Formation of a New Paradigm of Social Interaction: On Touching and on not Touching

Формирование новой парадигмы социального взаимодействия: духовные и телесные контакты

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Review

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly accelerated the use of online technologies for communication, as opposed to contact involving physical presence and touch. This commentary further considers the consequences of this change in individual human terms, in everyday as well as medical situations. It is a kind of discussion paper, specially written for this journal. It develops two directions of argument, the first about the reality of embodiment, the second about figures of speech involving touch and movement, figures of speech about the actions of whole people rather than about mind (spirit) or body separately. The discussion reviews the nature of differences between communication involving physical proximity and physical distance (and electronic media), with comments on the positive and negative aspects of each. An emphasis on the significance of touch (and movement, since all touch involves movement) to people is linked to the basic aspects of the lifecycle in birth, reproduction, and death. In conclusion, the discussion emphasizes the traditional importance of touch and physical participation to people's feeling for reality. New digital forms of relations disturb this feel, with significant consequences.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Пандемия COVID-19 в значительной мере способствовала стремительному внедрению онлайн-технологий для их использования с целью общения, заменив контакты, предполагающие физическое присутствие и прикосновение. В данной статье, носящей дискуссионный характер, подробно рассматриваются последствия этого изменения для отдельного человека, как в повседневных бытовых и социальных, так и в медицинских ситуациях. В ходе обсуждения развиваются два направления аргументации: первое — о реальности телесного взаимодействия (прикасаний), второе — о фигурах речи, связанных с коммуникативными взаимодействиями и движением, а также о действиях людей в целом, а не движения разума (духа) или тела по отдельности. Подробно рассматривается природа различий между общением, которое включает физическую близость, и которое осуществляется на расстоянии (дистанционно, с использованием электронных средств передачи информации), с комментариями о положительных и отрицательных аспектах каждого из способов коммуникации. Особое внимание уделяется значению для человека факта прикосновения (и движения, поскольку любое прикосновение предполагает движение), которое связано с основными аспектами жизненного цикла рождения, воспроизведения потомства и смерти. В заключении дискуссии подчеркивается традиционная важность прикосновений и физического участия для создания у людей ощущения реальности. Новые цифровые форматы отношений нарушают это ощущение, что влечет за собой значительные последствия — нарушение ощущения реальности, непринятие социально обусловленных границ взаимодействия и др.

Keywords: *touch sense; kinesthesia; feel for reality; COVID-19; digital technology; lifecycle*

Ключевые слова: *осязание; кинестезия; ощущение реальности; COVID-19; цифровые технологии; жизненный цикл*

THE PANDEMIC AND TOUCHING

At the end of 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, this medical journal published a commentary by a non-medical observer, "The virus COVID-19 and dilemmas of online technology" [1]. Under the conditions of the pandemic, as indeed is generally the case with health issues, it is neither possible nor desirable to sharply demarcate medical and non-medical topics and questions. The overlap of medical concerns and daily life is especially evident in connection with touch and touching. Touching, such as feeling the pulse or palpitating the chest, has a large place in different traditions of medical diagnosis, and "the healing hand" a large place in different therapies. Equally, touching is central to human relations. This commentary continues discussion of the consequences, accelerated by the COVID pandemic, of changes in the balance of freedom and restrictions on actual physical contact or physical presence between people. The purpose is to encourage discussion, not to report scientific results, and the style is therefore open-ended. New rules on contact in response to the pandemic almost overnight multiplied concerns about the impact of changes coming about through new digital media of communication. More than a year has passed since the first discussion, with signs that governments and people are now adapting to the presence of the virus, rather than hoping that it (or new forms of it) will disappear. This may make it of interest to comment further and, on the basis of more experience and reflection, deepen some of the earlier observations. The discussion will concentrate on touching and not-touching. In particular, it will consider the importance of the touch sense — and the sense of movement too, since touching involves movement — to the feel each person has for reality [2–5].

I first restate two large, related points, before taking each further.

