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# FREUD ON TOUCH: THINKING SEXUALITY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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## 1. Introduction

The sense of touch has been characterized by many authors as the most paradoxical of the senses. Aristotle was one of the first to do so in his book *On the Soul* (*De Anima, Peri Psyches*), writing that among the five senses<sup>1</sup> touch seems to be the most enigmatic, because the medium, the object and the organ of touch do not correspond to the schema of the other senses. He also affirmed that touch, besides being impossible to categorize, also makes categorisation as such difficult (see Aristotle 2002: 165–171)<sup>2</sup>. Also, Kathryn Linn Geurts, who conducted research on sensory experience in Anlo-land among the Anlo-Ewe people<sup>3</sup> in Ghana, said that the phenomenon that she considers as “touch” involved many conceptual problems. As she puts it, «[T]here seems to be a profusion of expressions for what all seemed to be ‘tactility.» (Geurts 2002: 55)

Geurts even says that the investigation of touch was so complex that she proposes taking her model as a provisional scheme (Geurts 2002: 55). Regarding the relation between touch and representation, already explored by Geurts, Mazziò (2006: 92) declares that:

Touch is not only difficult to account for, but it is difficult to count. Touch is a relative insubstantial unit; it is neither a piece, a part, but rather a point, which almost resists quantification. (Mazziò 2006: 88)

<sup>1</sup> Within Western history we find, aside from the customary grouping into five senses, enumerations of four, six or seven senses described at different periods by different peoples. Thus, for example, taste and touch are sometimes grouped together as one sense, and touch is sometimes divided into several senses (Classen 1997: 401).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's investigation of touch should be taken seriously, because it represents the first philosophical enquiry into it. However, Derrida is right in pointing out that Aristotle interrogated and contested the *doxa* of his time only partially. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle still talks about a *unity* of the sense of touch and of its appearance as such (Derrida 2007: 15–16). The latter is what I am pursuing to contest in this study.

<sup>3</sup> As Geurts says, the term *Anlo* is not an easy word to translate or define. It identifies a dialect of Ewe, which is a West African language spoken by many of the people who live in southern Togo and the southern eastern corner of Ghana. But for many Ewe speakers in Ghana, Anlo denotes a specific group of Ewe people who inhabit the coastal area of the Volta Region, around the Keta Lagoon, and whose traditions and dialect have unfairly been taken to represent Ewe culture as a whole (Geurts 2002: 21).

She adds that:

Although one might think the human hand an easy metonymy for touch, this was not always or even usually the case. [...] This sense without a metonymy itself becomes metonymic in much Renaissance drama for the psyche's approach to what the psyche cannot precisely locate or measure. (Mazzio 2006: 88)

The French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu<sup>4</sup> emphasised the centrality of touch and its cognates in the English language as one of the longest entries in the Oxford English Dictionary (Mazzio 2006: 86).

Elisabeth Hsu, while conducting research on tactile experience in Ancient Chinese medicine, came to the conclusion that difficulties with tactile experience are inevitable for anyone wishing to take it as a basis for a descriptive science. She refers to it as “the paradoxes of a science of touch” (Hsu 2000: 320). After presenting different pulse diagnostics defined by the Ancient Chinese medicine, Hsu says that given the present state of research, it is impossible to draw any conclusion from the observations. She argues that from a philosophical point of view one may, however, be reminded of Merleau-Ponty's comment<sup>5</sup> on tactile and visual experience, and take the visualisation of the tactile experience as the most radical attempt to objectify it (Hsu 2000: 327). Hsu (2000: 330) concludes her investigation by stating that: «tactile experience would seem quite unsuitable to [*sic*] establishing a descriptive science.»

All these authors testify for an immanent impossibility that pertains to the scientific investigation of touch. However, I do not consider this fact to be “frustrating”, but rather intriguing. The paradoxical nature of touch, its resistance to intelligible and sensual apprehension, makes touch, in my opinion, an interesting object of anthropological investigation and inquiry. The fact of an immanent impossibility of a science of touch (Hsu 2000) encourages me to begin an investigation of touch from this very impossibility.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Anzieu is known among psychoanalysts (at least among those of the Kleinian orientation) for the development of the concept of *Moi-peau* or Ego-skin. His book *Le Moi-peau* and the collection of papers devoted to that book *Didier Anzieu: le Moi-peau et la psychanalyse des limites* edited by Chabert *et al.* deal with an entity between the psychic and corporeal. Anzieu establishes a homology between the functions of the Ego (to limit, to contain and to organize) and those of the corporeal envelope.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that Hsu, when acknowledging the *impossibility* of a descriptive science of touch, turns her attention to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. In her article *Toward a Science of Touch, Part II: representation of the tactile experience of the seven pulses indicating danger of death in early modern Europe* the point of impossibility is at the same time marking the place of supplementation, which is exercised by philosophy. This “pattern” is not rare in other articles on touch as well.

