

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## ECOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND HAPTIC EXPERIENCE

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It. *Aptico*; Fr. *Haptique*; Germ. *Haptik*. By virtue of the Greek etymology of the word “haptikos” ([ἅπτικός](#), “able to [come](#) in [contact](#) with”, from [ἅπτω](#) (*háptō*, “to [touch](#)”), haptic experience bespeaks a kind of tactile perception. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “haptic” indicates a peculiar touch, assuming a specific meaning which is not a mere equivalent nor a generic synonym of the latter. The “haptic” goes beyond the grasping of the hand, encompassing the whole kinesthetic processes and all the senses. At first, this notion has been used, with different meanings and in different contexts, especially by psychologists, theorists of perception and phenomenologists. Today, however, the term “haptic” is known especially for its adoption by technological, medical, and prosthetic fields, as well as by applied psychology, cognitive sciences, and engineering. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers – particularly in aesthetics – have occasionally opted for it to suggest a trans-sensorial and cross-modal perception. Here, haptic is an indicator of a relational modality of making experience; a modality that overcomes the conventional dualism between subject and object.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In the sense here addressed, “ecological aesthetics” has not to be understood as a specific domain dealing with the natural environment, but as a comprehensive paradigm that has to do with a modality of perception. One of main peculiarities of “Ecological Aesthetics” (Gambaro 2020) consists in the fundamental importance attached to the notion of experience as an immersive field. More precisely, ecological aesthetics claims for the experiential nature of aesthetics in itself. Such a belief has brought to highlight its immersive and relational character, which also corresponds to the development of a paradigm that is alternative to the prevailing modern, Kantian aesthetics. This model originates from issues originally proposed by John Dewey’s notion of “aesthetic experience”, from the phenomenological approach of late Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and from the “ecological approach” to perception elaborated by

James J. Gibson. Since the 1970's Arnold Berleant has proposed to connote the "aesthetic field" in terms of a "participatory model" and as a practice of "constant engagement" (Berleant 2013). In the first place, a "participatory" and "engaged" aesthetics challenges the assumptions according to which aesthetic judgement calls for a distance between the subject and the object of aesthetic appreciation; secondly, it questions another characteristic often associated with that of distance, namely disinterestedness (Berleant 1994). In the Kantian aesthetics, disinterestedness is one of the keystones, as it is usually considered necessary for aesthetic judgement and appreciation. Ecological aesthetics, instead, calls for a collusive and an intimate model of aesthetic experience, shifting from "critical distance" to "critical intimacy" (Miles 2018). This model can also be defined as relational, and ecological aesthetics is, precisely, a relational aesthetics, positing a *with-y*, that is, participative, implicative and interdependent perceptual modality (Perullo 2020). This conception is based on the assumption that the aesthetic experience happens and grows *before* objectivation, being itself a relationship (Matteucci 2019). It is within such framework that haptic comes into play.

## THE HAPTIC

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term "haptic" indicates a peculiar tactility, assuming a specific meaning which is not a mere equivalent of touch. The "haptic" goes beyond the grasping of the hand, encompassing all the senses and the whole kinesthetic processes.

The first theory about haptic as active touch has to be attributed to Ernst Weber, master of Fechner and author of *De Tactu* (1834) and *Die Lehre vom Tastsinn und Gemeingefühl* (1851). Later, further investigations have been carried out by David Katz, for example in his *Der Aufbau der Taswelt* (1925) (Prytherch 2002). In 1950, the Hungarian psychologist Géza Révész, in *Psychology and the Art of the Blind* (Révész 1950), examined the relationship between the haptic and art. Here, the connections between blindness and artistic creation are analyzed using the example of sculpture. A few years later, James J. Gibson proposed the notion of "haptic" drawing a distinction between passive and active touch (Gibson 1962, 1966). According to him, the difference between passive and active touch lies in the intentionality of our exploratory behaviors of the latter. (Ballesteros, Heller 2008). Over the last decades, all these pioneering studies have delved into deeper, and been proved by studies in applied psychology, cognitive sciences, and engineering (Gopnik 2016) The field of haptic is increasingly wide, but heterogeneous and somehow ambiguous; all the more so if we consider that the most common contemporary applications of the haptic do not so much concern philosophy but digital technology, information technology and robotics (from medical prostheses to games), as well as media theories.

