So Present, Yet Unreachable: Phenomenological Aesthetics of Distant Touch

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1. Introduction: the need for distant touch

> *For if it is going to survive, it is not only necessary that it perceive when making contact, but also from a distance.*[1]
>
> Aristotle

1. The venture of moving forward in animals and insects, commonly defined by the ability to explore and create their own cartographies as they live and look for their *objects of desire*, is an endeavour that demands some type of sensorial technology allowing for a relatively extended awareness of their surroundings. Beings that move need to perceive if they are moving in the direction they want to go, if they are getting closer or farther away from an obstacle or from what they seek, and thus need *distal senses*. Touch and taste are senses defined by the nearness they require between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Nonetheless, Aristotle found fault with such distinction between distal and proximal senses: "It now seems that while taste and touch occur by means of touching, the others occur at a distance. But this is not the case. Rather, we perceive the hard and the soft through other things, just as we do that which can sound, as well as the objects of sight and smell".[2]

2. Aristotle highlights that even where we do not see a distance and don't perceive space, even where we think there is direct contact as when we touch a surface, there is in fact in-betweenness, middle actors to sensation. The philosopher first establishes a difference between that which is perceived *by means of touching* — *ἅπτεσθαι*, from *ἅπτω*, to attach, to grasp, a word related to *ἁφή*, *to touch*, *to affect*[3] — and that which is perceived *at a distance* — *ἄποθεν*; from *ποθεν*, denoting

1 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 71: *οἷον τῷ πορευτικῷ, ἀνάγκη ὑπάρχειν· εἰ γὰρ μέλλει σώζεσθαι, οὐ μόνον δεῖ ἁπτόμενον αἰσθάνεσθαι ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄποθεν.*
2 Aristotle, *De Anima*, 46.
3 R. Beekes and L. Van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, 120.

provenance, location, thus possibly meaning "that which is perceived *not from there*", *not from the same place*. He adds, however, that we perceive *the hard and the soft* (*τὸ σκληρὸν καὶ τὸ μαλακὸν*, 423b) and all tactile qualities *through* something else. In that respect, all touch is distal touch.

3. As touch remains commonly defined by the closeness it physically implies and it rhetorically evokes, the mere notion of distant touch and of distal haptic perception seems peculiar. But Aristotle's perspective, which I wish to take as a point of departure, is firm: we perceive the objects of touch, the hot and the cold, the hard and the soft, the curved and the sharp, *through other things*: *δι' ἑτέρων*. In this article, I would like to explore this *ἕτερος*[4] by showing how the *otherness* of perception always implies an intermediary, a middle point (*μέσος*), *i.e.* an other not so other, an other that is able to translate the much more distant otherness of the perceived object. Sensoriality and sensibility are precisely the (ultimately impossible) transformation of otherness into sameness; in the precarious, partial transcription and transduction of the external into an inner experience. But this process in which sensibility pierces and encompasses layers of otherness, from the subject to what is no longer part of it, is not simple. As it spreads a web around us, it goes even through the world that we no longer conceive as *ourselves*. All senses — even those called *proximal* — are therefore *δι' ἑτέρων* — *διά* meaning *via*, *through*. They extend our subjectivity *across* a space that isn't empty but dense, thick, and full of matter. This space seems invisible and untouchable but this is only because we are forgetful of its subtle and layered existence, and we overlook the series of alter-ations and inter-mediaries by which objects come to us as single, distant, and unified *things*.

4. To explore these forgotten layers of alterity that fall into what we commonly conceive of as the impalpable emptiness of distance, I propose to study the idea of distant touch from the perspective of phenomenological aesthetics. In order to do so, I will first examine some aspects of the Husserlian account of perception and will then focus on the phenomenology of distant touch in Alejandra Costamagna's novel *El Sistema del Tacto* [*The System of Touch*] (2018).

5. My use of Costamagna's novel is not merely illustrative. In other words, it is not my aim to clarify Husserl's philosophy of perception through a literary work but to meditate on alterity and the non-actual aspects of perception as highlighted by Aristotle, Husserl but also Costamagna as equally valid sources of inspiration and reflection. In our eyes, Costamagna's novel grasps even better than the two philosophers a particular facet of tactile perception, namely the mnemic aspect of touch and how each tactile experience has the potential to revivify our tactile past, as well as to reorganise — and sometimes disorganise — the present.