The singular question that perpetuates this article is whether or not touch could be defined as a sense only or whether is there any other way in which it could be conceptualised. I argue that by defining touch as a sense one does more than simply ascertain a state of reality.

From this perspective, the notion of sense becomes of the greatest importance. What touch is and how it functions should be deduced from the phenomenology of touch alone and not from some notions that are posited *a priori*.

At this point, I call for research taking the opposite direction, that is, no longer the direction from sense to touch, but rather from touch to sense. In other words, the question “what is a sense?” should be posed again. It is my thesis that the primacy of the notion of sense over that of touch is one of the causes for the fact that touch reveals itself as a paradoxical sense.

This is the reason I begin the analysis of the phenomenon of touch from a radically different perspective. I present Freud’s account of his technique of touching the forehead of the patient. This technique enabled Freud to access the unconscious images and thoughts that were previously negated in hypnosis, because of the arousal of defences before unbearable memories. The technique of touching represented a useful psychoanalytical tool to redirect the awareness of the patient in order to allow the psychoanalytical treatment to continue. Interestingly enough, the theme of the redirection of awareness was analysed by Freud in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. A parallel reading of the analytical technique of touch and the theory of the joke enables positing the thesis of a homology between the structure of touch and that of the joke.

However, the positing of the homology between the two mentioned structures represents only the starting point. In order to understand the difficulties implied in the phenomenon of touch, a proper psychoanalytical understanding of the conceptions of sexuality and unconscious are crucial. These conceptions are analysed in the context of anthropological data provided by Gabriela Alex, whose work made the relation between joke and touch explicit.

## 2. Freud’s Theory and Technique of Touch/Joke

Freud’s articulation of touch appeared a turning point in the history of psychoanalytic treatment. This turning point is represented by Freud’s passage from hypnosis to psychoanalytical treatment, also called the “talking cure”. However, the passage from hypnosis to proper psychoanalysis was not a smooth one. In fact, there was an intermediate technique that marked this passage. The intermediate technique consisted of Freud’s touching the forehead of the patient in order to make the appearance of unconscious images and thoughts possible.

The passage from hypnosis to the intermediate technique of touching was driven by Freud's finding that hypnosis did not work with every person<sup>6</sup>. He learned that the cause of hypnotic failure lies in the resistance to being hypnotised. Freud was therefore almost forced to find another technique, a different one from that of hypnosis. Following an analysis of his own treatments, he realised that if he was too persistent with the patients in continuing to assure them that they knew the content of their thoughts or that they would remember them, there was no positive effect; even worse, his comments aroused resistance and the treatment became an impossible endeavour. It was at this precise moment that he invented the intermediate technique of touching the forehead.

Freud asked his patients to lie down and close their eyes while he was sitting in front of them. He then waited for traumatic images and thoughts of his patients to arise. If the patient would not articulate those images, Freud would assume that there was an unconscious defence somewhere. About the defence, Freud writes that when an image approaches the patient's ego, which is felt as unbearable, the force of rejection is aroused in the ego. The goal of rejection is the defence against this unbearable image (Freud 2002: 310–311).

Freud was aware that if he implemented *too much effort* in assuring patients that they knew the content of their unconscious thoughts, that effort itself would raise the patient's resistance, which at the level of genesis showed itself as a rejection to articulating those thoughts. Freud's *persistence* should be understood as the main reason why he demanded that every psychoanalytic apprentice to undergo psychoanalytic treatment himself. Freud, in fact, knew that the resistance of the patient has something to do with the resistance of the analyst.

Nonetheless, Freud solved the problem of resistance. In those circumstances when resistance arouse, he used, as he described it, a little technical tool<sup>7</sup>.

He told the patient that in the next few moments he would press gently the patient's forehead with his hand. At the same time, he assured the patient that during this pressure he/she would see the memory in the form of an image or that he/she would experience a thought. Of course, Freud also demanded that his patients tell him whichever image or thought they would experience regardless of the content (Freud 2002: 312)

At first, Freud tried to explain this effect as a form of strongest hypnosis, but because of its complicated mechanism, he proposed a rather different explanation. Freud thought that the advantage of the new technique consisted in the redirection of the patient's awareness away from his conscious searching

<sup>6</sup> In addition, Freud openly admitted that he was not a good hypnotist (Freud 2002: 310).