The first point concerns *embodiment*. Any discussion of the effects of the presence or absence of touch and physical closeness has to start from the existential condition that people exist with bodies, the condition known in touch, movement, and bodily senses. Any restriction on touching and movement is, in effect, a denial or at least an attempt to marginalize this condition. (Asserting human embodiment, it is perhaps necessary to add, says nothing about what else in addition human beings might be — possessors of a soul, language users, computers, moral agents or whatever other characteristic belief directs us to accept.) It is therefore awareness of the *disembodied* nature of relations made possible by new technologies, and demanded by police powers in lockdown, that is of interest in the following discussion. Communications technology, like VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, YouTube, Zoom, and the telephone, makes "contact at a distance" possible, and it has a fantastic capacity to enable people to communicate around the world. The issue that will now be discussed, however, is whether this communication, this contact, is indeed rightly called "contact". For this author, and for many people in the society in which he lives (in which, in everyday English, "he moves"), the sense of reality is bound up with the experience of the body, its birth, life and death. This appears to be universal, but we do not really know, and anything said about experience is said in terms of the language and cultural assumptions of one group of people rather than another. The question, though, is what happens to the sense of reality of people likely to read this journal when patterns of touch change.

The second point concerns language and *figures of speech* involving touch and movement. People commonly discuss this as a matter of "metaphor", though this may not be quite the right word and not strictly accurate. At issue is ordinary language: "She moved him to tears"; "I'm touched by your concern"; "the nurse has a healing touch"; "hands off her!"; "that was a stupid move"; "an approach to an agreement"; "she has no grasp of reality"; "he has hands-on experience"; "a new political movement"; and so on. These figures of speech are ubiquitous and almost without number, in Russian as well as in English. Create your own list. It is of huge significance that these figures of speech apply equally to mind and body, that is, they apply to embodied *persons.* (For example, the injunction, "Stand on your own two feet!" is given to a person not to a mind or to a body.) The figures of speech refer to *actions of people*, rather than to mental or bodily phenomena. It is therefore not at all clear that these expressions are simply metaphors based on bodily senses, as many people writing in the light of biological ways of thought argue [6]. These figures of speech express everyday rather than specifically medical or scientific knowledge about the importance of touch and movement, though they certainly also have many medical uses and implications.

At the beginning of the pandemic, to the naive question why being physically present with other people, face to face, in contrast to being "in touch" online, mattered or made a difference to anyone, I received the simple answer: "*We are embodied!*" This is profoundly correct. In a way, nothing more needs to be said.

The digital human image, let alone the telephone voice or message, is a partial representation and not the whole person. Digital images, for instance, certainly have no smell. There is usually not even a picture of the whole body. Most importantly, there is no third dimension, no representation of the way in which in actual presence we appreciate space, thickness, depth, weight, and solidity (and note how each of these words has significant metaphorical resonance), and hence there is a lessening of appreciation of physical presence or physicality. Everyday figures of speech have a lot to say about this: something is judged negatively to be two-dimensional, while something is judged positively as having three dimensions. The digital image is usually a very different size from an actual person, usually much smaller, though in a cinema it may be larger. Further, the online image comes "framed". It is artificial in the sense that a considerable part of the geography or ecology, that is, the surrounding conditions, of a person's life is cut out, or at least the penumbra of sensations jostling at the edges of awareness in actual presence is diminished or changed.

Online sound is often not that good and requires concentrated attention. People online frequently devote much time and effort to handling the technology rather than to communicating with each other. Silences or spaces of non-communication and awkward posture abound. By contrast, when two or more people are physically together, the repertoire of movement and gesture of the whole body may participate in a continuously changing flow. (Of course, direct communication can also be embarrassingly awkward.) Offline, there may be considerable unanticipated activity. Online, many people feel, there is less gesture, less spontaneity, less dialogue. When teachers teach or lecture online, they do not see the audience. They are very uncomfortable speaking into "empty space", since good speaking has the audience in mind — it invites a response, and the speaker requires that response, and even if the response takes the form of silence this at least is visibly shared. The gesture of speech asks to meet the gesture of reception. This is badly disturbed online. Nevertheless, it is also true that people find new opportunities online and say that there are openings for surprise and novelty, with less embarrassment or modesty, not to mention access to new audiences.