4 *Ibid.*, 475.

2. Phenomenological meanings of distant touch

> *Now what about these two fields* [the perceptual field and the phantasy field]*? Are they coexistences as compatible as, say, different perceptual fields are — for example, the visual field and the tactile field?*[5] […] *Would it be conceivable that free phantasy and memory make their appearance in full sensuous vitality?*[6]
>
> E. Husserl

6. Edmund Husserl's descriptions of sensibility in the context of meditative analysis and from a first-person perspective, his speculations about the structure and regularities, laws and possibilities of conscious and unconscious experience pay special attention to what is not actually there, to the almost there and the vanishing. The volume *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory*, collecting lectures and sketches posthumously published about the theme of *image consciousness* (*Bildbewusstsein*), from which I extract our second epigraph, is fully dedicated to these forms of — one might say — *quasi*-presence. Although these phenomena are addressed by other branches of Husserlian phenomenology like the phenomenological theory of knowledge or the phenomenological theory of objectivity in general, this is traditionally done from a critical perspective for an image could never provide knowledge about *things themselves*: "a sign or a picture do not 'make known' the designated (or depictured) affair itself".[7] One of the fundamental gnoseological thesis of Husserlian phenomenology is, precisely, the difference between perception which *gives* physical things *themselves*, v. *in person* or *in the flesh* (*leibhaftig*), and the various forms of re-presentation.

7. It is fundamental because it prevents phenomenology from dissolving into an absolute idealism where there would be only differently accredited spectres, different imagery levels, without anything having the worth of or *appearing as* what is *there*. All types of representation, be they memorial, imaginary, or visual, signs and copies, illustrations and imitations, are only able to *point towards*, to put us in the direction of knowledge and of what is constituted *as* the fleshy reality *given* in perception. This is why one needs to examine the question of distant touch beyond the perspective of knowledge acquisition or indeed any perspective that would focus merely on the

5 E. Husserl, *Phantasy, Image Consciousness, and Memory (1898-1925)*, 82.
6 *Ibid.*, 578.
7 E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, volume 1, 120.

most accomplished forms of givenness, on what is perceived as real, leaving all less-substantial forms of givenness behind. The perspective of aesthetic phenomenology encompasses how we perceive and feel the signs and re-productions of what we understand as *being there* but also how we perceive and feel things themselves.

8. There are two main ways in which one might understand *phenomenological aesthetics*: it can refer to a philosophical discussion about art that adopts the phenomenological perspective, grounding itself specifically in this contemporary tradition, working with its methods and concepts, or it can refer to the phenomenological analyses of perception, sensoriality, sensibility, and all constitutional layers denoted by the philosophical notion of *αἴσθησις*. Indeed, all aspects of the philosophy of art, from how an art object is conceived and created to its cultural meaning and how we encounter and interpret it can be analysed phenomenologically; phenomenology being concerned with the analysis of all subjective and intersubjective experiences. However, phenomenological aesthetics can also refer to the examination, not of a specific creative endeavour but of sensibility as such, of *αἴσθησις*, and become a general *aesthesiology and perceptology*.[8] In our analysis of Costamagna's novel, we will see these two meanings of phenomenological aesthetics converge as we delve into a literary work with phenomenological tools in an attempt to better understand distant touch and its rooting in haptic memory. But let us establish our conceptual frame first.

9. Let us consider the Husserlian concept of *aesthetic* or *sensuous synthesis*,[9] which is necessary for phenomena to be constituted. The synthesis that takes place at the passive level of sensoriality accompanies intellectual activity or categorial synthesis. Together, they allow for phenomena to appear with all their facets and qualities. At the level of this passive aesthetic synthesis, tactile elements are being synthesised beyond what is actually being tactually felt, for example, in the experience of feeling the kisses someone sends in a written message. This is one instance that might fall under the concept of distant touch, namely, a non-actual tactile experience. Another case of non-actual touch we might consider is, for example, the roughness of the bark of the tree we see at a distance, of which we perceive tactile qualities through vision — its hardness, its shape, possibly its temperature, for example, if we were able to see ice or snow in its surface or if we had otherwise a notion of the air temperature surrounding it.