<sup>7</sup> Freud admits that such a pressure with the hand could be exchanged with any other signal or any other form of bodily injunction on the patient. But he states at the same time, that because of the patient lying before him it seems that the pressure exercised on the forehead or the holding of his head between his palms are the most suggestive and most comfortable ones (Freud 2002: 312–313).

and thinking. Or to put it in other words, away from anything that could produce the appearance of the will (Freud 2002: 131).

The touch that Freud implemented in his new technique held a specific function. Touch itself redirected the patient's awareness and made the appearance of unconscious thoughts possible. What Freud needed, and also found, was the means by which it was finally possible to overcome the obstacle represented by the will. Or as Dolar (2008b: 97) emphatically puts it: «One touches to get around the ego, one touches to reach the unconscious.»

Freud also dealt with the theme of awareness redirection in his book devoted to the question of the relation between joke and unconscious, entitled accordingly *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*<sup>8</sup> In order to gain a valuable and insightful understanding of touch according to Freud's psychoanalysis, I propose a parallel reading of the analytical technique of touch and the theory of the joke.

Freud says that a joke has a paradoxical structure. Firstly, he argues that for example, jokes about Jews are invented by Jews themselves. Other jokes or stories concerning Jews, which are not their own product, do not achieve the comical effect. We can even say that they are rather insulting for Jews. It seems that critique and aggression in jokes are unattainable and both are possible only through a deviation (Freud 2003: 152).

However, we can say that jokes work with *tact* – if they are insulting, they are no longer jokes in the strict sense of the term. Freud says that in the analytic practice one should work at his best as an interpreter in the place where ignorance produces anxiety and with a sense of *respect* towards the patient. This proposition, therefore, proposes that the joke also has something to do with respect. The joke functions on the limit between insult and respect and even more, the joke represents this very limit. However, it represents a limit that is potentially unstable. There is a danger that the joke becomes insulting. The same can be said for touch, which is also placed between respect and insult, constituting their very limit. Tact plays the impossible role of delimiting respect from insult. Or in other words, tact is there in order to *sustain the unsustainable limit*.

<sup>8</sup> Freud's main proposition regarding the joke is the notion of fore-pleasure, which is not related to the content of the joke. This fore-pleasure allows the lowering of our inhibitions and makes it possible to accept the aggressive or sexual tendency, which appears in the content of the joke, and which we would not accept (we would even turn away from it with disgust), if it would appear outside the context of the joke. Alenka Zupančič, in contrast, proposes a supplement to Freud's theory. She says that the narration of the joke redirects our attention from the place of a radical and discomfiting end. Or to put it differently, when we laugh at the end of the joke, a certain amount of pleasure is released. This enables laughing, which takes place before this discomfiting dimension (Zupančič 2008a: 143–144).

In the context of the relation between the patient and the analyst, Freud says that the analysis could stop if a feeling of the patient not being valued or being insulted would arise (Freud 2002: 342).

Touch and joke are therefore posited on the limit between respect and insult, or – more accurately – they represent this very limit. The question to pose is how the relationship between respect and insult is then structured and how and when an insult occurs.

In order to understand the mechanism of the insult properly, the acceptance of the fact that *the content is not offensive in itself* is necessary. As Zupančič says, the insult is a paradoxical event on the level of enunciation and the enunciated. The words stupid or idiot, for example, still preserve the linkage between the content and the offensiveness. That is why the disconnection and exchange of the enunciation and the enunciated is less evident and we could think that the content is offensive in itself. Zupančič turns to the Freudian example of the *Rat-man* in order to show that it is quite the opposite. When a little boy became angry with his father, he started to verbally abuse him, but because he did not know any other term of abuse he used all the objects he knew, such as: «You lamp, you towel, you plate!» Zupančič says that the signifiers on the level of enunciation produce something like: «I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.» (Zupančič 2002: 122)<sup>9</sup>

What Zupančič shows is that an insult does not retain the linkage between the content and the offensiveness. An insult could not simply be discerned from the “meaning” of the words implied in it. Each word can be used as an insult. Therefore, the *space* that differentiates an offensive word from a non-offensive one is never really clear.

