Alone Together

A Tactful Reading of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Ali Smith's *How to be Both*

Master's Thesis by Roos Muis

Comparative Literature & Literary Theory
Faculty of Humanities
Leiden University

Supervisor: Dr. J.J.M. Houwen
Second Reader: Prof. Dr. E.J. van Alphen
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Dedication

For my family

Abstract

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Exploring the intimate links between text and skin, this thesis examines the ways in which Virginia Woolf and Ali Smith approach tactile experience within the touch-transforming contexts from which their novels *The Waves* (1931) and *How to be Both* (2014) emerge. Drawing on the first sustained study that investigates literature and tactility since the publication of seminal works on touch by thinkers of deconstruction such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, it looks at the two texts from the perspective of a tactful reading. Engaging with the texts with close attention and from a distance, it argues that tactile experience not only resides in the contact of skin on skin, but also in the space between skin and skin. Looking primarily at how the writers give expression to a touch that transforms and a touch that reaches out both in and through their texts, it also draws attention to the way that memory, the shared thematic concern of the novels, too exhibits moments of change and nearness. Finally, this thesis seeks to open up a discussion on the limits and possibilities of a tactful approach and relates it to the potential it offers to the reading of recent innovative literary projects that respond to some of today's most poignant issues regarding tactility, digital technology and human connection. Inspired by the astounding and intimate sensory surrounds of Ann Hamilton's large-scale multi-media installation *the event of a thread* (2012), it demonstrates an attention to the presence of the tactile, and perhaps most importantly, an attention to the presence of each other.

"We touched with a softness that
pushed through the skin into memory,
like arms plunged into a river"
— Simon van Booy

"The moment was all; the moment was enough."

— Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

"It was all : it was nothing : it was more than enough."

— Ali Smith, *How to be Both*

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Introduction

There is a hall with 3.000.000 cubic feet of air. Swings suspend in squares of light. A white cloth hangs in the middle of the hall, its liquidity responsive to the movement of the swings. Beneath it, strangers lie on the wooden floor side by side, breathing in unison. A flock of birds is released into flight. At the eastern end of the hall a writer is seated at a table, a blank piece of paper in front of him. He moves forward, breathes and begins. The motions, sounds, and the textures of the materials are bound together around one particular point in space at an instant of time: the crossing of the near at hand and the far away. The hall and the air are the space for Ann Hamilton's installation *the event of a thread* (2012). In this space "we attend to the presence of the tactile", Hamilton writes in the artist statement, "and perhaps most importantly – we attend to each other" (8). By creating an installation both astounding and intimate, she allows its visitors to be, as she puts it, alone together. In a world in which the narrative of 'us versus them' is persistent, Hamilton seeks to make the circumstances for 'we', a place where the communal and the individual can exist side by side (Tippett, "Making and the Spaces We Share"). In order to do so, she considers the moment in which two things momentarily cross, touch, and intersect her art; the tactile quality of the elements in the space her material.

Hamilton's project arose from the incomplete yet profound metamorphosis that writer Rebecca Solnit locates in or around June 1995. In 'What Silicon Valley Has Brought Us' (2014), Solnit describes the consequences that the rise of new networking technologies such as the Internet and the mobile phone have had for human character and experience. Not only does Solnit argue that these technologies fragment and shard our previously large, focused blocks of time, she also argues that the most recent round of technologies contract communication, instead of expand it. She explains:

> I think of that lost world, the way we lived before these new networking technologies, as having two poles: solitude and communion. The new chatter puts us somewhere in between, assuaging fears of being alone without risking real connection. It is a shallow between two deep zones, a safe spot between the dangers of contact with ourselves, with others. (32)

According to Solnit, with our mobile phones in our pockets we are hardly ever truly alone, nor are we ever with someone else completely. Human to human contact has increasingly been mediated through screens: more than before there are visual layers between ourselves and others.

All of our digital technology, porcelain maker and writer Edmund de Waal describes, "make it easier to live in touchlessness" (Anderson). In virtual reality there is plenty to look at, but nothing to actually feel, he continues. De Waal, too, makes a connection between valuing the world of touch and fully valuing other human beings. Although he mainly writes about objects, for De Waal our relationship to the things we can touch says something about the power of presence and of intimacy. As he puts it at the end of his book *The White Road* (2015): "It is this consolation, someone walking part of the way by your side, that means almost everything. Everything" (389).

Contemporary artists and performers are celebrating, challenging and commenting on this changing landscape, one in which open spaces continue to be flooded by various kinds of technology that re-choreograph tactility and human connection. Recently I read a hand-made book that worked in harmony with a mobile application, and as I was reading the lines of the book, I found myself simultaneously having a conversation with a pre-recorded voice coming from the application on my phone. The experience called *Six Conversations* was created by Circumstance, an initiative that through this particular literary project aimed to explore the different ways of being present within a narrative. Where was I when someone was talking right into my ear but I couldn't see them? Where was I when I was not speaking but someone was listening nonetheless?

Art collectives like Circumstance are all part of what art historian Shirley Madhill describes as a shift within art making that moves from understanding art as "direct representation of seen reality to [art as] the expression of felt experience" (9). One of the most widely recognized representatives of this movement is visual artist Ann Hamilton (1956) who is mainly known for "the sensory surrounds of her large-scale multi-media installations" (Hamilton, "Biography"). In her 2012 installation *the event of a thread*, she uses a monumental silk sheet, a field of swings, a radio transmitter and an old typewriter to create an ephemeral yet visceral and haptic event that expresses the crossing of the faraway and the nearby and the meaning of presence within experience. She describes the questions that lie at the root of her work as: "How do you make the condition for tactile experience, which isn't literally always touching?" (Tippett, "Making and the Spaces We Share") How do we inhabit the spaces in which our reach is extended and amplified by technology? How is that tactile, and what is the nature of 'we' in that? And when asked what the question is that we should be asking now, in this tumultuous century, she answers: "Well, how to be together. That seems like the biggest question. How to be together" (Tippett).

The importance and relevance of tactile experience have also been recognised and evoked by contemporary writers. Scottish writer Ali Smith (1962), for example, wrote her postmodernist

novel *How to be Both* (Hamish Hamilton, 2014) partly as a response to the rapid development of digital technology that creates forms of contact that are not always directly tactile. Screens and networking technologies enable us to see and hear one another across time and space, but it is actual touch that doesn't translate. These developments amplify human presence at a distance, extending it to such an extent that the reach of the voice becomes greater "than the reach of one's touch" (Tippett). Smith is interested in the contact that is engendered by these virtual spaces we inhabit, those that Hamilton refers to as a "new piece of architecture for our lives" (Tippett). How are the spaces between people conducive to tactile experience and human connection, even when they do not offer the possibility of actual touch? Smith demonstrates the poignancy of this question by relating it to the state of the world we are living in right now. With millions of people moving around on earth, the question of whether to open or build walls in spaces in-between is urgent and omnipresent. Similar to Hamilton's question on how to be together, Smith asks: "How can we live in the world and not put our hand across a divide? How can we live with ourselves? It isn't either/or. It's and/and/and. That's what life is" (Laing).

It is the and/and/and of life, the hand reaching out to another hand and the attention for that what binds us, that her novel *How to be Both* arose from. In harmony with the omnipresence of virtual in-between spaces, Smith concentrates to a large extent on the spaces that exist between bodies and therefore between skin and skin, instead of on the contact of skin on skin itself. In *How to be Both* she experiments with form and content by "adapting the artistic techniques of fresco painting to literature", layering and intertwining the narratives of a modern, grieving teenager and an eccentric Italian renaissance fresco painter (Clark). By letting them brush past each other across miles and centuries, Smith lets them speak at and through each other, offering a meditation on what life after death feels like. The teenage girl George is mourning the loss of her mother, and without remembering how she once died, the Italian Franchesco is given a second chance at life by being parachuted into the twenty-first century. In a novel concerned with both proximity and distance, Smith explores if and how tactile experience can lie somewhere in between.

Yet tactility is not only a theme that is urgent today; it is a theme that has also been addressed during the time of modernism. At the beginning of the twentieth century technological and mechanical as well as scientific developments re-directed the attention of writers towards the notion of touch. The cinema, mechanised transport and the rapidly modernising city all transformed sensory and bodily experience. In the time that English writer Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941) was working on her modernist novel *The Waves* (Hogarth Press, 1931) she was prompted to re-think the very nature of the skin, the surface of the body that is perceptible to touch. The

discovery of the X-ray in 1895 had provided a new perspective on the body that was now open to penetration. The discovery of the electron in 1897, that suggested that the atom was not indivisible but made up of different parts, had given people the sense that the skin was not a smooth hard surface, but something in motion, permeable and impermeable at the same time (Garrington, "Touching Texts" 814). In Woolf's *The Years* (1937), the narrative voice states: "What was it made of? Atoms? And what were atoms, and how did they stick together? The smooth hard surface (…) seemed to her for a second a marvellous mystery" (126).

Woolf explores what the fluid quality of the skin meant for the skin-to-skin connection of tactile experience in *The Waves*, a novel on the meeting and parting of seven friends whose lives are inextricably bound together.[1] Moving from childhood to adolescence to old age, the characters grow up, fall in and out of love, age, and mourn the loss of one of their closest friends. Its colloquy of voices is combined with nine italicised interludes that describe the rising and setting of the sun across a seascape. Even though Woolf's and Smith's contexts are time-wise years apart, both authors were confronted with developments that gave rise to a kind of virtual space, a different kind of surface, in which things were neither here nor there, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time they were all of these at once (Ley). Networking technologies signify immediate connectivity across distance, and the new knowledge of the skin exposed the transitory quality of the body's surface. The way tactile experience seemed to transform re-directed Woolf's and Smith's attention to touch, the sense that became increasingly significant as the worlds through which they moved were rapidly changing.[2]

This thesis attempts to answer the question of how writers Virginia Woolf and Ali Smith approach tactile experience within the touch-transforming contexts from which their writings emerge. In order to answer this question, Woolf's modernist novel *The Waves* and Smith's postmodernist novel *How to be Both* are analyzed from the perspective of a tactful reading. In *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing* (2015), literary scholar Sarah Jackson lays the foundation for an approach to literary texts that is tactful, meaning an approach that requires

[1] There are critics that read Woolf predominantly as "a writer of psychological exploration, with an interest in the body only in metaphorical terms" (Garrington, *Haptic Modernism* 49). Yet as Sarah Jackson's tactile poetics will demonstrate, even the metaphorical repertoire of the skin can reveal an approach to tactile experience.