10. But these two kinds of distant touch, the distant touch of an imaginary kiss sent through

8 A. Pinotti, "Cubism", 63.
9 E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, volume 2, 19-23.

writing (different from a kiss, for example, that we would simply imagine, without any link to the actual intentions of a particular sender) and the distant touch of a single tactile quality, of the roughness or other tactile aspect of the bark — are they of the same type? In the case of the sent kiss, many tactile qualities are synthesised into one experience, possibly along with remembered kisses and generalities about the person who sends them and about our own bodies, whereas in the second case, the texture of the bark corresponds to an isolated tactile quality. Phenomenology is, precisely, the detailed description of very similar phenomena, and the classification in types and taxonomies will depend on the objectives and criteria established for such classification. Here, with these two examples, we would like to simply show a range of distant touch phenomena of different degrees of complexity, with varying degrees of tactility in between two extremities, from a full non-actual situational experience to a single tactile quality.

11. There is a kind of distant touch being synthesised, for instance, when we put our hand's palm against someone else's hand's palm through a window. There is also distant touch when we grab a virtual object in a virtual reality setting; or when a child who is being taken away from something he wants tries to keep contact with it for as long as possible by extending his arms as much as he can, hands and fingers towards it; or when we imagine without even moving how we would hold in our arms someone that we miss. These very different types of non-actual touch, be they interpersonal or merely objectual, are all instances of synthesised touch, meaning instances where all the layers of tactile sensations, current, memorial, and imaginary, have been unified into a singular tactile experience: touching palms, grabbing something, trying to keep something, holding someone. In the first case, we actually touch a window but we do not actually touch the other person, in the second and third cases only the air is actually grabbed or touched, not the virtual object nor the object longed for, and in the last case, we do not actually hold anything or anyone.

12. Going in the sense of a classification, it would seem that this sense of distant-non-actual touch, the one at hand in these full situational experiences, differs from how all the multiple constitutive layers, unities and groups of tactile sensations are also distant. Not yet constituted as the former, not even as an experience of non-actual or actual distal touch, these tactile morceaux, the roughness of the bark, for example, these touch smithereens, seem to be spread throughout the great distances of phantasy and memory and all layers of possible experience. Let us remember how putting our feet in the sand feels. Of course, we immediately go to a fully sensorial memory or a phantasy of being in front of the sea, with the smells and the lighting that goes with it, but if we try to isolate that sole tactile sensation in our feet, we will get a single tactile sensation that once was actual, present and

real, and now is remembered and imagined, isolated as one ingredient. Single ingredients like this one are used in a virtually infinite array of full situational distant touch experiences through aesthetic synthesis. This last kind of distant touch, the tactile fragments that become available to participate as elements of a larger synthesised unity, is the one that phenomenology allows us to appreciate, in my opinion, like no other perspective: the passive tactile fragments and adumbrations inherent to all phenomena.

13. When Husserl indicates that "sensations are the indispensable material foundation for all basic sorts of noeses",[10] we are not to understand this as only referring to sensations gathered in the present moment but to all the sensory fragments we have retained through life and to all the sensorial conjectures we can make on that basis. For example, we might never have felt a shark's skin but we can imagine that sensation. At this point, we can reconsider anew the Aristotelian text with which we started: to survive, animated beings need to perceive at a distance and this, not only because they need to have a sense of the greater space they are located in, its obstacles and characteristics, but because for the senses to work, they need to encompass information that is not present and is, in this sense, distant: non-actual, remembered and imagined sensory fragments. This holds also in the case of touch, even if it is sometimes conceived merely as the sense of presence, only in relation to something that is truly there, touching our skin.