Indeed, generalities break down. If for many people there is greater formality in online relations and less spontaneity or play, for others there is liberation. Yet, there is still something to be said about the general significance of touching in human life and how this is affected.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TOUCH

It is intrinsic to the nature of online media that there is no means to touch. To be sure, when people are physically present together there may also be no touching, and indeed it may be strictly controlled. Yet an imagination for touching colors all the relations a person has with things and people, online and offline, and there is something more vivid or pressing about this imagination when people come together. The three-dimensional perception of facing a whole person or object, the "physicality" of a perception, makes a difference. The absence of actual touching, online or offline, may bring on feelings of deprivation, feelings that vary from the mild sense of something missing to the painful absence that most clearly disturbs young children and older adults. These feelings of presence and absence profoundly inform the erotic dimension in relations. In spite of the ubiquitous availability of online "contact", large groups of people persist in objecting to online sexual relations and claim that it is not the "real" thing — and by "real" here, they evidently mean morally or psychologically as well as physically real (once again using ordinary language to talk about persons, not minds or bodies). As a host of human interactions, including medical ones, move online, the same issues recur: do the new media reproduce the "real" encounter?

A person sees another person move online, and the other person sees the movement of the first. But the movement feels rather "detached". What does this mean? There is the opportunity on video or TV to see the most wonderful movers, like ice-skaters, close-up, which might be very difficult to manage, and certainly very expensive, to do live. Most of us are not otherwise going to experience a cheetah racing to the kill than by watching a video. But these moving animals or people are "at a distance",

and this is an emotional distance as well as a physical one. The distance is not just a matter of physical space but of imaginative space. There seems to be a gradation in imagination, linked to physical presence or absence, for closeness in all its manifestations.

How people feel about closeness and distance clearly varies with personal habits and social customs. The variety of positive and negative responses to internet usage show this. Is it the case, then, that with time, practice and, if necessary, retraining, people will fully adapt to online life? All people, for everything or for most things? It is in the interests of many institutions that they should adapt in order to accomplish many daily activities: governments that want to move to online voting, universities that want the low-cost option of online teaching, overworked public medical centers that do not want to make time for patients to be physically present, businesses that want to employ fewer staff. Once an older generation, which finds adaptation to new technology difficult, has died out or become economically marginal, we might think that there will be a "brave new world" of digitally competent, happily adapted, and fully satisfied electronically competent people living at a distance from each other. Well, no.

This response returns to embodiment. A person is born from a womb, lives an embodied life, and dies when the body ceases to function. The very nature of the lifecycle is in its embodied character. This is the way it is, even if this is an area of very expensive, and hence geographically and socially localized, technological innovation, with a lot more promised, involving artificial wombs, artificial insemination, and the significant prolongation of life. I do not predict the future. But, speaking about the present, the reality for the overwhelming majority of people is a reality tied to the embodied lifecycle. The social practices that accompany the lifecycle directly reflect this. Life begins in a relationship, once again both psychological and physiological, between child and mother, and much of society is organized around this. New life originates when embodied people come together, elaborately orchestrated in courtship and marriage. Death all too painfully cuts across lives, accompanied by significant ritual. At each step, people wish to come together and do come together. It was one of the most obvious costs of the pandemic, and for many the costs were painful, that regulations prevented these practices. Put bluntly, people are not born, do not reproduce, and do not die online. Further, the ritual sharing of these events with physical presence is central to the social fabric. In Russia, the father goes to the hospital to receive the new child; he does not watch a video.

I am present at a funeral. Consider only the last step, the burial of the ashes. The ashes are *physically present* within a container in a blue plastic urn. Before the urn is placed in a physical hole *in the earth*, in a physical place under trees, a place walled around to preserve it from the encroaching city, the members of the close family of the deceased in turn *extend* an arm and *touch* the urn. After the ashes are *laid* to rest, the attendant *forms* a small mound of earth over it and *covers* the mud around the mound with clean white snow. The living then *lay* roses on the mound. Their *posture*, not words, says farewell. This is the everyday form of human relations.

This concern with presence and with touching is as important for mundane relations as well as for significant events. It is very striking that students, who are highly adapted to online technologies, given the chance, still choose to gather together. People like to gather physically precisely because the outcome is not predictable, and the manner of relating is not necessarily instrumental and for a fixed purpose. There is scope for playfulness, spontaneity, dialogue, flirting, rule-breaking and, it must be said, violence. All these things are in principle possible online, and indeed do exist there; yet, at least at present, it seems to be the case that they flourish offline, and that people, given the chance, go to cafes, dance together, sit around the kitchen table, push each other about, and seek physical intimacy. It is as if people wish to declare in their actions that they are embodied and alive.