[2] The developments described in this chapter form in the following chapters what is referred to as 'touch-transforming contexts.' In order to make the research as clear and transparent as possible, I distinguish the context surrounding the case studies from the movements in which they were written. It does not lie in the scope of this thesis to explore the specific differences in the ways that modernism and postmodernism *as movements* have engaged with the tactile sense. To truly and responsibly answer such a question, more case studies would need to be analyzed in order to support the claims that could be made. Because context and movement are, of course, intimately related to one another, certain qualities of modernism and postmodernism, such as their attitude towards time, are integrated in the tactful reading when the works are being introduced and situated. However, this thesis does not answer the question of how modernism and postmodernism as a whole have approached the tactile sense. Instead, it concentrates on the way Woolf's and Smith's works respond to their direct contexts that encompassed developments that influenced the experience of the tactile.

both close attention to and distance from the text. At the core of a tactful reading lies an analogy between text and skin. Text engages in the metaphorical repertoire of the skin: both can be understood as surfaces that can be read and written upon (Jackson 23). In her work, Jackson concentrates for the most part on the way a text can function like a skin. In contrast to Jackson, this work does not only concentrate on the notion of skin itself, but also and to the same degree on the space that exists beyond the skin and therefore, on the space between text and reader. In *The Waves* tactile experience is predominantly located in the contact of skin on skin; in *How to be Both* there is a greater attention for a form of tactile experience that lies in the space between skin and skin. Passages in the texts as well as the texts themselves express Woolf's approach to tactile experience as a touch that transforms and Smith's approach to tactile experience as a touch that reaches out.

Exploring these approaches to tactile experience has the following three aims. Firstly, by analogizing the approaches to tactile experience to the memorial practices exhibited in and by the texts, it sheds light on the thematic concern of the novels. Memory, the place where the past and the present momentarily cross, touch and intersect, can be considered to express the tensions between change and continuation, and between closeness and distance, that respectively lie at the core of tactile experience as a touch that transforms and a touch that reaches out. Secondly, by not only concentrating on the skin but also on the space beyond the skin, this thesis offers a critical reflection on the divide between close and distance reading that a tactful approach to literary texts attempts to bring together. It aims to open up a discussion on tactful reading itself. Finally, by allowing different artworks, contexts, and theories to come together, it also hopes to find a meaningful angle on recent innovative literary projects that respond to some of today's most poignant issues regarding digital technology, tactility and human connection and capture it.

Chapter 1
Towards a Tactile Poetics: Text and Skin

This chapter establishes a theoretical framework on the basis of the tactile poetics from literary scholar Sarah Jackson, who has offered the first sustained study on the intimate links between writing and touching. It first situates the tactile poetics in the wider field of tactile-oriented criticism, after which it looks more closely at Jackson's approach and relates it to the readings of *The Waves* and *How to be Both*.

1.1 Tactile-oriented Criticism

The starting point for this research on tactility and literature is the work of literary scholar Sarah Jackson, who has offered the first sustained study on the intimate links between touching and writing.[3] Despite the attention for the surface of the body in recent scholarship, the relationship between text and skin has remained relatively underexposed. Even though writers have explored text and touch for centuries, a coherent critical perspective on their relationship is only just beginning to be established. In *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing* (2015) Jackson offers a possible perspective in the form of a tactile poetics. She does so by drawing on a range of insights regarding touch by thinkers of deconstruction such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy and Algerian-French literary critic Hélène Cixous and through a special form of close reading of work by writers such as Anne Carson and Michael Ondaatje. The result is an approach to the role of touch and tact in literature that does not seek to offer conclusions, but to open passageways:

> As a 'touch paper' for ongoing critical debate, or as a site of tactile exchange, this book does not seek to provide a totalising account of touch in literature; instead, it hopes to tender a series of openings or passageways to thinking through an impossible tact. And rather than closing down a discussion of touch, it is this impossible tact that opens up to something other, something to come. (11)

With the term 'impossible tact' Jackson refers to the double bind of the type of reading she coins 'tactful reading': a reading that "requires at the same time close attention to and distance from the text" (7). In her understanding, a tactful reading of a literary text should be in accordance with the way one would approach a skin: with gentleness and appropriate, unmanipulative handling.

[3] Dr. Sarah Jackson is an award-winning writer and a senior lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University.

Jackson argues that an approach that is simultaneously close and distant might seem impossible, yet that it is at the same time a perspective that can open up a way for exploring how skin, and text, can be two seemingly opposing things at once: permeable and impermeable, touchable and untouchable. Jackson approaches the relationship between tactility and contemporary writing along a series of six categories divided from 'Touch Paper I' to 'Touch Paper VI': skin, touch, tact, feeling, reaching out, and a final interruption. Summarised very briefly, she defines these concepts in the following way. The skin refers to the origin, the medium. The bond between text and skin lies at the core of Jackson's tactile poetics.[4] If text "can function as a skin", writing might be able to touch a reader (4). Touch is not only the contact between surfaces, but also the interval between them.[5] Tact refers to the way the reader handles words; to a manner of close yet distant reading that does not press too harshly on a text, but that approaches it carefully. Feeling refers to the metaphor of touch in relation to an emotional 'touching', in other words, to something that is a deeply felt experience. Reaching out refers to the variety of 'literary textures' that Jackson brings together: she gathers texts of several genres, including novel, poetry and the short story. A final interruption refers to the fact that with 'touching', Jackson means 'touchings'. She does not speak of "a single, unified, homogenised touch, but a touching that is plural, varied in tone and texture" (11). All of these aspects together allow the literary critic to "think about how texts touch not only their readers, but also touch on themselves and each other" (2).

As it is the only and most substantial study of its kind, Jackson's tactile poetics is this thesis' point of departure. Since her approach is built on a substantial body of scholarship concerning tactility, this wider theoretical engagement too becomes part of its critical perspective. For this reason the sensuous scholarship that has preceded and inspired Jackson will be explored first, after which the chapter returns to Jackson's specific literary approach. The most influential studies that Jackson draws on and responds to in her work are Laura U. Marks' *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (2000) and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002), Jennifer M. Barker's *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (2009), Constance Classen's *The Deepest Sense: a Cultural History of Touch* (2012) and Abbie Garrington's *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (2013). The following section will provide a brief overview of these works to create an understanding of the wider field in which research on tactility and literature is situated.[6]

[4] Identifying this bond, Jackson writes: "The skin and writing are both processes that involve materiality and signification, limits and possibilities, thought and affect, difference and identity. (…) We cannot think about the skin without touching on its 'writerly effect'" (Jackson 1).

[5] The interval between surfaces returns at a later point in the chapter.

[6] The aim of the overview is to create an awareness of the relevant critics in the field that Jackson is 'in touch with'. For a more in-depth approach to how each of them individually has influenced her work, I refer to the introduction

A Cultural History of Touch: Constance Classen

In *The Deepest Sense: a Cultural History of Touch* (2012) cultural historian Constance Classen undertakes a historical exploration into the sense of touch. Observing that no one has ever written a history of touch, she aims to bring tactile experience to the forefront of the humanities and the social sciences. For a long time, touch was considered the most subordinate of our senses, reminiscent of a more primitive, uncivilized mode of perception. Classen considers touch, the instant of skin-meets-world, as the very sense that can make the past come alive by looking at history and allowing oneself to see historical figures as human beings of flesh and blood, rather than lifeless puppets. In this way, she aims to move away from a disembodied account of history, and imbue the past with a kind of tangibility: "Exploring the history of touch makes the past come alive. It clothes the dry bones of historical fact with the flesh of physical sensation" (xii). To grasp the sensory life of past societies and the meaning of tactility they adopted Classen moves from the early Middle Ages to modernity, which simultaneously meant a movement away from the communal and towards the individual.

The findings in *The Deepest Sense: a Cultural History of Touch* are an extension of the quest she began seven years earlier. In *The Book of Touch* (2005), Classen looked at the senses and the experiential world not so much to create an embodied account of the past, but to more deeply understand social life. In order to do so, she argued how touch seems to work like a language, as our hands and bodies can speak and compose their own vocabulary and grammar. At the same time she acknowledged that touch precedes and overwhelms language: "language seems too formal and linear a model for tactile communication" (13). However, like Jackson, she does see a parallel between the realm of language and the realm of the body. She for example understands both the page and the skin as backgrounds on which codes can be imprinted.

Haptic Criticism: Laura U. Marks and Jennifer M. Barker

A form of criticism that is in particular informed by questions of touch and tactility is haptic criticism. Haptic criticism involves a tactile approach to an object of research. Film theorist Laura U. Marks has offered one of the most influential accounts in the field of haptic-oriented film criticism in recent years. Marks considers Aloïs Riegl as the origin of the term haptic as she uses it in her work *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002). At the turn of the twentieth century, Austrian born art historian Riegl (1858 – 1905) approached the history of art with attention to physical tactility. By 1887 Riegl had become a keeper of textiles, which is an

of *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing*. Momentarily letting go of chronology, Classen's is the starting point as it is concerned with a general history of touch, whereas the other critics are more concerned with formulating and taking up a tactile approach to their object of research.

experience that might have inspired his tactile way of looking at art. Tracing the line from ancient Egyptian art to Roman art, he observed "the gradual demise of a physical tactility in art and the rise of figurative space" (Marks 4). Whereas in the haptic style of Egyptian art there was a sense of an object sticking fast to the two-dimensional surface of a plane, in Roman art this tactile connection from object to plane was largely replaced by more illusionistic, optical figures overlapping the ground on which they were displayed. Riegl points out that the moment this kind of illusionistic space is created, a ground plane no longer exists: a flat, unified visual background has transformed into a spatial ground with the potential to evoke a sense of depth.

In *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901), Riegl defines this figure-ground inversion in more detail and gives an account of its effects. One of the consequences of this inversion is that a beholder looking at a Roman work of art does not identify figures as "concrete elements on a surface but as figures in a space" (5). This experience creates a greater distance between the object represented within the artwork and the beholder perceiving this object, and is defined by Riegl as optical, rather than tactile in nature. Modes of representation that could be considered tactile were those that as Marks observes were generally considered subordinate to the general development of Western art: ornament, textile art, surface-oriented rococo painting as well as traditions such as weaving and embroidery that pointed to the presence of the tactile were thought inferior (6). What these traditions have a common is that they invite a specific gaze: a tactile looking that lingers over the surface of the object. It is this gaze that Marks eventually translates to the way that a haptic critic approaches the object of research, which is in her case a film.

Within the field of film studies, Marks defines this tactile gaze as 'haptic looking' and describes it as follows: "Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture" (8). Although haptic looking, concentrating on surface and texture, is different from optical looking, concentrating on depth and form, Marks stresses their relationship. Drawing on the work of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Fe□ lix Guattari, Marks argues that the haptic and the optical are not a dichotomy, but that they are intimately bound to one another. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) Deleuze and Guattari appropriate Riegl's distinction between haptic and optical images to distinguish between 'smooth' space and 'striated' space. The term 'smooth' space refers to environments that are known haptically rather than by abstractions like maps or signs, such as deserts or large fields of snow. 'Striated' space, on the other hand, refers to environments that are known by distant vision rather than close touch, such as cities. Similar to the way that Deleuze and Guattari's 'smooth' space flows into 'striated' space when the expanse

of the land meets the streets of the city, Marks restores a flow between the optical and the haptic: one can transform into the other and the other way around.

