



Space, in contemporary discourse, has taken on an almost palpable existence.

*Vidler, The Architectural Uncanny 167*

## hotel spaces

**I**n our progress through the hotel, we walk from outside to inside, from the public space of interaction to the foyer's semi-public space. Come with me. The foyer, where the reception desk is situated, is an ante-chamber between private rooms and the public bustle outside. Eventually we find ourselves in our room, alone together at last, breathless, fuelled by lusty anticipation. That strange, private space which reveals our own estrangement.

The hotel as literal and phenomenological "unhomely home" (Vidler 13), plush carpeted, clean-walled estrangement. What happens to touching, feeling and intimacy? What strange and intense touching occurs behind closed doors, between us friends, lovers, between strangers that pass through? That path through the hotel we just took, walking through the foyer and into the room, will have to be retraced tomorrow, donning respectability on the way out. Passing through the foyer, what happens to our hands and arms – brushing one another? Firmly clasped? A hint or suggestion of previous intimacy, or the beginning of divergence and estrangement, towards the door in sight, across the way? The path we traced, from foyer to reception to room, from public to private spaces, is also the path of this paper. I want to tell spatial stories about touching. Or, I want to tell touching stories about space. What aesthetic and affective narratives can be told in hotel spaces, of feeling bodies, bodies feeling? Touching, feeling, caressing, those spatially demarcated intimacies, whose narrative unfolds as disjunctions between "appropriate" (in Western

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## **CARESSES, EXCESSES, INTIMACIES AND ESTRANGEMENTS<sup>1</sup>**

culture, private) and "inappropriate" (public) spaces. Such affective spatial disjunctions occur within any uncanny, homely–unhomely space. But the hotel, with its architectural arrangements of foyers, public waiting places, private rooms, surely produces and multiplies more effects, and events, of estrangement. More stories, more uncanny negotiations of feeling.

So, how to proceed? The (auto)biography of a travelling couple, following from the street through the hotel spaces to the intimate encounters in their temporary holding space of the private room? Detailing each erotic caress, but revealing their relationship as estrangement and momentary encounter? A background narrative of the lovers in their progress and encounter through the hotel is conceptually accompanied by

a development of the theme of palpability, arising from theorising the sensible, which occurs in dialogue between Irigaray and Levinas. More than the immediacy of erotic touching, we open up ideas of touching, proximity and contact through a development of palpability in Irigaray. Firstly, following Bataille and Irigaray, there is a notion of excess that runs through these narratives. Hotels are excessive places by definition, unhomely homes that provide more than mere shelter or lodging. From the static, physical architecture of the hotel there is not only a heightening of the uncanny but an excess. Excess of feeling, of intimacies, of consumption, of display, of bodily limits. Secondly, the sensible in Irigaray and Levinas is in part characterised by its open passivity, and the case of touching is about an exteriority that approaches, whereby we are touched upon. In this, we are not inactive but open, receptive. Receptivity is significant in thinking the sensible, and this is certainly the case with palpability. Thirdly, Levinas' notion of the "caress" in *Totality and Infinity* (1979) and *Otherwise than Being* (1981) is an ethical encounter, an encounter with alterity, which needs no physical actuality of touch or stroke. There is another intimacy, a non-tactile but intensely feeling intimacy, born of the encounter with the other. Estrangements and encounters are heightened within hotel settings, and these will partly be framed through Levinas' notion of the caress, of non-tactile approach and proximity. So we come by turns into the psychical architecture of the hotel, the affective spatial layout, although holding back from a fully "architectural unconscious" (e.g., Casabare and Seator). Some insights from Grosz will be used to help articulate this, not within a purely psychoanalytic framework but within a phenomenological psychology, undeniably unfashionable though it is.

The structure of this paper follows a conceptual narrative, a narrative echoed by us hotel visitors. We strangers who defy estrangement or feelings of the uncanny in order momentarily to find mutuality, common ground, who touch with deep affectivity. The foyer is the semi-public space we've just walked into. So it is fitting that the first part of the paper, "Foyer: feeling, looking, between-us" establishes the role of touch in