An intellectually smart young computer programmer comes to visit (he has to come because sometimes paperwork is still necessary). He works all day at his job, which involves programming a kind of virtual reality so that pilots can safely learn how to handle aircraft. At the end of the day, he affirms, programmers have a strong desire to have contact with "the real world" (his phrase), to return to real as opposed to virtual presence, to have contact with things and people. Though images move, gesture, talk, perform, and give pleasure and pain, just like physically present people, it seems there is still appetite for face-to-face relations, even among the most sophisticated users of new technology. There is still concern with the feel for reality.

THE EMBODIED BEGINNING OF LIFE

This emphasis on the persisting expression of embodiment suggests it is appropriate to consider a psychoanalytic "approach" (another figure of speech involving movement) to understanding the significance of physical presence. Before birth, the child and the mother are in the most intimate possible contact, an intimacy so close it is a kind of identity. The fetus begins to make some movements of its own after about eight weeks. It is also generally agreed that the fetus develops some kind of sensory awareness, perhaps through movement, pressure, or the rhythm of the mother's heartbeat and breathing. Both movement and awareness are unarguably present at, and immediately after, birth. It was the large contribution of Melanie Klein to focus on the early days and to discern in them the formative experiences for the subsequent character of the child and adult. The essential mechanism (I very much simplify) is said to be that the initial pleasurable or painful, satisfying or frustrating, quality of the baby's contact with the mother, and subsequently with other caregivers, establishes an appreciation of what a relationship is. The early relations, made through touching and movement, create a model against which the individual tests and judges all subsequent relationships. It is a stock joke about a boy seeking a close relation with a girl that he seeks his mother. The child projects the image it has of its first relationships onto the world of other things and people. Children deprived of contact, as painful stories from orphanages and dire backgrounds of violence attest, may develop an incapacity for good-quality relationships. In therapeutic practices, the analyst tackles the difficulties people have relating to each other and to themselves, and the pain that certain kinds of relations cause, through the reconstruction of the roots of the relations in the early days of movement and resistance in embodied relationship with the mother.

If we accept some form of this persuasive argument in psychology, movement and touch emerge as the template for the formation of relations of all kinds. Donald Winnicott's theory of transitional objects, for instance, understood the attachment young children have to an object such as a blanket or a soft toy, as the projection onto something else of affective qualities earlier found in attachment to the mother. The objects effect the achievement of children's wider relations. It becomes possible to connect the theory of transition to the empirical study of touch practices, implicating kinesthesia (or the conscious sense of movement) to a person's ecology, to the feeling a person has for relations with the world in space and time. For instance, Winnicott himself associated the earliest movements of the fetus with movements later interpreted as aggression, thus associating the sense of movement with core emotional or affective experience. For Winnicott, the very activity that shows that an embryo is alive sets up the pattern of aggression fundamental to personality: "A baby kicks in the womb … A baby of a few weeks thrashes away with his arms … A baby chews the nipple with his gums; it cannot be assumed that he is meaning to destroy or to hurt. At origin aggressiveness is almost synonymous with activity" [7]. Moving, the baby produces a response, which in turn enters awareness, and the sense of this, permeated with emotion, is the core of the subjective world. Almost inevitably in Russia, one wonders how the once common practice of tight swaddling of infants fits into the account.

If, as some psychoanalysts claim, early days before and after birth lay down patterns of relations which shape all of a person's subsequent life, then the pattern of experienced movement would seem to enter every aspect of a person's character and social relations. As people move, so they are. For Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, both a philosopher and a dancer, who argued at length about the centrality of sensed movement in human life, "we humans learn 'which thing we are' by moving and listening to our own movement. [8]" It inevitably follows from this that any change in a person's scope for movement, and through movement coming into physical relations with other people, has deep consequences for them. It is clear why touching and not touching matters.

Speculatively, we might wonder about the difference new reproductive technologies will make. If babies are born from one woman's body and then cared for by another, or if babies come to birth in an artificial and extremely expensive womb ('in a test-tube', as humor has it), how will their felt movements and resistances, and hence the quality of their relations, differ? Some people will recall fearfully how Frankenstein gave birth to his monster [9]. The monster was not 'born of a woman' (Job, 14) but assembled, like a machine in a factory, from parts, parts torn from cadavers, fastened together, and then made alive by electricity. Other observers take a much more optimistic view and anticipate the coming transcendence

of the human species. But if we do not know what will be in the future, we do know that the quality of embodiment, and the consequences of that embodiment in touch and movement, will make a difference.