In philosophy, the haptic does not so much have a specific place, but it can rather be traced here and there, from Democritus to Jean-Luc Nancy (Crispin 2014). Aesthetics and art began to deal with the haptic with respect to sight and visual art. In 1896, Bernard Berenson wrote of "tactile values" with regard to Florentine Renaissance painting (Berenson 1959). Alois Riegl, in turn, in 1902 – resuming the distinction between optical vision and haptic vision proposed by Hildebrand in *The Problem of Form in painting and*

*sculpture* (1893) – used it to highlight on the one hand that there exists a tactile and close seeing, on the other hand that touch is not limited to the hand (Riegl 2000).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question also affects sculpture, whose need to be considered as a tactile art had already been amply argued by Herder in his *Plastic* (1778). “*Prière de toucher*”, Marcel Duchamp and André Breton exhort on the cover of the Surrealism Catalog for the 1947 Paris International Exposition (Pinotti 2009). A few years earlier, moreover, the Futurist Manifesto on *Tactilism* (1921), albeit without mentioning haptic, proposed a liberation of touch through a new sensitivity aimed at conceiving it not as one of the senses but the transversal super-sense. But what is at stake in the question of touch, and why suggest, in its place, the alternative of the haptic? The question has been addressed especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosophy.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, haptic is a better word than touch, because it highlights the potentiality – not merely retinoic - of the eye. The haptic space can be visual, auditory, no less than tactile (Deleuze, Guattari 1987). Following such a perspective, the notion of “haptic space” has been brought in the media theory (Bruno 2014). In a dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy, who proposed the haptic as the fading of *res extensa* an extension occupied by objects, Derrida claimed that a “pure” haptic cannot exist, deconstructing it as just another attempt at the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 2005).

Such interpretation of the haptic has entered also the field of social sciences and black studies. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, for example, define hapticality “the capacity to feel through others, to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you.” (Harney, Moten 2013).

#### THE HAPTIC AS EXPERIENCE-WITH

The common ground for ecological aesthetics and haptic experience lies in the assumption that relationship is prior to the distinction between subject and object. As “ecological” indicates the immersive and sensible nature of perception, “haptic” indicates, in turn, the relational process, in which perception operates on all the senses at the same time, and experience is a continuum: “all its dimensions are always all there, in different actual-virtual configurations, expressing different distributions of potentials.” (Massoumi 2008). Haptic experience suggests that a radical relationship can be described in terms of experience-*with* instead of an experience-*of* something. In such a model, aesthetic perception, as it is processual, situated, and engaged, it is also, by definition *ecological*; haptic space, moreover, fades *res extensa* as an extension occupied by objects.

We can illustrate this with the difference between haptic and optic perception. If the latter has to do with the gesture that solidifies the operational into the thematic, the former tries to correspond with the making process itself and with the flux.

The conventional paradigm of aesthetic experience, based upon the subject-object model, expresses the modality of experience-*of* something, that is, an optical (retinoic) approach, in which one perceives and appreciates the *content* of the objects – their quality – as the vector of aesthetic appreciation. Conversely, the aesthetic experience according to the relational model expresses the modality of experience-*with*. When Merleau-Ponty writes about the painter's sight, he refers to this experience; to see the sky means to see *with* the sky, to merge with its light and presence in a relationship of reciprocal affection (Ingold 2015). The haptic approach is a collusive and engaged perception, according to which the objects emerge *through* the relationship and their ecological, situated perspective. Here, appreciation and judgment do not refer to aesthetic qualities as *content* of something, but, rather, as encounters, as *with-y* phenomena, as "aisthema" (Matteucci 2019).

The haptic experience entails further relevant consequences. Notably, it suggests to overcome the sheer barrier between the inner and the outer, as well as between the mind and the world. The perceiver is never in isolation. In other words, haptic perception corresponds to extended mind and, conversely, that extended mind is always aesthetic. Aesthetic/extended mind is narrative and not explicative; it is not a centered and enclosed perception, rather but open and diffused (Perullo 2020).

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