14. Going back to our epigraph to this section, this is the reason why Husserl can ask: "Would it be conceivable that free phantasy and memory make their appearance in full sensuous vitality?" In other words, can what we imagine or what we remember one day appear to us as perception does, in front of us, here and now and in its flesh? Here, we are not so much interested in the answer to this question as in the reason why it makes sense — namely, because Husserl conceives sensibility as a series of overlaying sensory fields that are synthesised in phenomena of different types. Phenomena that have different reality attributions or different ontological statuses are constituted from a multitude of the same sensorial fragments and adumbrations. One might say that in this sensorial constitution, a tactile memory or a tactile dream, for instance, would pull from a common pool of tactile sketches. For example, this real mug that is really present in front of my eyes and that I can actually grab with my hand is *almost* the same, from the perspective of the aesthetic synthesis and the sensory adumbrations it implies, as an identical mug that I can imagine beside it, or overlapping with it, and almost the same as the mug I will remember tomorrow when thinking about this imaginary one. Seen as such, the perceptive field and the phantasy field, the field of our memories

10 E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, volume 3, 10.

and that of our dreams, seem to have no meaningful difference, all being constituted by sensory materials unified into an experience.

15. In summary, there are two main definitions of distant touch in this phenomenological framework: first, distant touch as unified experience (the distant touch of another person's palm through a window, the distant touch of a hug sent in a virtual conversation, or the distant touch of an embrace we imagine before going to sleep, for instance), and second, the distant touch of sensorial haptic fragments, distant touches that are disaggregated in the spaces of phantasy, reverie, and memory. These fragments are constantly informing the lived present perception in the forms of sensory expectations and colourations of experience. In other words, when we in fact touch something or someone, we do not *simply* touch but we touch with our past, our memory, our culture, our hopes and projections, and our efforts to separate from it all; all of this shaping silently, inaudibly the tips of our fingers.

3. Tactile memories in *El Sistema del Tacto*

> *But she is certain, absolutely certain, that in the near future, after all this is over, she will have a garden that she will water carefully. As if it were a small inner field, a territory freed from the memories and the blood. She will water it with the system of touch, as if it were a fainting heart, with the care of a stenographer.*[11]
>
> A. Costamagna

16. In Alejandra Costamagna's fifth novel, *El Sistema del Tacto* (2018), synthesised experiences of distant touch are present, not only as desired touch but as unbidden touch. But what is perhaps most significant is how the novel uncovers layers of infinite fragments of distant touch, those not-yet-synthesised distant touches that phenomenology allows us to theorize. *El Sistema del Tacto* tells the symmetrical story of Ania and Agustín Coletti. Their initials: A.C., like the author's. The novel starts in Campana, Argentina, with Agustín's concern for little Ania, the daughter of his cousin Juan Coletti, who, after leaving Argentina for Chile, sends his daughter back to Campana to visit the family. Like Costamagna, Ania Coletti is said to have been born in March 1970. At the same period,

11 A. Costamagna, *El Sistema del Tacto*, 118. Digital edition. All translations from the Spanish by E. Molina Garcia. Hereafter, *ST*.

Agustín begins his dactylographic notebooks (*ST* 69), the ones Ania will find years later when she goes back to Argentina to attend Agustín's funeral, in lieu of her father. The novel is composed of almost seventy fragments, corresponding mainly to these two stories, Agustín's and Ania's. Interposed among these two storylines we find family pictures, typewritten dactylographic exercises, typewritten dactylographic rules, encyclopaedic fragments, bits of the *Manual for the Italian Immigrant*¸ letters and synopses of the horror books Agustín would lend to little Ania: *The Cursed Inheritance*, *Panic in Paradise*, and *The Diabolical Children*, this last one being the only one that would interest her (*ST* 49).[12]

17. Agustín's and Ania's storylines are told by an external, third-person but subjective narrator, who describes their experiences, thoughts and feelings. In Agustín's storyline, we are mostly told what he would feel during little Ania's visits. In Ania's, we get to know the young woman she becomes and how she deals with the memories this grim travel to attend Agustín's funeral brings back — memories of her own childhood but also more distant memories, from Agustín's immigrant mother and the difficulties she went through. In this context, Costamagna's work illustrates the two phenomenological meanings we have given to distant touch, both through its content and through its structure. The whole book is made of present tactile experiences that not only evoke but carry with them past ones, and its fragmentary layout is suggestive of how past and present in this way mingle and how the destinies of different characters interweave.