Translated to haptic film criticism, this means that a film can both invite optical looking by allowing a viewer the distance to define and name things, as well as haptic looking by allowing a viewer the intimacy of sensory experience (12). Cinematic qualities such as grainy images, changes in focus and close-to-the-body camera positions emphasize the tactile, material presence of an image, and force the beholder to consider it as something other than only a visual representation. For the haptic critic, in other words a critic that adopts a haptic looking, "the film signifies through its materiality" (Marks, *The Skin of the Film* xi). In one of her earlier works *The Skin of the Film* (2000) Marks offers a metaphor with which to approach this materiality. To think of film *as* skin allows the critic to consider not only its tactile quality but also to consider it as something one can be in contact with. Marks finds a model for the act of haptic criticism in fractal algorithms, since they mirror the complexity of the elements they are related to. Similarly, haptic criticism can take on a meaningful, complex form itself by paying attention to the textures of an object and using this experience in the structure of the analysis itself.

Seven years after Marks' *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* Jennifer M. Barker's *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (2009) appeared. Barker's study builds on the trend of the sensual dimension of cinema and embodied spectatorship. Like Marks, Barker is considerably inspired by the work of cinema and media theorist Vivian Sobchack (1940) who defines the embodied relationship between film and viewer in *The Address of the Eye* (1992). Through phenomenological analysis, Sobchack argues that vision is 'fleshed out' and is meaningful because of our bodies, not to the side of our bodies (60). Following Marks who thinks of the eye as an organ of touch, and of film as skin, Barker takes up a tactile attitude towards film. She understands this tactile attitude as 'a style of being'. Drawing on the work of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 – 1961), Baker describes this style of being as "a mode through which the body – human or cinematic – presents and expresses itself to the world and through which it perceives that same world as sensible" (2). This mode runs both through objects and through our interaction with objects. She is therefore not only interested in the structures, patterns, rhythms and movements within cinematic images, she also exemplifies how to connect them to "the way meaning and affect emerge in the (…) encounter between films and viewers" (13).

In "Be-hold: Touch, Temporality, and the Cinematic Thumbnail Image" for example, Barker describes how the thumbnail image as cinematic trope evokes a space that offers the potential to think about the simultaneity of seemingly opposing categories such as movement and

stillness, closeness and distance, and connection and distinction. By showing a hand holding a photograph within the film's frame, the cinema invites the beholder to go over the different surfaces of film and photograph that are simultaneously present and explore the myriad of meaning that is established in this one moment in the eyes of the beholder. By also analogizing the photographic image to the process of racial identity, Barker relates this moment to an important theme in the film she looks at to describe its significance. Barker thus foregrounds the body of both film and viewer, and concentrates on what happens in the space in-between. The event in the in-between is always rooted in the structure of the cinematic image, so she too looks closely and carefully at camera position, zooming in and zooming out, and specific cinematic tropes referring to materiality and physicality, such as the thumbnail image.

The Haptic and Literary Studies: Abbie Garrington

Whereas a haptic approach has been widely explored in the realms of art history, philosophy and film studies, the field of literary studies has only recently begun to pay attention to the potential of the haptic for the analysis of the written word. A major recent contribution to the way that the haptic sense can be brought in conversation with literary studies has been offered by literary scholar Abbie Garrington, who has identified the haptic in the work of some canonical writers of the modernist period. In the article "Touching Texts: The Haptic Sense in Modernist Literature" (2010) Garrington outlines the framework for a haptic-oriented study of literature that three years later forms the basis of her book *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (2013). Similar to Marks' focus on the flat screen of film, Garrington is interested in the way that literature, having only a flat page at its disposal, "may still describe and engage the haptic sense" (Garrington, "Touching Texts" 812). In order to explore how, she offers an overview of various haptic-oriented theorists, of which professor of English Steven Connor's conceptual history on the human skin is particularly relevant in relation to making the translation from screen to page. In *The Book of Skin* (2004), Connor writes:

> If there were one function of the skin that might seem to unite or underly all the others, it would be that of providing a background. Like the cinema screen upon which images play (...) or the paper on which words are scrawled or stamped, the skin is always in the background. (...) but its more fundamental condition is to be that on top of which things occur, develop or are disclosed. (37 – 38)

Connor analogizes viewing and reading by making a connection to the skin; both the screen and the page are spaces where experiences unfold. After considering the work of Connor, Garrington discusses the influence of Marks' haptic criticism while at the same time partly distancing herself from it. Acknowledging that "the haptic can be invoked in the viewer/reader despite the unmodulated surface of the screen/page" (Garrington, "Touching Texts" 812), Marks' ethical approach to cinema "shifts her use of the haptic far from an analysis of modernist literature" (813).[7] The difference between their approaches could be defined even more sharply. Whereas Marks integrates the tactile in the very way she thinks of the cinematic object, Garrington considers tactility as something that is depicted within and evoked by a text. The difference between the two approaches is subtle, but its consequence is significant, which will be clarified and illustrated below.

Because Garrington sees a fundamental connection between the haptic sense and the modernist period, she analyzes canonical writers such as Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and D.H. Lawrence that all responded to the changing technological and social landscape of their time that renewed their attention to the tactile. The rise of cities, the discovery of X-ray vision, and urban travel were all developments that profoundly changed the experiential qualities of the body in relation to the world around it. For her analysis of Woolf's *Night and Day* (1919) for example, one of the aspects she looks at is the body in relation to travel in urban environment. Garrington approaches motorcar travel as a haptic experience that is represented by the text in the following way: "I said to myself: Gone, gone; over, over; past and done with, past and done with. I feel life left behind even as the road is left behind" (Garrington, "Touching Texts" 816). Garrington argues that by repeating the words,

> Woolf tells the reader of the impossibility of ordering such experiences into straightforwardly linear narratives, and in doing so they convey the experience of Woolf herself, or of her characters. (816)

As Garrington's close reading shows, the text has the potential to not only convey haptic experience by capturing it in words; it can also evoke the haptic sense by the particular rhythm of the sentences. Fundamental to Marks' tactile approach as well as Barker's is the fact that by using the eye like an organ of touch, the image materializes. With the screen no longer being the purely visual medium one generally presumes it to be, their relationship to it changes from one defined by distant observation to one defined by close connection (Barker 2). For Garrington, creative

[7] Marks looks at intercultural film and video works that raise not only aesthetic and cultural questions, but also ethical concerns regarding morally charged themes, issues of representation and effects of ideology.

literary work can depict and evoke the haptic sense because it is not only a physical sensation but also a psychological orientation (Garrington, "Touching Texts" 811).[8] Garrington therefore partly moves away from the physical and the material aspects that Marks and Barker depend more heavily on all throughout their work. In contrast, Garrington does not take up a tactile attitude towards an object. Despite the potential of a text to describe and evoke a haptic sense, she continues to think of text as text.

Before returning to Jackson's approach, there is one more example of the way in which the haptic sense as it is understood by Marks has been brought in conversation with literary studies.[9] This approach connects the haptic to the physical object of the book. In 'Toward an Interactive Criticism: House of Leaves as Haptic Interface' Jesse Stommel from the Digital Pedagogy Lab connects Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) as a physical object to Marks' act of haptic criticism. Stommel argues that *House of Leaves* demands Marks' form of haptic looking, because the book draws attention to its objectness:

> Whereas we might otherwise think of literature as making an abstraction of a tangible thing, turning matter into story, Danielewski reminds us of the fact that literature makes a thing of a thing, turning matter in the world into the matter of the page and into the matter inside our skulls. (Stommel)

In the encounter between reader and printed book, every reader will handle the book differently: some will read it from cover to cover, others will browse, scan, or simply bend the book back and forth. By referring to the book as 'thing' and 'matter' Danielewski stresses the physicality of literature. The actual, tactile form of *House of Leaves*, together with its unusual typography and the blue colour of the word 'house', impacts the reader's mind and body. According to Stommel, it resists the reader's attempt for meaning making while also sharing an abundance of *material*. Ultimately, he uses Marks' haptic criticism as an inspiration for what he coins interactive literary criticism: a form of critical thinking that considers literature as something that engages us and that we, the readers, in turn, engage. This form of criticism is less about completely interpreting a text and more about the disruption and reconciliation of interpretation in the space in-between text and reader. In *House of Leaves*, Danielewski seems to do just that by creating "the moment

[8] Garrington defines haptic as "having a greater dependence on sensations of touch than on sight, especially as a means of psychological orientation" (Garrington, "Touching Texts" 811).
[9] Jackson does not include this perspective in the tactile poetics, but it is part of this chapter in order to make the overview of the field complete.

where what we see just barely touches but does not yet become what we know or believe" (Stommel).

Tactful Reading: Sarah Jackson

The extensive body of work by these diverse thinkers is integrated into the work of Jackson. Like all of them she acknowledges for example that touch is not a single keen sense, but that it works as a broad sensory, combinatorial modality. As such it can be difficult and sometimes problematic to define. This is one of the reasons that these critics show that touch is plural, susceptible to change and signifies "differently in different contexts and cultures" (Jackson 11). Another similarity is their shared attention to the skin, even though they approach and work with the concept of skin in different ways. In particular, there is a significant difference between the tactile approach of haptic critics and the approach of Jackson. Jackson's approach to her objects of research is not tactile, but tactful. In this way she sets her approach apart from a traditional close reading as well as from a haptic reading in the tradition of a haptic looking that switches on bodily and sensory perception in order to fully experience an object. Tact has two meanings: the word both refers to the sense of touch as well as to an attitude of sensitivity and consideration towards a situation or an issue. A tactful approach answers the question of how to read a text with gentleness: if tact refers to a lightness of touch, a tactful reading must mirror a similar sense of reservation. Jackson discusses the work of critic Lisa McNally, who in her book *Reading Theories in Contemporary Fiction* (2013) argues against critic Valentine Cunningham who believes that tactful reading is still a close reading:

> McNally highlights the ironies of this account of close reading, pointing out that Cunningham's discussion incorporates phrases such as 'tending towards', 'approaching near' and 'coming carefully', all of which indicate 'an inclination to touch, which never, in fact, makes contact'. (43)

McNally concludes that within this understanding, a tactful reading might better be called 'distance reading, not close reading'.[10] Jackson argues for a position in which tactful can be both:

[10] The way that the theorists speak of distance reading in contrast to close reading is interesting to read in light of Walter Benjamin's description of the magician's and the surgeon's processes: "The surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short, in contrast to the magician - who is still hidden in the medical practitioner – the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing

a tactful reading involves close attention to *and* distance from the text (7, my emphasis). In the first chapter of the tactile poetics she demonstrates how such a close yet distance reading might look, taking as her focus the relationship between text and skin.[11] The chapter 'Writing Bodies: Hustvedt's Textual Skin' is made up of two parts. Analysing Siri Hustvedt's novel *What I Loved* (2003), the first half of the chapter pays attention to representations of the skin, the surface of the body. Questions Jackson seeks to answer are: In what way is the skin depicted? What is the role of the exploration of the skin in the text? In order to answer questions of this kind, she analyzes specific passages in which the skin is mentioned. This part of her reading demonstrates close attention to the text. The second half of the chapter concentrates on the possibility of what she defines as a textual skin. This part of Jackson's reading requires a distance: rather than interpreting passages in the text, she "examines the text's participation in the metaphorical repertoire of the skin" (23). In this part she no longer locates representations of the skin within the text, but she focuses on how the text itself can be considered to function like a skin. Questions she seeks to answer are: How is the text continually made and unmade, re-written and reread? How does the text challenge its own limits? By answering these questions, she is able to find parallels between text and skin, for example the fact that they both function as "the container, the interface and the inscribing surface" (23). These readings do not attempt to completely grasp the relationship between text and tactility, instead, they try to tender a passageway. This thesis explores the passageway Jackson has created and aims to critically extend and broaden the space it has opened up.