intersubjectivity. Starting with Irigaray's notion of the *entre-nous*, the "between-us," I use touch as an example of deeply intersubjective communication, an attempt to overcome estrangement. The ambiguity of touching, the physical action of touching and the affective reaction of feeling, is central to this. Then we walk to the reception desk. The second section, "Reception: receptivity, orderings of the sensible," consolidates this experience of intersubjective touching within the confines of the demarcated spatial divisions of the hotel, which leads to insights concerning the physical and psychical architecture of the archetypal hotel. The reception desk is where we negotiate our movement from public space to the private space of the room. We return to examine the notion of "estrangement," questioning how and why it is altered by spatial layout and sequencing. In this section I subject the usual discussion of Freud's *unheimlich* or "uncanny" to some affective spatial observations, and suggest Caillois' idea of "psychasthenia" (1987) as a useful supplement to think about touching and feeling in the unhomely home of the hotel. Having negotiated for our own private room, receiving the key, we then wend our way towards it. This leads neatly into the third section, "Room: the caress," of Levinas' notion of the caress and Irigaray's reading of this, from which I grasp towards an ethical-affective relation of between-ness, as much through non-touching as through physical touching. Walking from outside to inside, proceeding from foyer to room, eventually we reach a space of intimacy, of proximity yet estrangement. In our room I am not "assimilating an irreducible other," in the words of Vasseleu (104), but allowing eroticised otherness, soliciting the alien, encountering estrangement. Performing the caress. Accompanying us in our spatial progress through the hotel, therefore, is the establishment and development of ideas of palpability.

### foyer: feeling, looking, between-us

It's cold outside. The hotel sign comes into view. It's cold and noisy and there's a glistening beady drop forming at the end of your nose. We glance

at each other briefly, then walk in, slowly letting the cold breath leave our bodies.

We can trace a genealogy of phenomenological writing about touch, from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Luce Irigaray, fashion one particular path through these in terms of tactility, spatiality and intersubjective relations. Each of these acknowledges to varying degrees the importance of the tactile within the visible in the constitution of habitual perception, in thinking about constructions of subjectivity, and in thinking through themes of intersubjectivity: a between-ness, a between us (*entre nous*). Until now I have stayed away from any intersection with psychoanalysis. But it seems that the conception of touch and palpability in Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas lies at this fascinating intersection between phenomenological experience and psychoanalytic thought about intersubjectivity and communication, moving away from tactility as simply cutaneous contact or another facet of non-verbal communication. "Sensibility must be interpreted as touch first of all," states Levinas (*Collected* 118); touching can articulate relations of proximity and distance, of familiarity and estrangement, in the pre-reflective "here I am," within an ethical-erotic language. When Levinas says that sensibility is not thought (*Entre Nous* 14), it is not to further the artificiality of that pervasive rift between thought and feeling but to show these pre-reflective orientations in situations of proximity and encounter.

Touch's ambiguity lies in its being active and expressive, while simultaneously being receptive and responsive. This ambiguity can be explained in equally ambiguous ways. The ability to affect, coupled with the ability to be affected, is one way that notions of intersubjectivity and between-ness could be explored in the interface between phenomenological experience and psychoanalytic theory, such as my work on touch therapies. But here I pursue this theme through an exploration of the dyad of *between-ness* and *between us*. That is, the problematic philosophical conceptualisations of something *other* within embodied personal experience constitutes a set of problems of "between-ness," which seeks to escape the perennial problem of solipsism. Irigaray berates Levinas, and by implication the majority of West-

ern philosophy, for being "autistic, egological, solitary" (*Irigaray Reader*), as we shall see. The other aspect of the dyad is homophonic yet conceptually opposed; what is in Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray and Levinas the *entre-nous*, the "between-us." As we shall see, in the later Merleau-Ponty, in Irigaray's reading of him, and also as developed by Levinas, this becomes a quite different concept, one that goes beyond the usual philosophical problematic of self and other (worked through in, for example, Glendinning and Vasseleu), and instead posits and explores a rich set of themes and interpersonal relations, feelings of proximity, openness and engagement that emerge explicitly through the modality of touch as opposed to the usual philosophical framework of vision. Now, the form of touching that allows both the erotic immediacy of between-ness, and also the non-contact inclusion of the other in the between-us, is a deeper form of touch: the word "palpability" recurs in Irigaray, and seems apt for expressing this ambiguity.

Central to the analysis of "between-ness" and "between-us" is the perennial philosophical dialectic between solipsism and intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty's touch, as we shall see, is accused of being singular and generic, of imposing the subject's intentions onto the world. Levinas writes about the caress as a way of (not quite) touching or reaching the "other," being both a communicative and an ethical act. And from this, Irigaray goes on to give her own notions of palpability and intersubjectivity, away from Merleau-Ponty's formula one + other, to think two-ness, to think "between-us," to think differentiation with inclusivity. If, for Merleau-Ponty, touch is something performed by an individual, reaching out and grasping a world that *he* helps to consciously constitute (through intentionality), then Irigaray argues for the primacy of palpability, in intrauterine stages and in development, a combination of activity and passivity, *she* being open to the world. Of course, Irigaray does this through the metaphor of the lips (after Merleau-Ponty's hands). In this section I wish to develop this active-passive transactional exchange between self and other in tactility, in order then to consider the importance of recep-

tivity as a conscious orientation to touching, and being touched by, the other.