18. The title of the novel, *El Sistema del Tacto*, refers to a dactylographic learning technique — "the fastest and most scientific" (*ST* 71) — but also seems to define sensibility as an array of seemingly insignificant tactile experiences, which, little by little, constitute our grasp of the world and our attachments to it. Hence, for example, when getting the news of her father's sickness while still in Argentina, grownup Ania will, "with the system of touch deployed to the maximum" (*ST* 105), plan for her next actions. "The system of touch" refers to her sensoriality, her sensibility, her awareness, the person she is. Sensible beings are represented in the novel as complex systems of touch, processing all past experiences, opening and closing to new contacts and attachments, repairing and preparing for rough ones when they can. But this system, as Husserlian phenomenology suggests, is full of overlapping and confusions, of tactile flashbacks and palpable dreams.

12 Fragment 21: "In *The Diabolical Children* there are two siblings, a girl and a boy, who breathe through the fire. They need the flames to oxygenate their lungs. […] Flares everywhere, a burning city. The fire reaches the neighbourhood of the arsonist children, their own house, their bedrooms. The curtains burn, the furniture, the walls fall, the parents suffocate. And the siblings celebrate with their devilish laughter while they lose air and watch their bodies melt, one in front of the other, like a pair of rubber dolls."

19. Let us consider this scene: Ania, the protagonist, visits her father before leaving for the funeral in Argentina. While at his place, she looks at an article in the *Gran Enciclopedia del Mundo* about a bird, the *tilonorrinco*, and starts remembering her childhood with her cousin Claudia:

> The cousins climbed the tree, they slid like a pair of monkeys through the branches and hit the little bundles of straw. Not an ounce of sophistication, those birds from Campana. Sometimes there were one or two eggs. They knew they were not allowed to touch them, so they would just look at them and go back: branch, trunk, earth. Her father always explained that birds were solitary folk, that they should not be disturbed. Once, however, Ania took one of the little eggs and it cracked, it burst in her hand. She was alone, her cousin had classes at that hour. She didn't tell anyone. The sticky hands, crack, the mother bird hovering. She did not know what to do. The *catrasca* again, they would say. She knew it. Mistake after mistake, always so clumsy. (*ST* 16)

Looking at the picture of a bird, tactile memories reappear, first vaguely — the climbing of the trees, her whereabouts accompanied by her cousin — ; then, more precisely — the egg that she broke and the tactile ban she did not follow. Not to touch the bird's eggs, not to rasp the butterflies' wings: such are the tactile instructions given to the child the main character once was, a child that is learning to navigate a world full of fragile beings by calibrating and developing her sensibility, her *system of touch*. The passage involves both fully synthesised experiences of distant touch, such as the remembered breaking of the egg in her hand, and haptic fragments of experience, such as the remembered stickiness of her skin afterwards. Such experiences shaped her character: transgressing proxemic and tactile rules like these, that one should not bother birds, and never manipulate or play with their defenceless offspring, seems to have stuck to her self-perception as someone not just clumsy and inadequate in her actions but someone estranged, deprived of a sense of belonging.

20. While also giving touch its traditional role at times — the role of providing us with certainty, of being the confirmation of actual presence and the last step towards believing something is real — Costamagna is able to show how in tactile memory and imagination, touch might have precisely the opposite effect, confusing temporalities and spaces. Touch is, indeed, inherently ambiguous: it is by touch that we feel a caress or feel a blow, and, analogously, in front of uncertainty or trauma, touch can reassure us, giving us something solid to hold on to, or it can act, as in Ania's case, as a catalyser for a flood of semi-organised memories and sensations.

21. It is rather in Agustín's storyline that touch is mostly represented as a reassuring, confirmative sense:

> He should have done it so many years ago, Agustín says to himself. When he found his mother lying on the bed, saliva hanging from her mouth, lost gaze and the empty pill bottle on the nightstand. […] When there was no one in the house and he had to call an ambulance and help get her up and see how they took her away and pick a couple of oranges off the ground by inertia, just something to distract himself, and lock himself in the room to type for the sake of typing, as if the keys were bullets that could pierce his chest. Take the immigrant's manual or some other document from his mother's luggage and type. Hit something with his fingers, leave a trace, letters like projectiles. (*ST* 30)
>
> That's why he types without pattern or pause: in case that in inertia, suddenly, what he is looking for appears, the word that would bring him back or that would take him out forever. (*ST* 55)