1.2 Skin and Beyond Skin: Virginia Woolf and Ali Smith

This thesis attempts to answer the question of how writers Virginia Woolf and Ali Smith approach tactile experience within the touch-transforming contexts from which their writings emerge. In order to do so, it approaches the modernist novel *The Waves* and the postmodernist novel *How to be Both* from the perspective of a tactful reading, but also looks at this perspective critically by slightly re-locating the approach' focus. Instead of only focusing on the contact of skin on skin, it also explores what happens in the space between skin and skin. In the tactile poetics, Jackson already hints towards the distance that lies at the heart of touching. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, she writes: "It is the interval or spacing between two surfaces that becomes the very conditions of contact. A certain untouchability, then,

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the patient man to man; rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him" (Benjamin 217). Whereas their understanding of distance reading is reminiscent of the magician's careful laying of hands, their understanding of close reading is reminiscent of the surgeon who cuts into the body.

[11] Jackson explains: "Let us start, or start over, then, at the skin, for Jacques Derrida is not alone in his insistence that 'a thinking of touch must at least go through a theory of skin'" (2).

lies at the heart of a text on tact" (6) and "a thinking of touch, this thought of what 'touching' means, must touch on the untouchable" (83).[12] It was Derrida who observed that it was "about time to speak of the voice that touches – always at a distance, like the eye" (70), suggesting that there is a form of tactile experience that is evoked by senses other than the sense of touch, such as hearing and seeing. This thesis takes these reflections into consideration as it challenges the sense of immediacy that is, understandably, emphasized by studies on touch. Working from the perspective of a tactful approach to literary texts means attempting to look at the text both from up close and from a distance. The first part of the following two chapters looks closely at how tactile experience is represented *in* a text, the second part of the chapters take a step back to look at how tactile experience is represented *by* a text.[13]

The chapter on *The Waves* explores how the text expresses tactile experience as a touch that transforms. In this analysis, the focus therefore lies on the contact of skin on skin, and consequently on the contact of text and reader. A key assumption running through the analysis is how the transformative potential of touch is not a question of either change or continuation, but that the process of transformation demands them both. The chapter on *How to be Both* explores how the text expresses tactile experience as a touch that reaches out. In this analysis, the focus therefore lies on the space between skin and skin, and consequently on the space between text and reader. A key assumption running through the analysis is how reaching out is not a question of either closeness or distance, but that towardness demands them both. By analogizing these observations to memorial practice, the shared thematic concern of the novels, it sheds light on the way that memory can be considered to express the tensions between change and continuation and between closeness and distance that lie at the core of Woolf's and Smith's approaches to tactile experience. The final chapter of this thesis summarises its insights and reflects on the practice of tactful reading as an approach that situates itself between two opposing inflections. It concludes by making a link to recent innovative literary projects that reflect on some of the most poignant issues today regarding digital technology, tactility and human connection.

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[12] As mentioned in the introduction, it is important to look at the movement engendered by the space in-between more extensively, as it is also the very thing that lies at the heart of tactful reading: it is a tending towards, an approaching near, that never makes actual contact. In doing so, this thesis also offers a critical reflection on the divide between close and distance reading that tactful reading attempts to bring together.

[13] Following the labelling of Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan in *Narrative Fiction*, this thesis defines text as follows: "Whereas story is a succession of events, 'text' is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the text is what we read. In it, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective (…). Of the three aspects of narrative fiction [story, text, narration], the text is the only one directly available to the reader. It is through the text that he or she acquires knowledge of the story (its object) and of the narration (process of its production)" (Rimmon-Kenan 3).

Chapter 2
A Touch that Transforms: *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf

This chapter analyzes Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* from the perspective of a tactful reading. It first situates and contextualises the novel, after which it approaches the text from up close and from a distance. In contrast to *How to be Both*, the focus of *The Waves* lies on the skin-on-skin connection of tactile experience.

2.1 Introducing *The Waves*

In October 1931 Hogarth Press published *The Waves* by English writer Virginia Woolf (1882 – 1941). In the years following the First World War, a way of life had gone forever. Woolf and her contemporaries navigated the first decade of a new millennium in which the shelters of tradition, Church and class had become increasingly fragile. Woolf began to experience the world as a vast unknown uncertain continent that could no longer be written about in "the method of the nineteenth century" (Winterson XIV). As a result she created *The Waves*, a highly modernist text that reflected this rapidly changing world and that would eventually be described as her least accessible, most challenging work of literature. Blurring the distinctions between genres, she aimed to turn the book into a new form that consisted of prose, poetry, novel and play at the same time (Goldman 69). In an interview, Smith describes Woolf as the writer who changed the shapes and possibilities for every form she wrote in: "She wanted boundaries to overlap, a form of cross-fertilization. Maybe she even wanted boundaries to over*leap*" (Clark). Woolf partly moved away from an omniscient third-person narrator and gave the majority of the narrating and the focalizing to a very diverse set of characters who express themselves in a stream of consciousness: impressions that pass through their minds are displayed in a continuous flow of words. As these impressions pass by, there is an emphasis not on *what* is seen, but on *how* is seen. As a result a pattern of reading emerges that Smith describes in the following way:

> Where are we in this gallery full of representations of shapes that are seen in different times by different eyes? All we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the figures will begin to move and to speak and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant as they spoke, we will read into their sayings all kind of meanings. (Clark)

The effect that Smith describes is created by the intermingling of six focalizers who all look out into the world in a different way, as if the perspective shifts from one camera to another.[14] It would follow that this continuous flow of change makes the reader feel lost and disoriented, but Woolf does not let go of solidity and coherence altogether. In her introduction to *The Waves*, writer Jeanette Winterson describes how Woolf wanted something different and risky, but still needed to keep control (XIV). Both the fact that the character's lives follow a trajectory from youth to adolescence to adulthood and, most importantly, the rhythmic presence of nine gestative sections provide a sense of coherence that the reader can hold onto.

The regularity of time is most clearly reinforced by nine italicized sections that are dispersed throughout the novel from beginning to end. Reading *The Waves* against the backdrop of modernism, a tension can be observed between the characters' personal, subjective experience of time and the natural passage of time expressed in the italicized interludes. The way Woolf as well as other modernist writers have dealt with temporality is often related to the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941) who challenged his readership to "think of time not as a line, or a chain, or a succession of hours and minutes, but as 'pure heterogeneity'" (Taunton). This conception allowed many modernists to let go of conventional temporal structures and, as Woolf herself expressed, "to record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall" (Woolf, *The Common Reader* 109). Yet despite the dominant presence of the mind, *The Waves* is still attached to the trappings of time: whilst the impressions, observations and thoughts of the characters refuse to let themselves be linked to the succession of hours and minutes, the italicized sections emphasize the regular passage of time: the descriptions of the sun rising and setting continuously return and provide a rhythm. They represent the eternal renewal, in Bernard's words, the "incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again" (Woolf, *The Waves* 214).

Seventy years after Hogarth Press first published Woolf's experimental text, Penguin Random House UK re-published *The Waves*. The cover of the Vintage Classics edition was created by Helsinki-based artist Aino-Maija Metsola. Metsola designed a series of six of Virginia Woolf's books, which also includes *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *The Years* (1937). All covers feature scenic, ambient and abstract compositions that are brightly coloured. The design of *The Waves* is ephemeral and atmospheric, with only one line of handwritten text on the back of the book that says: *'I am made and remade*

14 Woolf's work has often been called cinematographic, and Woolf herself was also interested in cinematic experience. In the essay "The Movies and Reality", Woolf writes about the position from which one sees: "From this point of vantage, as we watch the antics of our kind, we have time to feel pity and amusement, to generalize, to endow one man with the attributes of the race. Watching the boat sail and the wave break, we have time to open our minds wide to beauty and register on top of it the queer sensation — this beauty will continue, and this beauty will flourish whether we behold it or not" (Popova).

continually.' The continuous sense of creation expressed by these words is illustrated by Metsola's colourful, circle-like silhouettes that are but half covering the wavering blue lines on the front of the cover. The light, true but brief, or brief but true, the rhythm of the waves, continuous but changing, or changing but continuous – no matter what one prefers, there is no solidity: everything shifts, storms and drowns (Winterson XIV). *The Waves* is made from the soliloquies spoken by six characters whose lives and relationships form the material for their reflections. Bernard, Susan, Rhoda, Neville, Jinny, and Louis voice their thoughts, feelings and observations as they grow up and are all affected by the loss of Percival, a seventh character that does not speak in his own voice.

The colloquy of the six voices is combined with nine italicised interludes that describe the rising and setting of the sun across a seascape. Taking the nine separate parts that are dispersed throughout the text together, they describe the following scene. Since the sun has not yet risen, the sea is indistinguishable from the sky. When the sun starts to rise, and the sky lights up, a line that divides the sea from the sky becomes visible. As the sun rises, the light touches windows, chairs and tables, flowers and walls, turning everything amorphous, as if the objects were liquid. The sun rises higher, the light brings out circles and lines, illuminating separate shapes. Whatever the light touches reveals itself. Only when the sun sinks, darkness deepens, covering everything from sight. And all the while, the waves "broke and spread their waters swiftly over the shore, one after another they massed themselves and fell" (Woolf, *The Waves* 106). Understanding touch as the moment when two things are so close to one another that no space remains between them, Woolf vividly describes this moment in relation to the natural phenomenon of light covering the surface of the world. Throughout the text, the lyrical, italicized sections are connected to stages in the regular text that concern the lives of the characters. For example, the first lyrical section explores how the surface of the sea becomes transparent and things flow into one another: one stroke of water and another, the grey and the blue of the sky, the wall of a house and the fingerprint of a shadow (3 – 4). The passage of the lives of the characters that follows explores how the characters, too, seem to drift into and away from one another when touched, like the shapes of the land and the sea that blur and overflow.

2.2 A Tactful Reading of *The Waves*

Within her focus on the skin-on-skin connection of tactile experience, in *The Waves* Woolf approaches tactile experience as a touch that transforms. Each transformation involves a tension between change and continuation. Scholar Nicole Anderson defines transformation not as a radical change or replacement so extreme that the previous 'thing' disappears and becomes

unrecognizable, but as "a repetition of the past (and thus an acknowledgement and recognition of that which we inherit) but with a difference" (106). The transformative process changes something yet analogously, it continues it as that which has gone before does not disappear completely, but remains to be present. Something that is transformed is simultaneously the same and different from the thing that precedes it: it is other to that which has gone before, yet has arisen out of it (107). In relation to *The Waves*, the aspect that will be considered is how skin, being something more than simple unchangeable surface matter, can be wrapped up in processes of change and continuation as two surfaces make contact. Drawing on research by Steven Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy and Michel Serres, in *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing* Jackson observes that the nature of the skin, the boundary of the body, is complex and contradictory. As the liminal space between one thing and another, it divides inside from outside and self from other. What makes it complex rather than simple is that it is not superficial or homogeneous, but a permeable site of mingling and motility. French philosopher and author Michel Serres has outlined how the skin moves, not as a solid mass but as a fluid substance, "troubling our distinctions between inside and outside, and between self and other" (Jackson 34). Serres argues that the skin is "a confluence not a system, a mobile confluence of fluxes. Turbulences, overlapping cyclones and anticyclones, like on the weather map. An assembly of relations" (38).