If we have posited touch and joke as the limit between respect and insult, this also implies that touch and joke retain something insulting. As Žižek says, Lacan was perfectly aware of the sadistic dimension of humour and the relation between humour and the Super ego (Žižek 2009: 425). This is why for Mannoni (1986: 114–115) the joke is not a symptom, but a *work of art* and as such it *respects the laws* and at the same time *violates them*. The joke is posited not between respect and insult, but *as the between* and touch is exactly that – the between.

### *3. Freud and Anthropology*

I would like to put forward the following thesis: the structure of touch is homologous to the structure of the joke. Or to put it in a different form: touch is structured as a joke. Following this proposition, I will undergo a further, parallel

<sup>9</sup> See S. Freud, *Pet analiz.* Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo and Založba Studia Humanitatis, Ljubljana 2005, p. 267.

reading of the joke on the one side, and touch on the other, and I will do so in an anthropological context.

We have to acknowledge the fact that Freud was not the only author who saw the relation between touch and joke. There were also several other authors who dealt with this relation in one form or another. For the purposes of this article, I analyse Gabriela Alex's ethnographic data on touch from India<sup>10</sup>.

The way in which I deal with the mentioned author is that I establish a dialogue between her and psychoanalysis. The analysis begins with an interview conducted by Alex, which explicitly acknowledges the relation between touch and joke.

Alex conducted her fieldwork in India in the rural state of Tamil Nadu among the groups of Vagri, Paraiyar and Muthuraja. The results of her research were published in an article entitled *A Sense of Belonging and Exclusion*. The article investigates touch as a prime marker of status and social relations. She considers touch as a means of communication used to express different forms of relatedness (Alex 2008: 537).

One day, Alex asked Babu (an Indian boy) whether a particular pinching inflicted on him by a girl was painful. He explained to Alex that, «Yes, it was painful, but mainly it made me laugh, because it was *maskeri*, joking.» (Alex 2008: 535)

Alex says that Babu did not describe touching as a form of beating, which also happens between children, but as a kind of tickle, since it was taking place within a joking mode (Alex 2008: 535). She says that relations with affine kin are framed in a joking relationship called *maskeri*, and this is more often than not, a form of sexual joking (Alex 2008: 534).

These insights, provided by Alex, allow me analyse the relation between joke and touch in an anthropological context. However, they also open a variety of questions related to sexuality.

#### 4. Sexuality of Touch/Joke

Alex states that the relations with affine kin, which are framed in a joking relationship called *maskeri*, are more often than not a form of sexual joking (Alex 2008: 534). She implies that jokes allude to sexuality, that jokes have a latent intentionality that tends towards the sexual satisfaction. The last horizon of meaning regarding the joke is therefore sexuality. In sexuality, according to Alex, we discover the principle that authorises the production of meaning.

<sup>10</sup> Besides Alex see also M. Jackson, *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies and Effects*, Berghahn Books, New York 2005 and C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques, Volume One*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990 [1964].



Alex affirms that in the context of a joking relation, touch gains the meaning of a joking touch. She affirms that the joke is the context, which confers meaning. Then, she implies that sexuality is the last horizon of meaning. Therefore, what authorises the joke to confer meaning to touch is sexuality.

But then, everything becomes sexualised. Every activity is based on sexuality. Sexuality becomes the principle of a hidden necessity that makes the world work. The latter articulation also represents a critique directed against Freudian psychoanalysis. This critique is directed towards the psychoanalytical understanding that everything is reducible to sexuality and that sexuality is the final principle of necessity.

A critique with the same form as the one directed towards sexuality is also directed towards the conception of the unconscious. I propose, therefore, to read the conceptualisation of sexuality through the unconscious. I postulate the following: when Alex says that all jokes are more often than not a form of sexual joking (Alex 2008: 534), she presents us with a specific understanding of the unconscious. We should take into account that for Alex sexuality functions as a latent or suppressed entity that finally finds expression in the joke.

In order to locate Alex's theoretical position I would now like to present Freud's conceptualisation of the unconscious. In the *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud differentiates between the unconscious images and thoughts that he designates as latent dream-thoughts and manifest dream-content – the dream itself. In this book, he warns the reader that the unconscious images and thoughts are not, in the strict sense of the term, the unconscious itself. The Freudian unconscious is the work of dreams, that is, it is the processes by which the latent dream thoughts become manifest dream thoughts (Freud 2001: 265–266). In the joke analysed by Freud, the mechanism of the joke is already *the work of the unconscious as the unconscious itself*. The formulation of the work of the unconscious as the unconscious itself is a precise one and it aims to show that the unconscious is not some kind of hidden and deep substance, but rather a non-substantial element that could be “seen” only through its (partial) effects in the substantial reality. The Freudian unconscious is, properly speaking, the *difference* between the latent dream-content and the manifest dream-thoughts – a difference that produces singular effects.

