

Haptic Trouble

10-11 October 2025

Sorbonne Nouvelle University

In the last decades, the rise of affective touch as a distinct neurological category has significantly revalued the developmental and therapeutic benefits of the tactile sense (Olausson et al. 2010; Morrison 2016). According to neuroscience and cognitive psychology, touch is not just pleasurable and desirable—it is vital to growth, care and bonding from the earliest stages of life to the complex relationality of social life across species. The sense that touch is beneficial is perhaps nowhere as evident as when it is lacking. For Richard Kearney, an increasingly digitalized society calls for “recovering our most vital sense” (2021). Alternatively, Mark Paterson sees the “futures of affective touch” in the reparative potentialities of companion robots and socially assistive robots (2023).

The nostalgia for lost touch, like the utopian hopes for assistive touch, responds to haptic scenarios of comfort and consolation. What happens, however, when touch does not just alleviate but generate trouble? Can we complicate these curative narratives of touch by engaging with the frictions, failures and disputes of tactile experience? For Hortense Spillers, touch entangles the promises of healing with the violence of coercion. As such, it constitutes a “formidable paradox, which unfolds a troubled intersubjective legacy—and, perhaps, troubled to the extent that one of these valences of touch is not walled off from the other, but haunts it, shadows it, as its own twin possibility” (2018, quoted in Rizvana Bradley 2020). Taking its cue from Spillers’s insight into the affective contradictions of touch, this conference proposes to interrogate haptic trouble as a site of sensory and social subversion, urging us to acknowledge the unresolved discontents of the haptic, to embrace its critical disturbances, and to test its emancipatory potentialities.

Drawing on the polysemy of trouble in critical theory, this conference will place touch at the interdisciplinary intersection of aesthetics, political philosophy, cultural and material studies, and the biomedical humanities. If “trouble is inevitable” and calls for “what best way to be in it” (Butler 1990), if it blurs the ontological limits of materiality in “mixed-up times” (Haraway 2016), then our attempt at recovering the disturbances of touch will articulate touch and critique, addressing touch as a “critical sensibility” (Fretwell 2018) that disrupts and remodels relationality. Perhaps haptic trouble arises from the reflexivity of this sensory modality—one is touched when one touches (Husserl 1952). If the variable limit between self and other, self and self, and self and things is not just considered as a chiasmic “synergy” (Merleau-Ponty 1964) but also as a contested limit, then touch, though long relegated behind visibility, constitutes a crucial critical sense.

Focusing on tactile aesthetics, our conference will be particularly attentive to promote the reevaluation of tactile thinking in literature, aesthetics, arts and media. From “tactile poetics”

(Jackson 2015) to “video haptics” (Marks 2002) and “touchscreen archaeologies” (Strauven 2021), from the ecopolitics of contact improvisation (Bigé 2023) to the body-centered medium of performance and the materiality of sculpture, our discussions will interrogate the criticality of touch in a variety of aesthetic forms and contexts. Topics of interest may include but are not restricted to:

- aesthetic representations of haptic trouble
- touch as the method and medium of aesthetic practice
- haptic deprivation (pandemic isolation, prison studies) and haptic excess
- the ethics of navigating touch: sexuality, consent, violation
- haptic tensions in queer theory
- haptic tensions in disability studies
- haptic tensions in critical race studies
- touch and political trouble
- touch and legal trouble
- touch and environmental trouble
- touch and technological trouble
- touch and cognitive trouble
- touch in the medical humanities

This conference will be held at Maison de la Recherche, 5 rue des Irlandais in Paris on October 10th and 11th 2025. Proposals of 400 words, together with a short biographical note, should be sent to Rachel Aumiller (rachel.aumiller@ru.nl) and Caroline Pollentier (caroline.pollentier@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr) by **March 31, 2024**. We welcome traditional papers as well as more creative presentations. After the conference, a selection of papers is planned to be published as a special issue.

Works cited

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