Keys like bullets, letters like projectiles: typing is flirting with the end and also the promise of a future, a quest for the final decision, the final answer, for whatever Agustín is looking for, not knowing at all what it is. Along with the reassuring function of touch, Costamagna shows masterfully the crumbling of perception, or to use Husserlian terms, how the aesthetic synthesis by which stable phenomena appear is no more than a complex and fragile association of fragmentary qualities. Costamagna does this through the iteration of objects and places: hospital, grapes, attic, stool, typewriter. These literary objects are invested with the task of becoming wormholes between past and present, putting the two main narratives into contact with one another — for example, the texture of a grape's skin in the present of Ania's storyline brings back strong memories of a scene of her childhood:

> Agustín looks at how *la chilenita* leaves the novels he has just given her on the floor and how she now climbs on a box to pinch the grapes of a bunch so ripe that it is ready to explode. She says she doesn't like the thick skin of these grapes; that it makes her 'quiver', she says. That in Chile they are thinner, that you can't even feel them. She puts one grape in her mouth and sucks on its juice. She throws the skin on the ground, right next to the books, a few inches away from Agustín's feet. He is sitting on a little green wooden stool, smoking, on the shared patio. He doesn't know if the little girl talks to herself or him. Maybe in Chile girls play like that. Agustín wonders if she has something like a boyfriend over there. But she is a little girl, Tinito, please. He can't imagine her kissing someone, she's his niece, she's the daughter of his cousin. Agustín has never kissed a woman. (*ST* 21)

The distant touch of tactile fragments, in contrast with that of synthesised experiences, has no fixed temporal residency. The tactile impression of the thick skin in Argentinian grapes little Ania felt

comes back in future analogous experiences and acts as a temporal passage and a densifying factor of the present. Costamagna shows at this micro-level the past-in-the-present structure of experience, the role of absence in presence, of distant touch in current or actual physical contact. In the same way as, when walking the steps in a building we knew as children, we are taken sensorially back to the moments we lived there, multiple tactile quasi-experiences — tactile fragments less visible than this general example of walking through a building — are constantly densifying our current experience, not always allowing for a clear distinction between past and present.

22. Throughout the novel, grapes and the little stool reappear, and when they do, in Ania's storyline, she seems confused. She gets those "thoughts that are not entirely hers" (*ST* 26); feelings and words keep invading her. She seems to feel the turmoil of thoughts other generations had rushing into her, and she constantly tries to block them. She doesn't know how much Agustín thought about her fingers (*ST* 91),[13] or exactly how much Nélida, Agustín's mother, suffered but, as a reader, one gets the impression that this past, the past of others, causes the commotion she is in, as ghosts that never leave certain objects and places.

> […] why it took so long to get her to the hospital, the same hospital where Nélida was admitted and then left being a different person, a woman without a head, an empty body, the same hospital where Agustín ceased to be a body to become remains: all that now slips into her scrambled thoughts, now that she goes into the attic and confirms that the bedspread is the same, the spider webs hardly let you see the window and the fan in the ceiling has broken blades, as the dishes that are broken too, the branches of the orange tree, the certainties of teenage years, the mirrors of this house, the little legs of the butterflies in the road. All that appears suddenly and, although she closes and reopens her eyes, she can't get out of there. Then she goes down the stairs and feels that little by little she becomes again the person she was when she saw the light that morning.[14]

Phenomenologically, these descriptions of Ania's confusion are significant, not only because they show the past-in-the-present structure of experience at an individual level but also because they point towards the much broader phenomenological structure of intersubjectivity. As she connects with the past through objects and spaces, walking through the hospital, sitting on the green stool, Ania does not merely connect with her own past. She is also flooded with the experiences of others, not by some metaphysical intrusion, but because the intersubjective structure of experience

13 See one of young Agustín's thoughts: "Turn into one of those butterflies that the little girl likes to save. Give her your legs and your antennae and let her erase the dust of your wings with their redeeming fingers."
14 *Ibid.*, 81-82.

determines that her own experience is constituted by that of others, by the experiences she knows or feels others had. Phenomenologically, our own egoic life encompasses the sensorial experience that we think or feel others lived. Places and object are haunted, in this manner, not only by the tactile fragments that constitute old and new experiences, creating an inevitable resemblance between them at the level of Ania's subjectivity, but also by the tactile conjectures that these fragments also constitute, namely the experiences Nélida and Agustín would have had, at least as Ania can conceive of them. What is confusing and sometimes difficult to bear is not the weight of only one person's sensorial biography but that of the intersubjective community she was and is a part of.