The technology of virtual realities has extraordinary effects. Yet, relishing or having fun with virtual reality depends on the contrast virtual reality offers with "real" reality (if you will allow this play with words). However sophisticated the machine that mediates reality, the body of the subject interacting with the machine remains present. Even were we to imagine a machine replacing all the senses at once — though what kind of presently imaginable machine would replace all the sensations of the body, and most especially the body's sense of itself? — the body, with all its posture, biochemistry, hormones, and dispositions, would still be there. Our programmer says that professionals like himself, compared to people who play with virtual realities or create artwork, are especially sensitive to the difference and want to return to reality after work. This response establishes a parallel with the fact that there is a continuing or, after the pandemic, renewed desire for *live performance* in the sports and in the arts. Why indeed, should this be, apart from the obvious financial interest theatres, companies, teams and stadiums have in getting a return on investment and in providing many people with a living? Individual performances in both sport and the arts are much more visible on the screen at home than live. Yet people pay to be present for embodied performance.

At the time of writing, the Winter Olympic Games were in progress in China. They looked like a model of controlled relations for purposes which traditionally have involved great numbers of different people physically coming together, but for which, on this occasion, numbers have been restricted. Journalists talked of people moving in "bubbles", that is, in groups hermetically sealed from other people, and of robots rather than other people serving in canteens. There was only token public participation: live viewing was restricted to performers and their trainers, government Party members, and a few elite visitors and students. Of course, there was mass viewing worldwide through the media. Different people have different opinions about the benefits and costs of what went on. The athletes, to be sure, performed brilliantly, and their agreement to do so in such circumstances suggests just how intensely they had committed themselves to competitive performance. The point I think it relevant to make here is that the arrangements "worked" because they achieved a very closely defined purpose, competitive sport, without interference from viral infection or political commentary. The arrangements were narrowly "instrumental". The arrangements formed a living model of a "closed" as opposed to an "open" society, and an engineering as opposed to an organic model of human relations. Yet, even so, the athletes *physically gathered*. They did not send in videos of their best performances for the judges to compare.

There are many circumstances where, people agree, or at least significant groups of people agree, lack of physical contact is desirable. Considerable numbers of individuals and scientists, as well as governments, agreed that the pandemic created such circumstances. Many people value the conditions that put an end to unwanted touch in relations with others. Anyone who has experienced the condescending hand on a shoulder, let alone women who have experienced the offensive hand claiming ownership of the body, knows about this. But there is still a desire for touching. Why?

TOUCHING REALITY

The concluding section draws the threads together in order address this question by saying something about reality. "Reality" is a very complex philosophical notion, about which people make many different kinds of claims. The purpose in this commentary, I want to be clear, is therefore not to naively state what reality is. The purpose is to point out that the *feel for reality* that people express in their lives, in present-day modern societies, and in the traditions of these societies, is bound up with the senses of touch and movement. Many of the figures of speech which have reference to touch and movement, and make the world familiar, implicate beliefs about reality. We refer, for example, to "palpable" evidence, or "grasping" reality, or "getting a grip on" events. In such language, we see how everyday thinking presupposes an "I" participating in a world through its action and by resistance to it. Knowledge of action-resistance in human being appears to originate with feelings of the body and its motions, and with touching and being touched. (As suggested, this origin may be very early, in the womb.) As a result, it is a commonplace part of everyday life to assert that something is real if it can be touched. (To be precise: if it can be touched, it is likely to satisfy common sense that something is real, even if this will not satisfy philosophical

argument about what constitutes reality and how we can know it.) This is the position famously exemplified in English lore by Samuel Johnson, who, in 1763, *kicked* a stone in order to demonstrate material reality and refute the idealist philosophy of Bishop Berkeley. If in kicking a stone a person says they do not feel the stone is real, we think them mad. Indeed, disturbances to a feel for reality, and a stated sense of unreality, can be part and parcel of psychotic conditions.

This association of touch or movement and reality has a long history and deep cultural meaning. It comes supported by the highest authority. When Thomas, among other disciples, saw Christ appear after his resurrection, he doubted what he saw. "Doubting Thomas" made the surely forgivable demand: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John, 25). Christ offered his resurrected body to human touch (which required movement: "to put", "to thrust") in order to confirm its reality. In the inclined body, the handshake, the embrace, the nose-rubbing, the kiss, and now the elbow-touching, we re-assert the cultural forms of mutual human recognition through touch and movement. Though the particular forms of gesture vary hugely according to local custom and tradition, each gesture is, in its nature, a form of touching and movement. An obvious question follows: when new technology or restrictive regulations affect the senses of touch and movement and therefore the expression of gesture, how far and in what ways does this change people's feel for reality?