As mentioned in the introduction, the awareness of the motility of the skin is what made Woolf re-think what was previously considered the smooth, hard surface of the skin and explore what that meant for the contact of one skin and another. *The Waves* expresses the tension between change and continuation in two ways. From up close, Woolf demonstrates how instances of touch make the characters experience that the surfaces of their bodies change even as they continue to divide inside from outside; not quite merging, not fully apart. The characters experience their skins as sensitive and percipient, and touch as something that creates a flow between outside and inside. The result is that the characters plunge into one another: "all divisions are merged – they act like one man" (Woolf, *The Waves* 64). From a distance, the interplay between the regular and italicized sections of the text changes and continues moments by at the same time suspending them and setting the narrative in motion. These aspects can be analogized to *The Waves*' exploration of the theme of memory. Memory, the ability to bring to one's mind an awareness of the past, continues the past in the present by pulling it back and releasing it again, mirroring the rhythm of the waves.

Close

In *The Waves*, Woolf records the unfolding relationships of a group of friends as they grow up, meet, come together and fall apart. They know both moments of contact and moments of separation, but regardless of the state they are in their roots are threaded, "lightly joining one thing to another" (34). The novel is polyphonic: it consists of multiple interconnected voices and viewpoints. There are six focalizing characters that the reader comes to know directly, and there is one that the reader comes to know entirely *through* the other characters. Bernard, Louis, Neville, Rhoda, Susan and Jinny all narrate their thoughts, feelings and impressions, and it is Percival, who passes away in the story, that never speaks for himself. In *The Waves*, the skin symbolizes the boundary between self and other and allows the characters to enter processes of becoming through the transformative potential of touch. When they are touched, the characters experience the boundaries between self and other as permeable. They perform a continuous exchange that Jinny, the most sensual of all characters, describes in the following way:

> The torments, the divisions of our lives have been solved for me night after night, sometimes only by the touch of a finger under the table-cloth as we sat dining – so fluid has my body become, forming even at the touch of a finger into one full drop, which fills itself, which quivers, which flashes, which falls in ecstasy. (158)

In this passage Jinny expresses how the contact established by the touch of a finger makes her experience the surface of the body turning from solid to fluid. In this passage and the one that follows it, she does not merely observe that she is not isolated or alone; she says that she eddies with the things she touches. In a movement that is comparable to that of fast swirling water she tests boundaries and notes the textures, edges and ridges that change as they continue in another form. From rain that turns into snow and becomes palatable to the flame that flows into smoke and into ash (159): everything symbolizes the way that boundaries, as permeable, liminal zones, are transformed through the contact with something else. In *Hélene Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (2003), literary theorist Abigail Bray describes how *The Waves* is saturated with the continual exploration of the flows between self and other; each character represents a wave that can cross into another wave. The effect of this permeability and intermingling of characters is a tension between a change and continuation of their identities: with each contact the characters are transformed, yet what they were before does not disappear entirely as something of them remains. A character's identity is therefore no longer defined by singularity, but by multiplicity. With one character being able to cross over into another character, each and every one of them

becomes something more. When their skins touch, the characters are not quite merging and not fully apart.

Halfway through the narrative, the characters are confronted with loss: in India Percival falls from his horse and dies. In lives so centred on the tactile contact of self and other, contact with the other becomes impossible. Percival is beyond the characters' reach. Something has come in between, as Bernard addresses to Percival: "If I shall never see you again and fix my eyes on that solidity, what form will our communication take? You have gone across the court, further and further…" (109). Yet in the same breath, Bernard expresses that something of Percival remains. Soon after he has passed away, Bernard begins to touch the edges and surfaces of objects because he doubts their solidity. He then says:

> "Who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, we are divided; we are not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt "I am you". This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome. Yes, ever since old Mrs Constable lifted her sponge and pouring warm water over me covered me with flesh I have been sensitive, percipient. Here on my brow is the blow I got when Percival fell. Here on the nape of my neck is the kiss Jinny gave Louis. My eyes fill with Susan's tears. I see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt. (208)

In Bernard's experience, his skin is susceptible to the skin of the others; it is as if though he is able to feel the blow, the kiss and the wind *they* have felt on their skin. These sensations trace his body, despite the fact that they are not sensations that his skin felt, but theirs. Yet as Bernard remembers them, they temporarily make Percival, for example, as vivid and sensible as the table he is tapping his knuckles on, but only for a moment. Recalling far-gone things as an attempt to shape the past and take it in his hands, Bernard is confronted with memory's transcendency: "here come only fine gusts of melody, waves of incense" (209), he continues. The fine gusts and the waves symbolize the brevity of a memory: it confronts one with the purely momentary nature of life, even as it temporarily holds a past moment up for inspection, continuing it in another time. Memory fleetingly captures a past moment before it lets it go. Mirroring the rhythm of the wave, how it breaks, pulls back and breaks again, Percival is pulled back by memory only to be released again (Bray 195). The act of remembering too, is a transformative process that repeats

the past but with a difference. Through remembering, a past moment transforms to a moment in and of the present and continues it, even though it has changed into the form of a memory. When Bernard remembers, Percival's presence continues in his here and now, even though his memorial practice simultaneously registers loss and affirms absence (Hirsch 23). The following paragraph takes a step back to look at how the text itself performs the tension between change and continuation.

Distance

Confronted with a touch that transforms, the characters in *The Waves* live among the tension of solidity and fluidity, stability and change, motion and suspension. This tension is not only expressed in the text, but it is also expressed *by* the text. The textual structure of *The Waves*, alternating between scenes of the sea and scenes of the characters' lives, continues moments and changes them, making the text a place that, like the skin, can be a confluence of fluxes and a place of transformation. The following chapter on *How to be Both* includes a reflection on the work of Barker who, writing on film, elicits that a shift in camera distance and focal length allows a fleeting glimpse of how two things can be inseparable: by zooming in and out a film draws the viewer toward and away from an image, making what's represented both elusive and palpably present at the same time (Barker, "Be-hold" 200).[15] There is another possibility concerning viewpoint. It can change in position, which is a change similar to the one that takes place regarding the focalization of the characters in *The Waves*. This change in viewpoint does not bring an end to a specific moment, but instead continues and suspends it. The first regular passage about the rising sun, described in the italicized passage that precedes it, is as follows:

> *The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually. (…)*
>
> *The light struck upon the trees in the garden, making one leaf transparent and then another. One bird chirped high up; there was a pause; another chirped lower down. The sun sharpened the walls of the house, and rested like the tip of a fan upon a white blind and made a blue finger-print of shadow under the leaf by the bedroom window. The blind stirred slightly, but all within was dim and unsubstantial. The birds sang their blank melody outside.*

[15] A perspective from the field of film studies is integrated in this paragraph, because of the cinematic quality of Woolf's work and its emphasis on *how* is seen, rather than on *what* is seen. The focalization moves around similar to the way that the viewpoint of a camera changes from position to position.

> "I see a ring," said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."
> "I see a slab of pale yellow," said Susan, "spreading away until it meets a purple stripe."
> "I hear a sound," said Rhoda, "cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down."
> "I see a globe," said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."
> "I see a crimson tassel," said Jinny, "twisted with gold threads."
> "I hear something stamping," said Louis. "A great beast's foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps." (3 – 4)

The angle on the moment of the rising sun is constantly changing and at the same time continues it by, as Winterson writes in her introduction, by making it look different in different lights (XV). The image that is stilled by their descriptions is hold up for the reader's inspection; it is "literally and figuratively suspended in space and time" (Barker, "Be-hold" 196). The descriptions provide a continuation, but only for a moment. The moment continues as the sun is captured in the image of a ring, a slap of pale yellow, yet it is in motion as it rises, through which the moment has already changed. This means that as soon as the moment is described, the moment passes. It is "an otherness barely touched upon that already moves away" (Ahmed 1). That is what Woolf attempts to create and re-create at the same time: suspending a moment that is always, already, in motion forward, continuing something that has already changed. This interplay between a changing moment and the descriptions that continue it turn the narrative into a place that is in flux. It both arrests the narrative and sets it in motion. The repetition of a moment yet every time from a different perspective impacts the pattern of reading. Repeating the sunrise from different angles does two seemingly opposing things at the same time: it suspends the moment and simultaneously moves the narrative forward. This illustrates that the transformative potential of touch is not a question of either change or continuation, but that transformation demands them both.

Woolf explores how something out of which transformation rises continues to exist, demonstrating that transformation demands both change and continuation. In order to grasp this thought more fully, this paragraph looks at Barker's writing on the thumbnail image, a cinematic trope that makes visible the relationship between stillness and movement. The thumbnail image captures different things at the same time: still photography and moving cinema, colour and monochromaticity, the tangible (photograph) and the intangible (cinema), looking and being looked at (Barker, "Be-hold" 196). When a character in a film holds a photograph in his or her hands, an image is temporarily suspended while the cinematic narrative moves forward in a

certain amount of frames per second. In *The Waves*, moments are temporarily suspended whilst also setting the narrative in motion for the reader. These aspects reveal something about *The Waves*' exploration of the theme of memory. The act of remembering continues the past by repeating it differently: it brings the past up in the present in the form of a memory. Re-calling another time within this time creates a tension between then and now, here and there, absence and presence. In her memoir *The Long Goodbye* (2011), writer and poet Meghan O'Rourke reflects on the way that memory can briefly suspend and still features of the past when she re-calls a passage by a scholar of ancient Egypt:

> We usually think of time as a river, a river like the Nile, with strong, swift current bearing us further and further away from what we have been and towards the time when we will be not at all… But perhaps we should think of time as a deep, still pool rather than a fast-flowing river… Instead of looking back at time, we could look down into it … and now again different features of the past –different sights and sounds and voices and dreams – would rise to the surface: rise and subside, and the deep pool would hold them all, so that nothing was lost and nothing ever went away.
>
> The passage consoles me. The idea of time as a pool brings an actual solace, conjuring up the peculiar fact that our brains so often make the past as vivid as the present, without our choosing. Our memory is our weather, and we are re-created by it every day. (285)

In the way she approaches memory in *The Waves*, Woolf attempts to look down into time by letting the past rise to the surface of the present as remembering makes the past, for a moment, as vivid as the present. Through memory a past moment transforms to a moment in and of the present, changed and continued at the same time. "This is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again", says Bernard, as dawn whitens the sky, stars draw back, and a redness gathers on the roses (214). Remembering continues the past in the present that, inevitably, has moved forward in time. This is the incessant making and re-making of life, knowing that something that cannot be seen happing in front of us, still exists.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter analyzed Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* from the perspective of a tactful reading. Within her focus on the skin, Woolf approaches tactile experience as a touch that transforms. This instant of transformation demands both change and continuation; a tension that the text

expresses in two ways. From up close, Woolf demonstrates how instances of touch make the characters experience that the surfaces of their bodies change even as they continue to divide inside from outside. The passages of Jinny and Bernard illustrated how they experience the boundaries of their bodies as fluid and percipient, as a consequence of which they seem to cross over into the other characters and can even feel on their own skins the touches and impressions the others have felt on theirs. From a distance, the interplay between the regular and italicized sections of the text changes and continues moments by at the same time suspending them and setting the narrative in motion. These aspects illuminate something about the thematic concern of the novel. Memory pulls back the past and releases it, continues it and changes it, mirroring the rhythm of the waves. Memory holds past moments up for inspection only to let them disappear again, similar to the way that the deceased Percival continues to be captured in a moment that lasts only briefly. A key assumption running through the analysis was how the transformative potential of touch is not a question of either continuation or change, but that transformation demands them both: something has changed yet something remains.