A few words concerning vision's relation to touch are necessary at this stage before we can consider the wider, metaphorical sense of touching as palpability that will be of use in this hotel (psycho-)analysis. We are familiar with critiques of visuality. Within the trope of the physiological interdependence of touch and vision there are ways to rethink intersubjectivity. If, ostensibly, vision affirms and reproduces boundaries, exaggerating the atomistic and the individual, then it is arguably *touch* and *tactility* that can explore relations *between* subjects, between bodies. One of Irigaray's projects has been to replace the fascination with the visual, the habit of what Spivak calls the "clarity fetishists" (in Braidotti 71), with that of the tactile. Within the singular act of touching/seeing, the act of seeing becomes counterposed to that of touching, making borders and bodily limits softer, suppler. The primacy of sight is perpetuated in psychoanalysis, especially Lacan's mirror stage. Therefore, stress on separation and autonomy is conceptualised within a visualistic model, being part of the masculine gaze (e.g., Braidotti 72), and this is assumed in psychoanalysis too (e.g., Benjamin 78). The tactile can be accentuated within the visual as an exploratory mode, a way of thinking intersubjectivity, of thinking intersubjectively. Or the tactile can be posited as a counter-model to the visual, to stress tactile explorations of intersubjectivity, as opposed to the separateness and supposed autonomy that vision assumes. There are plenty of subtle reworkings of theories of vision that can accommodate such limitations (see, for example, Jay 1994). But rather than argue from within the trope of the visual, I want to conceptually open up tactility in order to develop the idea of palpability.

One way to embark on this exploration of touch is to grasp a strand from Merleau-Ponty's thought on touch and intersubjectivity, and then provide both Levinas' and then Irigaray's critique of this. Such a reading will facilitate our understanding of Irigaray's ideas on touch, and develop the idea of palpability. Merleau-Ponty's writing about tactility and embodied perception has been accused by feminists such as Iris Marion Young,

Judith Butler and others of being solipsistic and ill-attuned to bodily difference and cultural experience, underlining the facticity or givenness of embodied experience as something universally shared. Despite writing most beautifully about flesh and our embodied encounters with the world, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological subject remains singularly white, able, adult and male. His version of tactility only goes to reaffirm an individualistic subjectivity, and is a tactility that remains caught up in a visual model. His ethnicity and his privileging of the visual notwithstanding, Merleau-Ponty remains one of the pre-eminent philosophers of the synthesis between body and consciousness, actively attempting to resolve the unity of subject and object through a phenomenology of embodied consciousness, including the hands as well as the eyes. In writing about perception he admits the importance of the tactile within visual experience, for example. Multi-sensory, synaesthetic and non-visual experiences of space are explored throughout *Phenomenology of Perception* (1992), and the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* (2000) has an extensive discussion of tactility and flesh as a way of being mutually imbricated in the world. The trope of touch within vision is illustrated in a passage from the latter, where his fetishisation of what he calls the "visible" is manifest:

The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. (130–31)

This passage, picked up by Irigaray in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (152), departs from the careful investigation of the non-visual that he discusses elsewhere, imposing the standards of the visual on all sensory experience, including that of intimacy. Despite his earlier work arguing that the "natural attitude" implies not having separate sensory data but a flow of experiences (*Phenomenology of Perception* 281), and that "synaesthetic perception is the rule" (229), even in this early work he too readily falls back into visualistic metaphors, looking at painting, visual art, and visual examples of the gestalt

in order to seek clarification, as he does in his famous essay “Eye and Mind.” In addition, as we shall explore in more detail below, his analysis often returns to a sense of the primordial, and is too often solipsistic (see Irigaray’s *Ethics* 183ff.). Yet his particular phenomenology of perception on occasion engages explicitly with the tactile. For how can we truly talk about embodied perception if we fail to acknowledge the way that touch helps to make our world, establishes a reciprocal relation between an external world and our embodied consciousness? A mutuality between the toucher and the touched? The paradigmatic case of the tactile within the visible is in *The Visible and the Invisible*, where Merleau-Ponty gives the emblematic example of one hand touching another hand:

This can only happen if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this criss-crossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied upon one another, as the two halves of an orange. (133)

Immediately we are offered two problems with this, which help us think about the dialectics of solipsism and intersubjectivity. Firstly, for Merleau-Ponty, the *look* being a variant of, or interchangeable with, the *touch* is problematic in the history of philosophy. It is the translation of a tactile world into a visual world, the will to impose a visual understanding as the primary mode of engaging and encountering the world. Diderot and Descartes, for example, asked blind subjects about experiences of blindness, then famously conceptualised the role of touch for the blind as “seeing with the hands” (see, for example, Morgan, Eilan). As a result, historically touch is not differentiated sufficiently from vision, being conceived as merely an adjunct to vision, and Merleau-Ponty follows suit. In fact, it is vision that completes what he calls the “aesthesiological body” (*Visible* 154), a term taken from Husserl to denote sensorily open

corporeal experience. Irigaray argues that if such gaps in experience of the aesthesiological body exist, it is more likely that touch fills them; the haptic modality making continuous the skin, the body, the inside and the outside.