23. Ania can feel when the sensorial confusion between her past and present sensations — as well as between her sensations and those she conceives others felt in similar spaces or in interactions with the same objects — starts to happen. The loosening up of the aesthetic synthesis when she sees and sits on the little green stool seems palpable to the point that she can try to avoid it. This is the same green stool from which Agustín would observe her when she was a child (*ST* 21), in the shared patio where the vine was, and its black grapes "with skin thick as that of memory itself, gelatinous inside" (*ST* 28); the same green stool she found in Nélida's room when she came back, which, "just like the typewriter and the other belongings, had been waiting for her without scandal all those years" (*ST* 100): "a lonely little stool, upholding the memory of a house in ruins" (*ST* 101).

4. Conclusive remarks

24. In the frame of Husserlian phenomenology, I have distinguished the synthesised experiences of distant touch such as the touch of another person's palm through a window or a hug sent in a virtual conversation, from the distant touch of haptic fragments disaggregated in phantasy, reverie, and memory, fragments that are waiting and available to be used in the constitution of the former synthesised tactile experiences. The distance in this second type is given in the non-objective spaces of phenomenological experience: sensible, mnemic and imaginary spaces that, it would seem, are also the ones implied in aesthetic empathy, when we, for instance, are able to recognise and tune with a character's tactile interactions through the distance of aesthetic space-time, be it literary, pictorial or of another kind.

25. After establishing a distinction between fully synthesised experiences and fragments of distant touch, I have, without expanding on the first type, analysed the second one in the light of Alejandra Costamagna's *El Sistema del Tacto*, a novel that entangles the two meanings of distant touch. If

touch has traditionally been considered the ultimate confirmation of reality and the utmost basic element of sensory perception, Costamagna's novel reveals that it is also the source of perceptive disorganisation, of an everyday tactile confusion that one is not used to noticing. As a result, Costamagna's novel does not simply illustrate Husserlian phenomenology, but also allows us to think beyond it. *El Sistema del Tacto* highlights all the tactile layers that are constitutive, as phenomenology also shows, of different tactile experiences; of those that are not quite actual, like those we live in virtual settings or in imagination, those that might never be actual, as in phantasy or dreaming, or those that can never be so again, as in memory. But Costamagna also invites us to think about the possibility that these ubiquitous tactile unities might lose their usual arrangement, the configuration that is given to them by the whole interplay between categorial and passive syntheses. If, in classic Husserlian phenomenology, "my body is given originally to me and to me alone",[15] in its parts and as a whole, and it is only because of this guaranteed originality that the actual and possible experience constituted through the different syntheses has the signature of being one and my own, Costamagna allows us to think the tenuousness of such originality. In Husserl, we can constitute others as subjects only to the extent that an analogy between them and our bodies can be maintained, meaning only as long as others appear to be organisms utterly similar to us. In Costamagna's novel, the emphasis is put on Ania's sensorial confusion between her past and present, but also between her sensorial experience and that of others, allowing us to understand sensibility beyond the individual subject.

26. When Ania touches a grape or walks through the hospital, she feels the memories coming, as if the past, the story of her immigrant family, Nélida's sufferings and even her own, little Ania's, overcame the singular person she is as an adult. With some effort, she is able to stop them. She imposes her present. The elicitation of tactile memory is so overwhelming that it seems to threaten something — her identity? her sanity? Nothing of the sort. Rather than a reminder of how fragile perception, reason and identity are and how risky it would be to notice this fragile structure, this novel is a reminder of how complex sensibility is, how difficult the memory of our families, of our countries can be to hold, and how we constantly deal with such complexity. Among somatic flashbacks and forgetfulness, we constantly relate not only to our own past but also to the past of all those we have lived with and who partake in our self-constitution, in ways not necessarily mediated by their presence or by language.

15 E. Husserl, *Phenomenological Psychology*. *Lectures*, *Summer Semester 1925*, 81.

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