In a diary entry written on 15 August 1922, Woolf writes about a passing moment of beauty that makes her experience that she is "not capable of catching it all, and holding it all at the moment" (Garrington, *Haptic Modernism* 123). The contact of skin on skin, of mind and memory, of text and reader, is Woolf's attempt of catching something and holding it, however transient and impermanent this moment can be. According to Woolf, intimacy, a far more difficult business than many other things in life, could be created between writer and reader if the writer could put before the reader something he could recognise (Jackson 1). In contrast to Smith's *How to be Both*, Woolf, as a modernist, does not let go of coherence and solidity altogether. Time is held in the fundamental chronology of nine gestative sections, and tactile experience is located in the contact of the surface of one skin on another, no matter how much the nature of the skin itself transforms through it. Smith takes up Woolf's experiment and carries it further, exploring what form can be, yet eager to re-image it as something more elastic, imagistic and achronological by making time timeless and illustrating that tactile experience can also reside beyond the skin somewhere in between.

Chapter 3

A Touch that Reaches out: *How to be Both* by Ali Smith

This chapter analyzes Ali Smith's *How to be Both* from the perspective of a tactful reading. It first situates and contextualises the novel, after which it approaches the text from up close and from a distance. In contrast to *The Waves*, the focus of *How to be Both* lies on tactile experience that resides in the space beyond the skin.

3.1 Introducing *How to be Both*

In 2014, Hamish Hamilton first published *How to be Both* by Scottish writer Ali Smith (1962). At that point, Smith had also written works of fiction such as *Hotel World* (2001), *The Accidental* (2005) and *There But For The* (2011), all novels on the unlikely ways that human lives can become connected. Smith first began writing what she calls 'story-shaped things' to make her arms work again. While recovering from chronic fatigue syndrome, writing became as physical as that (Clark). During this time, Smith predominantly concentrated on all the possible forms that a story could take. Crossing forms and genres, her writing has mainly been described as postmodernist, although the number of academic accounts on her work remains sparse.[16] After modernism had challenged some of the most essential elements of the arts, such as harmony in music, perspective in painting, and traditional realism in literature, postmodernism arose around the mid-1980s. Emerging from modernism, postmodernism partakes in most of its ideas, yet its particular attitude to some of them is different.

Many modernist works were still rooted in the idea that art could provide unity and coherence; postmodernists emphasized fragmentation and incoherence – both in life and in art (Klages). Whereas some modernists still tried to cling to order, for even "the wanderings in time of [Woolf's] Mrs. Dalloway have to be held in the matrix of a single day" (Smith, *Artful* 24), many postmodernists made no such attempt and embraced fragmentation. So does Smith, by creating a novel that does anything it likes with time: it's achronological, elastic, falls apart and together; it simultaneously presents time as timeless and transient (24). In his postcolonial essay "Border Lives: Art of the Present", Homi Bhabha argues that the wider significance of postmodernism lies in its ability to address the moment of transit:

[16] See for example *Postmodernist Features in Ali Smith's Novels* by Pavla Navratilova, *The Whole Story? Reading Postmodernisms in the Work of Ali Smith* by Gael Harvey and *Ali Smith: There But For The* by Julie Phillips.

> We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. (Bhabha)

In *How to be Both* Smith moves away from singularities, creating a work in which nothing, not even the order of the book, is fixed and where boundaries are constantly negotiated. The past becomes present, individuals can be girl and boy at the same time, the fictional gets real and the real gets fictional. The place where one story ends and the other begins embodies philosopher Martin Heidegger's words that Bhabha opens his essay with: "a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing" (Bhabha).

The cover of one of the editions of *How to be Both* shows a hand delicately holding a pair of eyes. The eyes arise from the stalk of a flower like two buds opening. The skin of the hand looks pale in comparison to the vibrant red of the sleeve that partly covers it. Both the hand and the eyes belong to Saint Lucy, a holy martyr whose eyes were violently taken from her head. Many renaissance painters depicted the eyes of this fair protector of vision as two detached balls of coloured glass. Yet here, rather than being deprived of vision, "it seems as though she's been granted a second, enchanted pair of eyes", literary scholar Claire Daigle describes in "The Place of Green Possibles: Ali Smith's How to be Both" (Daigle). This small iconographic subversion was made by Francesco del Cossa, an Italian renaissance artist from the 1460s. A drawing of the pair of eyes arising from the stalk opens Franchesco's narrative in *How to be Both,* and establishes the novel's primary focus on the intimate relations that can exist between people, in this case through vision; through seeing and being seen.[17] In a great rush and breathless rhythm, Franchesco starts to speak:

> there are flowers that open for
> all the world like
> eyes :
> hello :
> what's this?
> A boy in front of a painting. (191)

[17] In the novel, an 'h' is added to Francesco del Cossa's name, combining fact with fiction. In contrast to Smith who refers to Franchesco both as 'he' and 'she', I refer to Franchesco as 'she' in order to avoid confusion.

When Franchesco finds herself with her head on someone's shoulder but cannot be seen or heard, she assumes that she must be in some form of purgatory, a space between life and death that she has been placed in after asking for higher wages for the frescoes she was creating in the palazzo in the northern Italian city Ferrera. Born in a family of brick-makers, her father dressed her as a boy, sending her off into a life of gender disguise and artistic endeavours. In *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (1998), Bernhard Berenson describes the life and work of the actual Francesco del Cossa in a way that closely resembles the idea that informs *How to Be Both*. According to Berenson, the artistic process of del Cossa was similar to that of his contemporary Cosimo Tura, an Italian early-renaissance painter: in Berenson's words, they form a double star, each so similar to the other and of equal size and magnitude, that it is almost impossible to keep them apart or to find out which of the two circled around the other (151). Yet there is one thing that set del Cossa apart: he mastered the art of the functional line. Like every great artist with a refined sense for movement, this made the contours of his figures obtain a tangible quality; an impression of being able to be touched.

Franchesco's narrative circles around another narrative that is told in *How to be Both*, one that opens with a drawing of a more detached looking modern surveillance camera. This part of the book centres on George, a teenage girl grieving the sudden death of her mother. The narrative starts with a conversation between George and her mother about a renaissance artist asking for a higher wage for the frescoes he is painting. The conversation is happening in May in Italy when George's mother was still alive. They are in Ferrera to look at the work of the Italian fresco painter her mother had seen a picture of and couldn't get out of her head because it had looked so friendly and generous. George lost her mother in the following September, and is remembering the conversation on the New Years' Eve thereafter at home where she now lives with her father and younger brother. The work by a Francesco del Cossa, that was once the reason they travelled to Italy, has now become the subject of George's personal investigation.

In contrast to Franchesco who focalizes and narrates in the first-person in a stream of consciousness, George's narrative is narrated in the third person with George as the focalizer. The book was intentionally printed in two versions: the order is either eyes/camera or camera/eyes, offering different experiences to the reader. In my edition, George's narrative makes up the first section of the text, which made me move from contemporary England to 15th century Italy the moment I encountered the drawing of the eyes. Though this is not entirely true, for the narratives are intertwined in such a way that George's narrative does not really end there, and Franchesco's begins way before the flowering eyes. There are parallels between their narratives too: the principle characters have both lost their mothers, leading them to navigate a

world the thing they most long to be close to is at the same time the thing that's no longer there. By offering two narratives that speak at and through each other, Smith shows that connection resides somewhere in between.

3.2 A Tactful Reading of *How to be Both*

In *How to be Both*, Smith approaches tactile experience as a touch that reaches out without making actual contact. This experience is defined as tactile, because it intentionally seeks contact and inclines to touch, even if the contact itself is not or cannot be established.[18] Each gesture of towardness involves a tension of seeking closeness and keeping distance: it demands an interval, a spacing between two surfaces in which this double movement can take place. In her introduction of *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing*, Jackson presents a brief overview of the discussion that brought to the forefront the space that exists beyond the skin. Jackson takes as the start of this discussion the work of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1940), who challenged the phenomenological idea of the self-reflexivity of touch by "introducing a spacing or interval into touch" (5).[19] The fact that one can only touch the outside of something in the world *with* the outside of one's body presupposes an interval between two surfaces. It was French philosopher and thinker of deconstruction Jacques Derrida (1930 – 2004) that took Nancy's discussion further by challenging the sense of immediacy and closeness emphasized by haptocentric approaches.[20] Although it might seem that the emphasis on a separating space overturns proximity and immediacy, this space becomes the very space in which tactility can be explored, even when touch itself, the instance of surface upon surface, never actually makes contact. Once the importance of the space in between has been recognized, the question that follows is: what does this space engender? One possible answer is that all our contact becomes determined by "the tension between the desire to touch and the order to keep our distance" (53). The space gives rise to the possibility of movement, of getting closer and pulling away. Preceding the contact of skin on skin, there is a gesture of crossing the distance between the two.

In harmony with contemporary forms of instant connection across distance, Smith is interested in the space between two bodies. The experience of contact and separation, of proximity and distance, is a significant and recurring trope in Smith's *How to be Both*. The text

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[18] Tactility is also the inclination to touch, indicated by the movement of "tending towards, approaching near, coming carefully" (Jackson 7). Intentionality is key.

[19] According to phenomenologists such as French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, because the body is both sensible and sentient, instances of touch are self-reflexive as one is always touching and being touched at the same time. Nancy questions this concept by pointing out the impossibility that lies at its root: the experience is the body is always exterior, the things we can touch remain on the outside, so a 'primary interiority' is impossible (Jackson 5).

[20] Derrida didn't think that Nancy's intervention was deconstructive *enough*. Derrida engages with Nancy's ideas in a complex way that has led to much debate. See Jackson's 'Touch paper II: touch' (4).

expresses the tension between closeness and distance in two ways. From up close, passages describe how the characters experience the realm in between skin and skin as a space in which two things can move closer to one another, even as they never make actual contact. From a distance, the simultaneous superimposing and cross-referencing of and among the two narratives creates a constant back and forth movement towards and away from the main characters. These aspects shed light on *How to be Both*'s exploration of the theme of memory. Memory, the ability to bring to one's mind an awareness of the past, brings distant things close and lets them meet in an imaginary middle.