As Zupančič writes, Freud discovers human sexuality as a problem (in need of interpretation) and not as something with which we could interpret every (other) problem. Freud understood sexuality as inherently meaningless and not as the final horizon of all human-produced meaning (Zupančič 2008b: 60).

Zupančič explains where the difficulties regarding the conceptualisation of sexuality come from. She argues that the problem of sexuality derives from the fact that we cannot equate sexuality and the genital. The genital-sexual organisation is not primary or natural, but it is rather the product of the development of many stages. The genital-sexual organisation presupposes the

*unification* of primarily heterogeneous, diffused, sexual drives, composed from different partial sexual drives such as looking, touching, licking etc. (Zupančič 2008b: 61–62).

Zupančič's proposition implies that Alex's assertion, according to which meaning derives and receives its authority from sexuality, is only possible on the presupposition that a unification of heterogeneous and diffused sexual drives have been achieved. If sexuality is by definition non-unified, as Zupančič proposes and the unification, which is called genital sexual organisation, is a product of many stages, does the same unifying element not also produce the meaning in the joke? When Alex says that sexuality confers meaning to the joke (and with it to touch) or makes it meaningful, she actually says that what produces meaning is the organizing element that makes something as a genital-sexual organisation possible. This organisational element tends towards unification, which is always vulnerable to what cannot be integrated and therefore unified.

Zupančič (2008b: 62) argues that:

Freud's fundamental gesture was to de-substantialise sexuality. Sexuality is not a substance, which could be adequately described, delimited and framed, but it is in itself the impossibility of its own delimitation and framing. Sexuality is not a particular, differentiated domain of the human activity or life, and this is precisely the reason why it can inhabit every domain of human life.

Zupančič implies the impossibility of delimiting and describing sexuality, and she also asserts that sexuality inhabits every domain of human life. Sexuality brings the same problems that the introductory part of this article has ascribed to the phenomenon of touch. I would like, therefore, to establish a correlation between sexuality and touch. As it has been suggested by this article, the latter is also marked by the impossibility of being adequately described and delimited and, precisely for this reason, it can inhabit every domain of human life. Or to be more specific, touch can inhabit any other sense. As Telban (2004: 14) suggests, looking at someone corresponds to touching someone. Also, a speech or melody heard can touch us (or move us, which also presupposes touch or at least a contact).

## 5. Conclusion

The established correlation between touch and sexuality, understood in Freudian and Lacanian terms, should explain why touch represents a problem for a *science of touch* (Hsu 2000) and the human being in his/her everyday experiences and encounters. The impossibility of adequately describing and

delimiting touch poses the science of touch and the human being in a position, where nothing is absolute; counting no longer accounts, measuring is confronted with the immeasurable, and meaning is vague. Due to all these reasons, touch represents the object of anthropology *par excellence*. Because of the impossibility inherent to touch or even, because of the impossibility called touch, something like culture is possible. The varieties of ways in which cultures deal with the problem of the impossible (touch) represent, in the last instance, the very substance of cultures.

The Freudian theory of the joke has demonstrated that touch should not be understood as being outside the cultural world of representation, sensation and meaning. From a methodological point of view, following Sola (2007: 38), the anthropologist can apprehend the perceptions and representations of a human being *only* through verbalisation, corporatisation or projection onto an object. Even though the word *only* appears in Sola's methodology, this should not lead us to the assumption that there is something missing – the direct approach to the thing in itself – but to understand verbalisation, corporatisation and projection as the very possibility of the existence of touch.

In order to unravel the paradoxes of touch, two steps must be taken. First, the acknowledgement of the fact that touch (as such) is presented as ultimately unattainable. Second, what it is needed in order to overcome this impossibility is a change of the previous position, where touch is conceptualised as unattainable for thought. The fact that touch is unattainable must be understood as already being a product of an empty abstraction (Hegel) of this very thought – thought itself posits touch beyond its access. The change from a position that holds touch as unattainable represents the proposition that this article wanted to put forward. Only if starting from the impossibilities pertaining to the phenomenon of touch and taking those very impossibilities as part of the phenomenon of touch itself, could a proper understanding of it be achieved.

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