Both the “aesthesiological body” and the “natural attitude,” ideas within Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that have a direct lineage from Husserl and the experimental psychology of Straus and Michat, assume a generalised, normative body. Irigaray’s criticism of Merleau-Ponty’s example in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is that each of the hands is replaceable, the one hand (any hand) can touch any other. There is no differentiation, and this is similar to other feminist critiques of Merleau-Ponty, including Olkowski and Sullivan. The body and its parts are highly abstracted, generic body parts, belonging to everyone or no one, summoned at will by the philosopher; a piece of ad hoc conjuring of a generalised, normative body. Shannon Sullivan heavily criticises the assumption of something pre-personal that we all share as embodied beings. She also criticises Merleau-Ponty’s projective, intentional phenomenology for imposing such values, meanings and concepts onto the world (86). If there is pre-personal content, then is it that we “grasp” another person’s motor intentionality purely and simply *because* I, too, have a body, she asks (70)? She wishes to talk less of a projective phenomenology and more of a “transactional” phenomenology, and this would be more in keeping with Irigaray’s dialectics of the fluid, of intercorporeal exchange, and of receptivity. In shifting from “touching” to “palpability,” I contend, we may salvage some of the power of Merleau-Ponty’s attempts to reunite the object world and the subject world within the phenomenological experience of touch, while taking into account feminist criticisms of his homogenous or isotropic body, and opening out the notion of touch properly into intersubjectivity.

Irigaray is a voracious critic of our visual fixations, and has engaged with Merleau-Ponty on these issues. Her writing has gone to posit a way of thinking about the sensible world that departs from visuocentricity; it is as tactile as it is visual. In *To Be Two* she has talked about “an

alchemy of the sensible" (94). This is part of her larger concern with a philosophy of twoness, rather than an individual subject who encounters and becomes imbricated in the world. For however deeply Merleau-Ponty's notion of "flesh" strives to account for the subject's participations and imbrications in the world, the additive calculus of one + other, self + world remains incomplete. In *i love to you*, Irigaray specifically addresses this incompleteness and irreducibility: "I recognize you goes hand in hand with: you are irreducible to me, just as I am to you. We may not be substituted for one another" (103). Irigaray's alchemy of the sensible may provide us with an articulation of the tactile that is not subordinate to the primacy of the visual as an enframing strategy, thereby assisting in widening the notion of "tactility." In other words, it is not enough to close the eyes in order to explore touch, for our touching remains within the visuo-spatial register of before. To really explore palpability, we need to *feel* touch.

To disentangle the close binding of touch and vision in the tradition culminating in Merleau-Ponty is a shift from vision as sight to vision as glance. Not wishing to parallel Levinas' notion of the face too closely, the instance of a glance in Irigaray shows both the active and receptive nature of looking, of the tangible alongside the visible. It also admits of twoness, reaches beyond Merleau-Ponty to allow the flash of recognition or flirtatiousness as an intersubjective action and openness to response. A brief but literally insightful instance of this occurs in *To Be Two*, where an encounter in the street between her and her lover, of the mutual and sudden gaze when walking, allows a presencing or being there; not merely of the tactile within the visual, but a really felt palpable presence. The beginning of this section is where our nameless, shameless fictional characters walked into the hotel. Within even a brief description, their intent is expressed. We can imagine a moment between them such as that of Irigaray and her lover, an encounter in the street outside the hotel: "the dialogue between our eyes, the first tactile encounter," she writes (*To Be Two* 95). Such an encounter not only celebrates the ambiguity of toucher and touched, seer and seen,

upon which Merleau-Ponty himself remarks (*Visible* 132), but rejoices in the ambiguity of *feeling*, the touching that affects and is affected. This shows a more tactile orientation, escaping the distanced and power-inflected nature of the gaze to think of the less invasive yet equally powerful *feeling* of touching; a between-us that arises at the moment of encountering. A touching glance. As should be clear by now, Irigaray's notion of the tactile is a stronger one than cutaneous contact, encompassing the ambiguity of feeling, of affectivity as well as erotic caress.