Close

After the stalk that blossoms into eyes has opened Franchesco's narrative, the typography of the words that are printed on the page has changed. The lines vary now in length and position, and only find their neatly outlined form from the third page onward. The effect is that Franchesco gradually seems to appear. Around 180 pages later, at the end of her part of the novel, the lines are becoming shorter again until a line that consists of only one word is left, making Franchesco gradually disappear again.[21] There is one other typographical element that is notable. Some of the lines are divided not by a **.** but they are connected by a **:** . After her mother has passed away, her father gives Franchesco a piece of paper. When she unfolds it in front of her, she recognizes her own handwriting. Holding her 'child's hand' in her adult hand, and noticing how much paler the paper had looked compared to the skin of her father's hands who had held it just before hers did, her father tells her:

> It's yours, he said. It also holds your mother in it, who will have helped you fashion it, cause you were very young when you wrote this and the sentences have her turn of phrase about them, as well as – look, here, here and here – her habit of putting these 2 dots between clauses where a breath should come.
> It's my habit too, I said.
> He nodded (…). (337)

The colon between clauses typographically connects and separates words, drawing attention to the in between of things that can fuse and con-fuse at the same time.[22] This typographical

[21] Even before the drawing of the modern surveillance camera has opened George's narrative, Smith hints to the (dis)appearing of characters by quoting Giorgio Bassani: "Just like a character in a novel, he disappeared suddenly, without leaving the slightest trace behind" (Smith, *How to be Both*).
[22] Confuse comes from *confudere*, meaning 'to mingle together.' The use of the colon simultaneously brings together and sets apart.

element symbolizes a wider engagement to the in between that is present all throughout *How to be Both*. Franchesco and George experience different kinds of spaces, ranging from those in between bodies to those in between painting and beholder. Franchesco herself is situated in purgatory, a space in between life and death, from which she observes George's mourning unfold right before her eyes. According to Franchesco, beauty in its most completeness is "never found in a single body but is something shared between more than one body" (276), and who we are lies not in ourselves or in another person, but in "the glimmer of a moment between two people, the nod of knowing and agreement between friends" (282). But most significantly, the contact established in, by and through the in between is symbolized by the life of the pictured figure that steps in the space beyond the frame, a moment of freedom that creates the illusory quality of *How to be Both*. Just like Franchesco likes a body really to be present under painted clothing, she likes the painted body to leap over the border of the frame:

> I like very much a foot, say, or a hand, coming over the edge and over the frame into the world beyond the picture, cause a picture is a real thing in the world and this shift is a marker of this reality : and I like a figure to shift into that realm between the picture and the world
>
> Cause then it does 2 opposing things at once.
>
> The one is, it lets the world be seen and understood.
> The other is, it unchains the eyes and the lives of those who see it and gives them a moment of freedom, from its world and from their world both. (307)

The moment of freedom that Franchesco describes, in which the figure and the beholder both seem to be move towards one another in the space between them, is according to essayist and literary critic James Ley the elusive quarry of *How to be Both*. In that moment of freedom,

> Art does not simply reflect a reality but creates its own experiential reality, which belongs neither to the world of the viewer nor to the image but somehow unites the two. (Ley)

Ley continues that that moment of freedom, of in betweenness, takes on its understated poignancy in the novel's exploration of grief, the theme that confronts the characters with questions that are always already beyond reach. *How to be Both* is about contact, touch, and

intersection, yet at the same time questions of loss, ephemerality, and vanishing presence lie at its heart. This is the paradox of grief: learning to live with the knowledge that the thing one longs to be close to has already disappeared. The absence is persistently present, as C.S. Lewis writes in *A Grief Observed* (1961):

> Suppose that the earthly lives she and I shared were… two circles that touched. But those two circles, above all the point at which they touched, are the very thing I am mourning for, homesick for, famished for. You tell me, 'she goes on.' But my heart and body are crying out, come back, come back. Be a circle, touching my circle on the plane of Nature. But I know this is impossible. I know that the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get. (25)

The mourner is confronted with impossible proximity, even if the longing for it is ceaseless. In *How to be Both*, George's mother is always beyond her reach. She is constantly waiting for "her own dead person to come back from the dead" (139) and needs to repeatedly correct herself when she thinks of her mother in the present tense: "… but I'm not, her mother says. Said. That was then. This is now" (104). Then and now, one a time to which her mother belonged, one a time in which she is not anything, George continues. Yet bearing in mind Franchesco's observation of figures that seem to figuratively come over the edge and shift into the realm between the picture and the world, Smith explores the possibility of letting two people meet in an imaginary middle through the act of remembering. The past, Franchesco's mother explains to Franchesco as a child, we can't see anymore, but it hasn't gone. Referring to something from the past that Franchesco had just recalled, she says, "Didn't you feel it go through you? No? But it did, you're inside it now. I am too. We both are" (205). Memory becomes the figurative space in which a vanished presence can temporarily endure. By bringing the dead up into the world of the living, it does two opposing things at once: it lets the absent be present, evokes the then in the now, and brings the there to here. It lets two things that are per definition distant come close and demands them both. This dance between distance and closeness is one that is also performed by text and reader in *How to be Both*. The following paragraph takes a step back to look at how the text both invites the reader to come close whilst also keeping them at arm's length.

Distance

Confronted with tactile experience that resides in reaching out, the characters in *How to be Both* live among the tension between closeness and distance, the here and there, the then and now.

This tension is not only expressed in the text, but it is also expressed *by* the text. The textual structure of *How to be Both*, superimposing and cross-referencing two narratives, brings figures closer and holds them at a distance, making the space between text and reader, like the space between skin and skin, open to a movement of towardness. In *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing*, Jackson analogizes the movement of proximity and distance to the tango, a dance that requires two people to alternately move apart and closer towards one another. The tango, a dance that is born from the very movement towards the other, prefigures space; only the distance between two people can enable a form of closeness. The text of *How to be Both*, with an impossible intimacy at its heart, negotiates between proximity and distance of the reader towards the two different narratives, too. The voices of George and Franchesco seem to be able to touch each other, carrying over "the intimacy of voice to the intimacy between voices" (Jackson 82). In her reading of Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*, Jackson looks, from a respectful distance, at how the text performs "the relationship between touching and not-touching, between proximity and distance, between writing and dancing" (83).

In a similar gesture, in *How to be Both* the superimposing and cross-referencing of narratives move the reader closer to and away from the "finite stretch of space and time in which the couple might be together although apart" (85).[23] At first sight, Smith superimposes two narratives that are, in reality, quite distant: George is a teenage girl living in contemporary England; Franchesco is a renaissance artist of the 1460s. Although their narratives are held by different parts of the book and are therefore still quite distant from one another, arguing that the novel exists of two halves laid on top of one another wouldn't be completely true. The narratives are separated from one another, but not by a division that is impermeable: it seems as if Franchesco and George seep through it and reach another time.[24] Without remembering how she once died, Franchesco observes George who is mourning her mother's sudden death. Because of Franchesco's afterlife, two strands become intertwined like vine, shaped like a double helix (Smith, *How to be Both* 95). Each narrative contains cross-references either backward or forward to the other narrative, the effect of which is that the distant lives of George and Franchesco are suddenly close.

No matter which narrative the reader has in front of them first, the moment that the other narrative is being mentioned, the other character is made palpably present. George first

[23] The couple that is mentioned in the quote in this context refers to the characters Franchesco and George.

[24] Beneath the quote from Giorgio Bassani, Smith also hints towards the life of Franchesco by quoting Hannah Arendt: "Although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living –" (Smith, *How to be Both*).

becomes aware of Franchesco when she is looking at her frescoes in the palazzo of Ferrera together with her mother. After her mother has passed away, the work of this painter becomes the subject of George's personal investigation by which she attempts to remain close to her mother. When George and her friend H. are studying together a couple of months after her mother passed away, H. takes a picture of a man in a blue space from the wall and looks at it. George tells her that her mother liked that picture so much they went all the way to Italy to see it. The two girls have to do a school assignment about empathy and sympathy and decide to do it about the painter of this image because there's so little known about him. In this way they can imagine most of it and no one will know. When they are imagining what it would be like for the renaissance painter to be parachuted into the twenty-first century, the following conversation takes place:

> He'd be like an exchange student, not just from another country but from another time, H says.
> He'd be all *alas I am being made up really badly by a sixteen-year-old girl who knows fuck all about art and nothing at all about me except that I did some paintings and seem to have died of the plague,* George says.
> H laughs. (139)

Even though the reader has George's narrative in front of them, in this moment Franchesco is made present in a way that very closely resembles how Franchesco speaks in her part of the novel. She seems to temporarily step over the border that separates the narratives and move towards the reader, making the reader move, for a moment, towards her. Interestingly, when the reader reads George's narrative first, as in my version of the book, it is only upon encountering that specific moment in Franchesco's narrative that the cross-reference itself become most evident. This happens when Franchesco observes the two girls from purgatory. She narrates:

> The girl has a friend.
> The friend has a look of my Isotta, very fine, and has arrived in here like a burst of air as if a new door opened itself in a wall where no door was suspected : there's a kin between them and their hearts are high with it : they are sharp and bright together as the skins of 2 new lemons
> The girl is holding up to her friend the wall she's made from the many small pictures : her friend is admiring and nodding : she takes a piece and looks closely at a single picture (…)

> The girl looks astonished : her mouth opens : then it breaks into a smile : then laughter from them both. (364 – 365)

In this moment described by Franchesco's narrative, George's narrative is at once moving closer. Connections like these almost force the reader to, in Smith's words, keep looking and looking back again. The synchronicities call their attention every time. In instances like these, it is as if though George has been granted the saint's second pair of eyes, not eyes that look for her, but that look at her. When George is seen and described by Franchesco's narrative, the reader is taken either backwards or forwards in the text depending on the order of the book they're reading, and they are momentarily being pulled closer to George. Literary scholar Peter Brooks describes that these moments "allow the ear, the eye, the mind to make connections, conscious or unconscious, between different textual moments"' (Jackson 44). In *How to be Both*, the parallels between their lives as well as the references to each other's lives force the reader to make the connection between characters that are in reality far apart. The fact that the narratives are superimposed creates a sense of distance for the reader, whereas the cross-references within the narratives move them closer to the reader.

By both superimposing and cross-referencing the narratives, in *How to be Both* Smith evokes a space of in betweenness in which the reader is moved towards and away from the moments that are represented by the text. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, scholar Sara Ahmed describes this movement of 'towardness' with phrases such as "to move or pull the subjects towards another", "to get closer" and "seeking to take a place where one is not yet" (126). Writing on film, Barker elicits that a shift in camera distance and focal length allows a fleeting glimpse of how two things can be inseparable: by zooming in and out a film draws the viewer toward and away from an image, making what's represented both elusive and palpably present at the same time (Barker, "Be-hold" 200).[25] By switching from one narrative to another while at the same time continuing the first narrative through the practice of cross-referencing, Smith also makes things, in Franchesco's own words, look both close and distant. Reading the first lines of Franchesco's narrative draws the reader spatially and temporally away from George, but the moment Franchesco sees George only a couple of pages later, with her head on her shoulder, draws the reader immediately back to George. This creates the reader's experience of being temporarily close to George before they get pulled away towards Franchesco again. This back

[25] Similar to the work of Woolf, there is a cinematic quality to *How to be Both*, in particular because of the many modes of vision that are present all throughout the novel. The eyes of Saint Lucy, the surveillance camera and the particular artistic eye of Franchesco are but a few examples of the many visual images that shed light on "the pleasures and pains of seeing and being seen" (Daigle).

and forth, toward and away, movement creates constant crossings in *How to be Both*: crossings "between here and there, now and then, presence and absence" (213).

