

## BOOK REVIEW

Kearney, Richard. *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 195 pages. Index. ISBN: 978-0-231-19953-7.

As I sat down to sketch this review of Richard Kearney's new book on touch, I happened to have received just then in the post a record I had ordered some time ago. It was an album by the French group Daft Punk by the very Proustian title *Random Access Memories* (and let us not forget that in this year we commemorate the centennial of Proust's death who has written some memorable passages in anticipation of the discussion that Richard Kearney opens around what he rightly claims to be "our most vital sense"). As I could not resist the temptation to open the package, my eye fell on a song which happened to have the exact same title as the book I was about to review: *Touch*. 5 10

The strange coincidence in the titles of book and song provoked in me the temptation to put Richard Kearney's book through an unconventional challenge: to test, by comparing them, whether the book's insights on touch were in agreement with those of the song by the same title. Would the muse who inspired the music of Daft Punk confirm whatever the owl of Minerva had whispered to Richard Kearney's ear or the old sibling rivalry between philosophy and poetry would reveal their alleged discord? This is what I found out. 15

But first let me offer, as it is customary in book reviews, some remarks about the book as a whole, considered both as it stands alone but also in its relation to some of Richard Kearney's previous works, as I happen to be quite familiar with most of them. What I found in *Touch* is the same original approach to an original topic as it was the case with Kearney's books on the possible and on imagination. Together with the imagination books, this book shares the same methodical and systematic fashion in the presentation of the material that comprises its first half; material in which Richard Kearney traces the genealogy and evolution of our attitudes toward touch in what might be called a phenomenology of the senses (chapter one: "Coming to Our Senses"). This is, then, followed by a hermeneutical retrieval of the tactile as it lies within the history of philosophy itself (chapter two: "Philosophies of Touch: From Aristotle to Phenomenology"). The second half of the book borrows more in its tone and structure from Richard Kearney's work on the philosophy of narrative and literature. The book itself, furnished as it is with a series of visuals on classical and—at times—provocatively modern themes, reminds me of such books as *On Stories* and *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*. In short, *Touch* is a book that offers what Richard Kearney can do best. 20 25 30

Now to return to my unorthodox experiment, the first thing that you must know about the song (although, as the reader will soon realise, in speaking of this song I will be, in fact, speaking of Richard Kearney's book, even if only *per speculum in aenigmate*) is that it has a tripartite structure, and that fact alone is quite significant because, if we were to return to one of the most fundamental insights of this book, we shall find that this is nothing else than the tripartite structure of touch itself. "Flesh is a medium" (p. 37) we read time and again throughout the book and it is upon the intermediacy and *intermittency* of touch that some of its other key characteristics lie, such as, its intersubjectivity and reciprocity. The song, therefore, has the following three parts: two stanzas and a refrain which in this case is also a chorus. I should also add that the tripartite structure of the song is further organised around 35 40

a threefold question: “Where do I belong?”, “How do I begin?”, and “Touch, where do you lead?”.

The two stanzas are sung by a single voice, that of Paul Williams, that speaks, almost in *recitativo*, on behalf of that sovereign subjectivity that claims the first person singular in saying “I”: “I remember touch”. But, surely, it ought to be the other way about; it is the touching and touched body that remembers. “Remember, Body” is the title of one of Cavafy’s poems that best summarises what Proust describes as a bodily memory, the memory of the body: “the composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder-blades, offered it a series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept . . .” (*Swann’s Way*). For the body, once touched, remembers; and its memory is, as the song says, “A room within a room/A door behind a door.”

These two stanzas represent two common misunderstandings when it comes to thinking about touch. They illustrate, and are themselves serving as an apt illustration, of what Richard Kearney describes in the last chapter of the book as the “Age of Excarnation.” Here touch is confused with the visual (“Pictures come with touch/A painter in my mind”) or with the digestive (“Kiss . . . /Hunger like a storm”). Both stanzas are framed by the indirect question “tell me what you see.” One, however, would not find touch among the things one sees or even could see—touch is not something that you can see (or, therefore, know). The phenomenon of *excarnation* is a result of an I that is all eyes, capable of seeing everything hidden or afar, but which, precisely because of it, remains blind to itself, bereft of the passion of auto-affection. It “forgets” that it has a body (“a half-forgotten song”) and lives a life like “a tourist in a dream/a visitor it seems”). Thus, the first question: “Where do I belong?”

The second stanza asks a different question: “Touch, where do you lead?” In an instant exemplary of the reciprocity of touch, Richard Kearney’s philosophical inquiry “touching” on touch is touched back in order to reveal an ethos *in* thinking, an ethos *of* thinking, informed by the tactile that mistrusts itself enough—it ought to—as to be willing to try everything, but it is also confident of itself, as to avoid forming an opinion on anything without first trying it, that is without first submitting it to its own tribunal. Touch advances towards the world, the world of others, *our* common world, without forming any preconceptions, conditioned only by itself. *Innocently*. Careless, like a child who knows only by reaching out and touching things before it brings them to its mouth to taste them. A philosophy of touch that rises to the mysteries of our tactile, haptic thought.

I have always thought that no book review is complete (and judged accordingly, no book review I have read so far has ever been so), without advising the prospective readers not only on what they should expect to find in the book, but also how they, the readers, are expected to handle the book under review. And so, since this book on touch above all else, is a book that requires to be touched (after all, it is not quite clear whether the book’s title is a noun or perhaps an imperative, an invitation, or a permission to touch), I would like to suggest that one might best enjoy Richard Kearney’s *Touch* when reading it, in a crowd, alone.

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## Notes on contributor

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