### reception: receptivity, orderings of the sensible

Experiencing you, experiencing me, espousing you, espousing me, we are more than one. And two. (Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* 58)

If philosophy, cultural theory and psychoanalysis have been criticised for their obsession with the phallic order and visibility, are there other orderings of the sensible that we can posit, other hierarchies of the senses through which we experience the world? Jessica Benjamin actually posits "intersubjectivity" as a mode that is other to the visual (92). If the feminine is often characterised as passive, and the tactile is often ignored in favour of the visual, then she argues that *receptivity* is a form that allows connections and agency, and can be an *active* form of experience. One has to be open to the world in order to take it in, and this is certainly the case with tactility. The difficulty, writes Benjamin, is that ways of talking about or representing this are limited by the usually phallic modes of discourse that we habitually use to describe our intra-psychic life (93). She uses her formulation of intersubjectivity in order to find a freedom to be both with, and yet distinct from, the other. And its intersubjectivity lies obviously in its openness and receptivity to the subject meeting another subject. This receptivity as openness to the other entails a simultaneously active-passive mode of communication. Receptivity is not synonymous with passivity. Being touched assumes an open orientation to the experience of touching, actively converting raw sensation into synthetic

affects of fear, calm, tenderness. Writing about intersubjectivity and communication, John Dewey offers a definition of communication and then remarks: “commonality is an active achievement” (in Sullivan 74). The forging of an openness to commonality, such as the receptivity to the other that touch allows, is just such an active achievement. The “tactile” or palpable in Irigaray’s sense is therefore communicative, extra-linguistic, intersubjective openness to the “other.” And it is such an active, communicative openness that I wish to posit as a way of illustrating the difference alluded to above, of betweenness and between-us. This needs clarification.

When Jessica Benjamin writes that “in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self,” she is, however, continuing a line of thinking from Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* – a line that is subsequently taken up by Levinas in thinking about the “caress,” as we shall see, and later by Irigaray when engaging with these writers in order to feminise and subtilise the idea. Part of the power of this explanation comes from the cultural histories of the senses, the lines upon which these orderings of the sensible have been achieved. Constance Classen, for example, has written about how the sense of smell has been used as a way of thinking beyond and between bodies, i.e., intersubjectively. She notes the culturally specific way in which smell orders relations between bodies in some cultures, for smell goes beyond the strictly delimited boundaries of the body, and marks a sensed relation to an “other” and its between. Might not the same be said of touch? The body’s morphological imaginary, a body-image repeated over time, maintains the illusion of a stable identity, and Damasio interestingly sees precisely this as one sedimented function of “core consciousness” (142). Gail Weiss wished to explore the transformative effects of this bodily morphology. So under the gendered, stable, (phallically) ordered positions of the visual, can the non-visual senses be explored for their destabilising and transformative effects in thinking about intersubjectivity? Are there other orderings of the sensible, orderings that allow us to “make sense” of our subjectivities and those of others, the between-

us, in a non-visual way? What can be said of the transformative aspects of *touch* and palpability, in particular? How does touch subvert the gendered power relations inherent in the gaze, for example? These questions can be answered in part by considering the theme of “palpability” in Irigaray, that recurring notion which lays the ground for a non-cutaneous touching that is simultaneously a thinking of proximity, limits and otherness.

In order to do this, let’s momentarily return to Merleau-Ponty’s example of the hands. With one grasping the other, Irigaray asks: in what mode are they touching? Active, passive, middle-passive (in between)? This leads her to consider a form of touching that is far more intimate and continually felt – the touching of the *lips*. The origin of a specifically feminine palpability that leads into a receptive passage, a place of reception and generation. The reception as receptacle; the room as womb; a receptivity in terms of a sensible opening out onto the world, the passage from interiority to exteriority. A private place, a most intimate matrix, taken away from the maelstrom of the public gaze. Unlike Merleau-Ponty’s hands, Irigaray’s metaphor of a deeper tactility or palpability is then:

A touching more intimate than that of one hand taking hold of the other. A phenomenology of the passage between interior and exterior. A phenomenon that remains in the interior, does not see the light of day [i.e., away from vision], speaks of itself only in gestures, remains always on the edge of speech, gathering the edges without sealing them. (*Ethics* 161)

In this way Irigaray is able to move away from phallic visibility to explore the continuity and constant fluid exchanges between inside and outside. Asserting the twoness and between-ness of the lips frees up sensible, tactile experience from the solipsistic, phallocentric oneness of before. Going from the imaginary of male hands to female lips now entails something for which Merleau-Ponty was ill-prepared, and physiologically ill-equipped, to confront. The reception, the matrix-place of receptivity, the womb receptacle that organises and orders the passages of

incomings and outgoings, where “the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified nuances” in Bachelard’s words (216). It now explicitly becomes a psychoanalytically informed spatial metaphor. Bachelard, in his non-psychoanalytic phenomenology, must still acknowledge the morphological imaginary, that projection of maternal matrix space into our everyday spaces of habitation:

We will examine images of rest, of refuge, of rootedness ... The house, the stomach, the cave, for example, carry the same overall theme of the return to the mother. In this realm the unconscious commands, the unconscious directs. Oneiric values are more and more stable, more and more regular. They are entirely concerned with nocturnal forces and subterranean powers. (In Vidler 64)

And in so doing, Bachelard whisks us back to the hotel, where passages and corridors lined with blood-red carpets allow flows of people through its mat(t)er-body: the hotel as resting place, the foyer as vaginal cavity with its fluid incomings and outgoings; reception desk as receptive cervix, simultaneously opened out and closed off. Bachelard gives us the house, the stomach, the cave as resting places. Irigaray gives us the cavern, the inside, a mysterious “wellspring of sameness” (*Elemental* 14). I give you also the hotel, the uterus. But this is just playing the Freudian mapping game for fun, now; entering too much into the spirit of telling those “fundamental, but elementary, fables” that psychoanalysis specialises in, as Levinas puts it (*Entre Nous* 31). The hotel trope is fabulation, but useful fabulation nonetheless. As waiting place, as resting space, next we consider the hotel room as intimate, even vaginal, space. “Waiting for that wall which divides us to be made porous by your arrival” says Irigaray (*Elemental* 102), indicating the intimate passageways and waiting places of the recesses of the receptive body; having proceeded from public space to more intimate space via the lips, proceeding from rigidity to porosity, a passage from the phallic stability of being to a more fluid becoming. A thoroughness of passage, she suggests, “the

through which allows each one their living becoming” (27).

While we consider the more intimate space of the room/womb, Irigaray’s trope of the lips also allows her to speak of an especially female, viscerally felt phenomenon that the touching of the lips entails: the limit, the boundary. And what porosity and overspill imply: excess, that which lies outside the limit. Female palpability is continual, unlike Merleau-Ponty’s brushing of the hands, since the lips constantly draw the outline, act as boundary. The lips are “edges which touch each other,” are “reserve, excess, source of movement” (29). Contrast this with her view of masculine limitation, where it is the province of the male to draw limits, fix boundaries, impose walls. In keeping with our hotel spatial framing, while female palpability is directionless, everywhere, the wall-limits are imposed from (a male) without, imposed because “he is afraid of his body’s limitlessness” (53).

By considering the lips as a model of female palpability in this way, we escape the confinements of a sensibility as sensation, wherein the tactile is posited within the visual. Instead, this palpability hints at a sensibility based on visceral proximity, on openness, on fluid becoming, on an orientation towards twoness and a more than two. And an excess. Something of this relation between the excess and the caress is shown when Irigaray states: “In excess, that is where I become you,” through the interpenetration of the skin, even wearing it away at the edges, an openness to interchange, an openness to openness even. “The internal and external horizon of my skin interpenetrating with yours wears away their edges, their limits, their solidity. Creating another space – outside any framework. An opening of openness” (59).

Irigaray’s formulation of the caress is chronologically posterior to Levinas’, yet brings limits, excess, and the intersubjectivity of the more than two into the equation. In the caress, the solid envelope of skin, wall becomes fluid; but it is a “caressing without unity” (59). In “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas,” however, Irigaray’s criticism is direct. In a sentiment that could be addressed to any number of his philosophical predecessors, she protests: “He knows



nothing of communion in pleasure,” and despite physical proximity, distance is always maintained with the other:

This autistic, egological, solitary love does not correspond to the shared outpouring, to the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath, abandoning the relatively dry and precise outlines of each body’s solid exterior to enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons ... becomes indistinct. (180)

Time now to make the diachronic movement, reaching forward into touching while simultaneously stepping back to allow an erotics of non-touching. Time now for what we have been waiting for with blushing anticipation: the caress.

### room: the caress

Away from the busy in-out traffic of the foyer, we walk to our temporary resting place, the room of relief/release. Keys in hand, hurriedly we stride towards our room, the destination, our sensual sanctuary. Heartbeats almost audible now, what’s left of the world disappears around us.

What is caressed is not touched, properly speaking. (Levinas, *Time and the Other* 89)

We know what happens at this moment. In the heated, heightened encounter of voluptuousness, evening gives way to night, the public transmutes into the private, and vision gives way to touch. Voluptuousness is an abandonment of sociality, this passage from the public to the private simultaneously being a translation from the clarity of light to the ardour of night. With characteristic erotic charge, D.H. Lawrence describes such a moment in *Women in Love*:

Quenched, inhuman, his fingers upon her unrevealed nudity were the fingers of silence upon silence, the body of mysterious night upon the body of mysterious night, the night masculine and feminine, never to be seen with

the eye, or known with the mind, only known as a palpable revelation of living otherness.

