INTRODUCTION

Haptics, Aesthetics, Philosophy

In Beckett’s last television play Nacht und Träume, a pair of hands emerges from darkness to convey a cup to a dream-figure’s lips and rest on his head for a moment. No face is revealed behind the hands; the play is concerned primarily with what is a dreamt act of touch. This is perhaps the most explicit visualization of the act of touch in Beckett’s drama, yet it occurs within a dream and within the virtual, light-signal space of television. The hands are dreamt, imagined out of darkness, thus presenting many of the tensions surrounding touch that this study explores: between presence and absence, tangibility and intangibility, the hand that touches, and the hand that withdraws. Beckett’s work is deeply concerned with these touches variously remembered, half-remembered, imagined, and, most importantly, failing to happen at all. The owner of the hands in Nacht und Träume remains outside the field of vision, existing solely in this act of touching, however incomplete and virtual that touch may be.

This study focuses on these fleeting, often failing moments of tactile connection in Beckett’s work, as well as the demands that the dimness of the imagery, their partialness, and invisibility place upon the sense of sight for the figure of the drama and the spectator alike. Touch is, as Margrit Shildrick puts it, “always an embodied gesture that may sustain a reciprocal sense of solicitude and intimacy that grounded in the mutual instabilities of our corporeal existence. To touch and be touched speaks to our exposure to, and immersion in, the world of others, and to the capacity to be moved beyond reason, in the space of shared vulnerabilities.”1 Paying attention to touch in Beckett’s work throws up a multiplicity of meanings and connections, from the shared vulnerabilities of intersubjective touch to the aesthetic structures that represent it. Such a focus emerges from a tradition of thinking though touch in art, its haptic qualities (from the ancient Greek ἀπτός...
or *aptos*, pertaining to touch) contained in either its depiction of touching or in its presentation of texture to the eye of the viewer. This study will situate Beckett’s work relative to discourses about tactility and art across a range of media: theater and performance, visual art, cinema and television as well as considering how such discourses intersect with issues of embodiment and technology. The Beckettian dramatic *corpus*, fragmented as it is, comes to be at the limit point of the strands of aesthetics and philosophy that are most concerned with the body, and this is revealed most tellingly through a critical concern for touch. Philosophers of the body in whose work touch has figured prominently, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy, are especially relevant, as is the meeting point that Jacques Derrida establishes between these two, in relation to their use of touch.² Important also are critics who have observed a haptic aesthetic taking shape in visual art and cinema since the nineteenth century, perceiving how such haptic aesthetic strategies may disrupt dominant aesthetic conventions, not only in their rejection of the visual or the demand that the spectator relate to the artwork in a different manner, but in the way that these strategies reject coherence of time and space, the imperative of narrative arcs and aesthetic resolution. Crucially, in *Nacht und Träume* the image never reveals all its secrets; it withholds visual and narrative resolution, encouraging the viewer to think about the many meanings of the act of touch.

In a world in which touchscreen technology is proliferating, bringing the world to our fingertips quite literally—at least for those who can afford it—it would seem that we have direct tactile interaction with technology and therefore with the online worlds it brings. At the same time, we create virtual online personae for ourselves in the form of social networks such as Facebook. We maintain contact with people who very often live thousands of miles away, people who we may never meet, or touch in any material way. A great global distance has been shrunk through such technology, yet our haptic or material-tactile lives cannot be lived via this technology—at least for now. The next few decades may yet see massive improvements in haptic communications—something that is urgent for those who are visually challenged and rely on haptic interfaces to use technology, but also has extensive marketing potential. What I propose here however is not some nostalgia for touch, for a time when humans could *only* make face-to-face contact. Anthropology, theology, philosophy, aesthetics all can show that to some extent humans have always had a sense of the threshold between the virtual and material, because of religious belief, imagination, or both, and this is certainly the case since the dawn of the modern era of communication and the possibility of intimacy without presence. Rather I attempt to answer the question: why think about touch? What does it mean to touch? What does it