Electronic media certainly bring people into relations and sustain them in circumstances where relations would otherwise collapse. But, as the previous discussion has attempted to illuminate, these electronically mediated relations are not identical to relations involving physical presence. Most obviously, there is no touching, and no possibility of being able to do so. Indeed, from the beginning of sound recording, photography, film, and TV, there has been discussion about the way the media convey a different picture of reality and foster new imagination about it. Media *mediate*. But the sheer capacity of digital media to create new images and realities has gone much further in leading people to question the nature of previously taken-for-granted differences between the real and the manufactured, and the natural and the artificial. One large and prominent consequence is the worldwide discussion of the role of fake information and fake news. Awareness of the mediating nature of media encourages some commentators to state that no one notion of reality is sustainable, or that all claims about reality cannot be trusted. Yet, people carry on their everyday lives, and certainly respond to social conditions like poverty, or to pressures to immigrate, or to medical conditions, not to mention to events in the lifecycle, in ways that do presuppose that there is *a reality for them*. The feeling for reality continues to matter personally, in spite of new media. This is not the place to develop this particular discussion, but statements and actions that devalue people's feel for reality have consequences. This is dramatically evident, for example, in the inability of governments to successfully persuade people of the medical value of vaccination. Facts have significance only if there is an agreed-upon feel for reality. And that feel is bound up with touching.

Ask yourself: Why do I feel real? It seems to me likely that you will answer: Because I have a body. And you know about this embodiment for many reasons, though certainly because you have bodily and tactile senses, which centrally include the sense of movement and of resistance to that movement, but also include such conditions as pain. Ill people know a lot about resisting bodies. And what could be more real than pain? By contrast, in some cases disturbed people do not feel real at all, or they have what other people think a very distorted sense of reality (as in an anorexic person's feeling of being overweight). That individuals conduct their lives in terms of what bodily senses reveal as real is not in doubt. It seems an obvious step to frame an understanding of this in terms of the key features of the lifecycle — the manner of birth and the boundary of death. Everyone was once a baby and everyone has a body, and everyone will die, and that past, this present and that future is there, and everyone we judge sane is aware that it is there through movement, contact, resistance, and other bodily senses.

Certainly, videos or virtual games also display movement, often beautiful or violent movement, but this movement is at one "remove" from the way each person originally felt movement. To experiment with some of the differences, watch yourself move in a mirror; then take away the mirror and look "inside yourself" at the same movement. There are different kinds of awareness, and there is a feeling that some kinds are more essential to a feel for reality than others.

There is a branch of electronic engineering called haptics. In due course, manufacturers will market everyday products communicating touch. (In a way, they already do, since phones and other tools require touching to work, and there is remarkable proprioceptive knowledge — largely non-conscious knowledge — at work in people's use of touchscreens.) Perhaps new tactile media will produce a lot of sensual entertainment and even pleasure. At the moment, however, it does not seem likely that new devices, any more than those used for existing media, will persuade people that a tactile image of a person is the real person. There is more to the feeling of touch than the sense of literal contact with surfaces, and this more comes from the inclusion of touch in the body senses, including the sense of movement. Such new devices will have to be very good indeed to reproduce the sheer range of tactile sensation (texture as well as pressure, for example), let alone the complexity of the body senses and sense of movement. The engineers face difficulties: "Compared to ordinary visual and auditory sensations, haptics is difficult to synthesize. Visual and auditory sensations are gathered by specialized organs, the eyes and ears. On the other hand, a sensation of force can occur at any part of the human body, and is therefore inseparable from actual physical contact. These characteristics lead to many difficulties in developing a haptic interface. [10]" When "the feelies" (in parallel to "the movies") come online, it is probable that the range of sensation will be limited in comparison to existing forms of touch and bodily sensation. Even so, the new media will lead to further questioning of the nature and experience of reality. It is not possible to change people's experience of the touch and movement senses without also changing the very nature of the relationship they have with the world and their feeling for whom and what they are.

The commentary offers a framework for closer inquiry into how touching and not touching affects individual lives, especially lives where isolation, resulting from either social or medical circumstances, has a large place.

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