She had her desire of him, she touched, she received the maximum of *unspeakable communication in touch*, dark, subtle, positively silent, a magnificent gift and give again, a perfect acceptance and yielding, a mystery, the reality of that which can never be known, vital, sensual reality that can never be transmuted into mind content, but remains outside, living body of darkness and silence and subtlety, the mystic body of reality. [...] For she was to him what he was to her, the immemorial magnificence of mystic, palpable, real otherness. (320; emphasis added)

Palpable otherness, unspeakable communication, and the fulfilment of desire find strong expression here. Perhaps it is surprising to find such themes in a male writer. Nevertheless, it is in this space of palpable otherness, the space of the caress, that we find the culmination of our theoretical excursus and our hotel story.

So, what of the caress? It is anything but prehension, grasping, groping. To remind ourselves, it is not a simple-minded reassertion of touch or tactility in the face of the primacy of vision. Instead, the caress “is a losing sight of touch as sensation rather than a perpetuation of the tactile” (Vasseleu 106). In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas states that “the caress, like contact, is sensibility ... but the caress transcends the sensible” (257). Because it transcends sensibility it can be distinguished here from the cutaneous contact of touch. Later, in “Language and Proximity,” the caress reconceptualises this contact and touch. Space does not allow a more comprehensive consideration of the development of Levinas’ caress. But we may note the influence of the caress and his “phenomenology of eros” in *Totality and Infinity* for Irigaray. Irigaray’s reading of Levinas is particularly instructive, extending the realm of palpability further into the touching and non-touching alterity of the erotic encounter, even going so far as to acknowledge the sensible and the transcendent in Levinas’ caress by speaking of the “transcendental sensible.” What Irigaray calls the “transcendental sensible” (translated as the sensible transcendental) “refers to the horizon of

sexual difference and the overcoming of the split between material and ideal, sensible and intelligible, female and male," as Margaret Whitford clarifies (in *Irigaray Reader* 19). In being both sensible and transcendental it is embodied alterity, the capacity for both literal cutaneous touching and for metaphorical affective touching and being touched. For in erotic encounter "the other appears as an object of need while also resisting incorporation and remaining entirely other," summarises Vasseleu (104). The caress admits both the immanence of lust and the transcendence of habituated bodily sensation, the excess of *jouissance*; it reaches out to allow another to remain an other. Reminding us of our move from the clarity of light to the ardour of night, Irigaray speaks of the caress within the night of sensation, neatly contextualising the caress and the excess within our hotel room:

Why should we not be illuminated by the light of our *jouissance*? Which casts a different light on things, on their contours, their spacing and their timing. It brings them back into the world, and reshapes them according to a perception foreign to the rigour of the day, which makes colder distinctions. For sight is no longer our only guide. Seeing within an expanse which is dazzling and palpable, odorous and audible. A night of sensation where everything lives together, permitting co-existence without violence. (*Elemental* 38)

Eros, proximity, palpability. The night of sensation, away from the harsh demarcations of light, where touching is our guide. Elizabeth Grosz makes the link between palpability and space in Irigaray, arguing that in *jouissance* maternal-feminine space is defined in opposition to male-geometrical space. The feminine is a spatial envelope that marks out and delimits the space of men (Grosz 159; Irigaray, *Ethics* 11). To simplify this dialectical relation, as Grosz does, without male geometrical space the feminine would be like water without a container, that is, pure flow (162). Or excess. In erotic encounter, for Levinas desire is not based on *lack*, as in Freud or Hegel, but is itself *excessive* (Davies 265). Yet within this overflowing desire, the reaching out towards the irreducible other, this is a form of palpability that does not seek merely

to possess or grasp. This caress, in the words of Davies, seeks instead "to delight in the resistant alterity of the erotic Other" (268). Yet, faced with either Levinas or Irigaray in the intimate space of the hotel room, it would be Irigaray's caress that accommodated the immanent vascularity of touch, that palpability of the felt body, its mucous excess, as well as the irreducibility of the loved one; twoness. An example: in our room, together. In the mirror, facing each other, the outlines of our sensory bodies map onto each other. But not through vision alone. For us to map onto each other's sensory bodies, touch is involved. "Sense mirrors where the outline of the other is produced through touch," states Irigaray (*Elemental* 77), and shows how our carnal awareness of self and other is informed by touch. So far, so phenomenological. But what of the loss of limits of self and other that occurs in touching, the interpenetration of skin, flesh, mucus, where "I become you" (79)? The moment when the caress and the excess (literally) come together in their intimate immediacy?

