hands in compensating for the impairment of other senses; nor the Guidolmian hand, the reflexology hand, the zodiac hand; nor arthritis, arthralgia, anarthria or ataxia; nor Rober Racine's *Sound Signatures*; nor Stelarc and his robotic third arm performing a three-handed writing of the word 'evolution'; nor Esther in Bergman's *The Silence* who, upon arriving in country with a foreign language, decides the first thing she should learn is the word for 'hand' (*Kasi*); nor Karlheinz Stockhausen's demonstration of time by way of his fist pounding on a table to a disinterested Morton Feldmann; nor the tactile aside from the hands, skin allover.

---

<sup>40</sup> Focillon, 184.

These discussions are on the tip of my tongue and on my fingertips.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Laurie. Stories from the Nerve Bible: 1972-1992 Retrospective. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Artaud, Antonin. Oeuvres Complètes, t. III. Gallimard, 1978.
- Bobrick, Benson. Knotted Tongues: Stuttering in History and the Quest for a Cure. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- Bulwer, John. Chirologia — Chironomia. New York: AMS Press, 1975 [1644].
- Chion Michel. Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen. Trans. & ed. Claudia Gorbman. Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Deleuze, Gilles. Cinéma 1: L'image-mouvement. Les éditions de minuit. 1983.  
\_\_\_\_\_. Cinéma 2: L'image-temps. Les éditions de minuit, 1985.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia, vol.2. Trans. Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Derrida, Jacques et Paule Thévenin. Antonin Artaud: Dessins et portraits. Gallimard, 1986.
- Diderot, Denis. Premières oeuvres 2. Paris: Editions Sociales, 1972.
- Fisher, Jennifer. "Relational Sense: Towards a Haptic Aesthetics" in Parachute 87 (Montréal), 1997, 4-11.
- Fleche, Anne. "Echoing Autism: Performance, Performativity, and the Writings of Donna Williams" in The Drama Review 41, 3 (T155) Fall 1997.
- Focillon, Henri. The Life of Forms of Art. Trans. Charles B. Hogan and Georges Kubler. New York: Zone, 1989 [1934] .
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Toward a Universal Language of Motion: Reflections on a Seventeenth-Century Muscle Man" in Choreographing History. Ed. Susan Leigh Foster. Indiana University Press, 1995, 25-31.
- Heidegger, Martin. Basic Writings. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Huyghe, Pierre in Premises: Invested spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture, & Design from France, 1958-1998. Guggenheim, 1998, 288-291.
- Krafft-Ebing, Richard von. Psychopathis Sexualis. New York: Paperback Library, 1965.
- Lacqueur, Thomas. "Credits, Novels, Masturbation" in Choreographing History. Ed. Susan Leigh Foster. Indiana University Press, 1995, 119-128.
- Le Bot, Marc. La main de dieu, la main du diable. Fata Morgana, 1990.
- Leroi-Gourhan, André. "The Hands of Gargas: Towards a General Study" in October 37, 1986 [1967]. Trans. Annette Michelson.
- Lippard, Lucy R. From the Center: feminist essays on women's art. New York: Dutton, 1976.

London, Louis & Frank Caprio. Sexual Deviations. Washington: Linarc Press, 1950.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Phénoménologie de la perception. Gallimard, 1945.

Nerval, Gérard de. Sylvie. La main enchantée. Paris: H. Piazza, 1924 [1832].

Ostwald, Peter. Schumann: The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius. Northeastern University Press, 1985.

Strauss, Jonathan. Subjects of Terror: Nerval, Hegel, and the Modern Self. Stanford University Press, 1998.

Viola, Bill. Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House. MIT Press, 1995.

Weiss, Allen S. The Aesthetics of Excess. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1989.

Williams, Donna. Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic. New York: Random House, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. Somebody Somewhere: Breaking Free from the World of Autism. New York: Random House, 1994.