In the erotic encounter, then, is a form of non-prehensile palpability. Irigaray's caress is private but decidedly not privative, as night's ardour entails the movement from public to private, from social to secret spaces. As Tina Chanter remarks: "Eros depends on the secrecy of lovers, which is violated by the intrusion – perhaps even by the thought – of others" (193). We now have a number of questions that emerge from our engagement with Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Irigaray. We can pursue these answers by developing further these ideas from Irigaray, via Levinas' notion of the caress, about the sensible and the palpable. Remembering this is not simply the immediacy of tactile sensation. What place does palpability, this deeper and non-cutaneous touching and tactility, have in thinking intersubjectivity? How exactly does touching allow an *entre-nous*, the between-us, the mutual non-visual feeling and presencing of the other to occur? How might this unfold within the imaginary narrative spaces of the hotel?

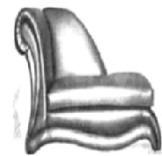
As regards this narrative schema from public foyer to private room, one way to answer such questions moves us towards a discussion of eros,

an important consideration for both Levinas and Irigaray. Having looked at the hands and the lips, the mapping and mirroring of sensation, Irigaray clearly shows in the erotic encounter that the palpable is within the realm of the transcendental sensible. But it is not transcendental per se. Levinas' subject, engaging with otherness, is nevertheless criticised by Irigaray for having the stance of a mastery of the world. In typical phenomenological fashion, those things of exteriority are synthesised, incorporated, assimilated into the I. Whereas to think of the erotic as Irigaray does through Levinas, is to leave the other intact, as other. "In the erotic relation ... the other has the capacity to remain other in the face of the same," explains Chanter (221). By so doing we reflect on the transcendental sensible, that is, a phenomenology of the tactile not limited to corporeality, and argue towards a stronger notion of the "tactile" and "tactility" as palpability, providing a framework for thinking "things" and "intersubjectivity," between-ness and a between-us (*entre nous*). The palpable is a strong tactility that takes account of the tangible in our perception, without prioritising the visual. By re-theorising the tactile in the visible, by taking account of the role of the non-visual senses in these formations of gendered self and non-self, and the points in between, what results is, in the words of Irigaray, an "alchemy of the sensible" (*To Be Two* 94) or, as we have seen, the "transcendental sensible." Palpability as the strong notion of tactility fits into Irigaray's ideas of the sensible; not the passive sensation of the skin or flesh, nor the active process of perception, but a whole active-receptive affective relation between self and world, self and other, the between-us (*entre nous*).

So far we have been arguing away from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the flesh. The profundity and porosity of this form of palpability, a truly sensible transcendental, is echoed by the philosopher David Appelbaum: "Touch lies situated beyond breath, blood and the vibration of the nervous system. Touch brings each function into contact with the presence lying beyond but passing through the vessel of the body" (187). The body/non-body distinction becomes

blurred, exemplifying the seepage and saturation of space and objects. As against the impossible hardness of stone, of the mass and materiality of objects, we *feel* our bodies not as having distinct boundaries but "as being interlaced with things ... Our bodies extend into things and they extend into us," as Martin concisely affirms (49). Just as the percept (what is perceived) and the affect (emotive power) are intertwined, we feel our world and the world of the other as being co-implicated, the one osmotically penetrating the other; a continuous dynamic state of affective, sensible-spatial seepage.

Of course, this affective spatial story about palpability is non-directive, offers little or nothing in terms of a practical psychotherapy or actual psychoanalytic practice. More concrete examples show this being done in infants, for example with Tiffany Field's work, and also in terms of touch as emotional communicative medium in adult psychotherapy (e.g., Fagan and Silverthorn's survey). The purpose of this paper remains unchanged, however. To show, via Levinas and Irigaray, the role of palpability in our ethical-affective, intersubjective spatial relations is to allow touch to open up. By so doing, the role of touch and palpability may disclose some of the underlying ethical-affective feelings behind facing up to others, our orientations towards each other. To think beyond touch as mere cutaneous contact or proximal intimacy, from the tactile as adjunct to the visual, from the caress as erotic contact, we have had to examine and expand on these in turn, to reveal limitations and contradictions. In effect, to arrive at an enlarged, ethical-affective notion of deep touch or "palpability."



#### note

1 Where is this title from? These affective terms are literally *intimately* bound up with the author's personal experience. An extremely personal and difficult paper to write, although with some cathartic value. For it was hotel intimacies when abroad that untied a relationship at home. Therefore, hotel intimacy and estrangement runs throughout the writing and thinking of this paper as a constant emotional presence.

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