This exchange illuminates something about the thematic orientation of *How to be Both*. Smith imagines memory as a figurative space that brings distant things close, letting two people temporarily dwell and brush past each other. The very textual structure of Smith's novel evokes this space and lets the reader brush past a character whose narratvie isn't the one that is present in front of their eyes at that particular moment yet at the same time is. Like Franchesco appearing suddenly from behind the stalk with the flowering eyes and then disappearing again, the characters appear and disappear, but not completely, and always temporarily. By continuously negotiating the distance between the reader and Franchesco and George, Smith informs a reading pattern informed by the attempt to reach out to something that pulls away. In the face of impossible corporeal proximity, tactile experience transforms from a moment of touch into a movement of towardness, a gesture of reaching out. This gesture hovers between the idea of closeness and the idea of distance, of moving towards and moving away and demands them both. By intertwining, rather than only layering, *How to be Both* deftly tackles the challenges of loss and "the perpetuation of the living's relationships to the deceased", creating an experience of how something that cannot be seen happening in front of us, nevertheless exists (Lucci).

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed Ali Smith's novel *How to be Both* from the perspective of a tactful reading. Within her focus on the space beyond the skin, Smith approaches tactile experience as touch that reaches out. This reaching out demands both closeness and distance; a tension that the text expresses in two ways. From up close, passages describe how spaces in between invite a movement toward and a movement away from something or someone. The passage relating to Franchesco in particular symbolizes how the realm between two things requires the presence of both. From a distance, the cross-references among and the superimposing of the two narratives let the reader come closer to one of the characters whilst also keeping them at a distance. These aspects illuminate something about *How to be Both*'s exploration of the theme of memory, a practice that brings distant things close in an imaginary middle. The text itself evokes a space of betweenness in which the reader is drawn towards and pulled away from the characters, similar to the way that within the text, the characters long to be close to something that is always pulling away and is already beyond their reach. For Smith, it is exactly the space between two things in which tactile experience as reaching out resides. A key assumption running through the analysis

was how tactile experience as reaching out is not a question of either closeness or distance, but that towardness demands them both: only distance enables something to come near.

On the Penguin Books edition of *How to be Both*, the cover shows two girls walking next to one another. In the novel, Smith writes that they "look as if between sentences" (287) and the place that their glances cross is exactly located in the space between them. On the other side of the front cover, the inside, there is an image of the man in the kind of blue space. On the other side of the back cover is an image of a girl. The whole story takes place in between them. In 1475, Francesco del Cossa painted a *Portrait of a Man with a Ring*. The painting depicts a man in a landscape who extends his hand, holding a ring, beyond the picture's frame. His gaze longing and steady, it looks as if though he is waiting for another person to extend their hand towards him. It's in the space beyond the frame, between the man and the beholder, that the hand is temporarily and at the same time forever waiting. Touching it would lie in reaching out.

Conclusion

This thesis answered the question of how writers Virginia Woolf and Ali Smith approached tactile experience within contexts that transformed the sense of touch. Both writers were confronted with developments that changed the way that the skin itself and the space between skin and skin were perceived. These developments gave rise to a different kind of surface, a kind of virtual space, in which things were neither here nor there, neither the one thing nor the other, though at the same time they were all of these at once. The new knowledge of the skin exposed the transitory quality of the body's surface and networking technologies signify immediate connectivity across distance. As a result tactile experience transformed and Woolf's and Smith's attention was re-directed to touch, the sense that became increasingly significant as the worlds through which they moved were rapidly changing.

The first chapter of this thesis established a theoretical framework on the basis of the work of literary scholar Sarah Jackson, who has offered the first sustained study on the intimate links between writing and touching in *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing*. At the core of Jackson's tactile poetics lies the bond between text and skin. The text engages in what she coins the metaphorical repertoire of the skin: both can be understood as surfaces that can be read and written upon. Jackson lays the foundation for an approach to literary texts that is tactful, meaning an approach that requires both close attention to and distance from the text. Neither a traditional close reading nor a haptic reading, Jackson integrates an attitude of sensitivity and consideration into the reading of literary texts. This thesis continued the investigation that Jackson started by taking up a tactful approach towards the literary texts, but also by slightly re-locating the focus to the space that exists beyond the skin and beyond the text in order to open up a discussion on tactful reading itself.

The second chapter of this thesis analyzed Virginia Woolf's modernist novel *The Waves* (1931) from the perspective of a tactful reading. Within her focus on the skin, Woolf approaches tactile experience as a touch that transforms. This instant of transformation demands both change and continuation; a tension that *The Waves* expresses in two ways. From up close, passages describe how instances of touch make the characters experience that the surfaces of their bodies change even as they continue to divide inside from outside; not quite merging, not fully apart. From a distance, the interplay between the regular and italicized sections of the text changes and continues moments by at the same time suspending them and setting the narrative in motion. Reading them together from a tactful perspective demonstrated that passages within the text as well as the text itself give expression to the form of the waves as the place where the

shapes of the land and the sea blur and overflow. In *The Waves*, the skin, the boundary of the body, turns into a place of transformation when it comes into contact with another skin. Woolf establishes a rhythm between a moment of change and a moment of continuation, a tension that is staged not only by the contact of skin on skin, but also by memory itself. Memory pulls back the past and releases it, suspends it and sets it in motion, continues and changes it, letting that what can no longer be seen happening in front us, still exist.

The third chapter of this thesis analyzed Ali Smith's postmodernist novel *How to be Both* (2014) from the perspective of a tactful reading. Within her focus on the space beyond the skin, Smith approaches tactile experience as a touch that reaches out. This reaching out demands both closeness and distance; a tension that *How to be Both* expresses in two ways. From up close, passages describe how spaces in-between invite a movement closer to and a movement away from something or someone else. From a distance, the superimposing of and cross-references among the two narratives let the reader come closer to the characters' narratives whilst also keeping them at a distance. Reading them together from a tactful perspective demonstrated that passages within the text as well as the text itself express the form of the fresco as it superimposes two things but also lets them be in front of one's eyes at the same time. In *How to be Both*, it is exactly the space between two things in which tactile experience as reaching out resides. Smith establishes 'a place of green possibles' and allows the reader to dwell in it. In this place one surface almost meets another surface among "the little green almost not-there weeds" (370). Smiths brings together the not-there with the there, the not-yet with the already, not to keep them apart but to unite them. Memory, too, brings distant things close in an imaginary middle, letting that what can no longer be seen happening in front of us, nevertheless exist.

The encounter that was staged between the work of Woolf and the work of Smith demonstrated an intimate bond between the two. Both books that have loss, grief, and mourning at their core, it is the moment of connection, touch and intimacy they most ardently explore. Both authors show that the one state doesn't eliminate, refuse, or reject the other, rather, it is the sense of absence that makes presence a question more poignant, and ultimately, a sensation more longed for. Both authors also attempt to re-invent the form of the novel and go past convention, not only in the case of *The Waves* and *How to be Both*, but also in terms of their wider bodies of work. In an interview with Smith, writer Alex Clark describes that her literary work "does all the things that we need the novel to do" and at the same time, "it can also do the things that we don't expect a novel to do, while allowing us the satisfactions of narrative" (Clark). As Berenson put it, the processes of Woolf and Smith closely resemble one another, and had it not been for chronology, it would have been difficult to keep them apart or to find out which of the two

circled around the other. One similarity that is particularly striking, and worthy of further research, is the parallel between Smith's *How to be Both* and Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). Through her creation of a character that spans centuries and genders, Smith carries on the legacy that Woolf begun in *Orlando*, a novel that follows "a figure from the 16th century to 1928, from *his* birth through *her* life" (Daigle).

Creating an understanding of Woolf's and Smith's approaches to tactile experience has also led to the following three insights. Firstly, one of the aims of this thesis was to create an understanding of memory, the shared thematic concern of the novels. Memory, the place where the past and the present momentarily cross, touch and intersect, can be considered to be analogous to the tensions between change and continuation and between closeness and distance that lie at the core of tactile experience as a touch that transforms and a touch that reaches out. In *The Waves*, Woolf symbolizes the brevity of a memory: it confronts one with the purely momentary nature of life, even as it temporarily holds a past moment up for inspection, suspending it in time. Through memory a past moment transforms to a moment in and of the present, and as such, repeats the past but in a different way. In *How to be Both*, by bringing the past up into the present, memory does two opposing things at once: it lets the absent be present, evokes the then in the now, and brings the there to here. It lets two things that are per definition distant come close. From these perspectives, memory seems to position itself in between two things that it demands both. Memory is always dependent on the past *and* the present, and therefore involves a coming to terms with "distance, either spatial or temporal" that it simultaneously seeks to bridge: "in displacements that create distance, memories stand as mediators that connect the accessible with what threaten to become inaccessible domains" (Hallam and Hockey 25). Memory is change and nearness, a trace of a living presence that at the same time alludes to loss, absence and all that is not. *The Waves* and *How to be Both* model a memorial practice insistent simultaneously on contact, touch, and intersection and the transient "incomplete proximity to what remains" (Macmillan 4).

Secondly, by not only concentrating on the skin but also on the space beyond the skin, a second important aim of this thesis was to open up a discussion on the limits and possibilities of a tactful approach to literary texts by offering a critical reflection on the divide between close and distance reading that tactful reading attempts to bring together. The thesis adopted this approach by halfway through the tactful reading slightly changing its position towards the novels from *within* text to text *itself*. The first part of the chapters concentrated on what was expressed in a text; the second part of the chapters concentrated on what was expressed by a text. The second focus demanded a change in position to be able to look at the text as a whole from a distance,

instead of interpreting specific passages in the text. Reflecting on the tactful reading that demands them both, two main conclusions can be drawn. The first conclusion is that there is a contradictory sense to tact that complicates the act of tactful reading. Tact is both concerned with contact and with non-contact, and as McNally argues each is undone by the other: "a distant non-contact persists at the heart of close contact; distance is undone by the possibility of an intimacy it can never wholly eschew" (131). Reading distance and closeness together at the same time is therefore impossible, for when there is distance absolute closeness cannot be attained, nor is there absolute distance when there is closeness. Therefore the critic is faced with one thing that can never be fully itself as long as the other thing is there, inevitably incomplete and not wholly realised, too.[26] To a certain degree, the tactful reading adopted in this thesis reflects this impossibility: even though closeness and distance are read both, they still exist in separate sections. Yet this doesn't mean the reading is not tactful or that it has failed, instead, this experience provides insight into the very core of tactfulness, which is related to the second conclusion.

Recalling the colon that Franchesco puts in between sentences, it can be said that tact, too, situates itself between two opposing inflections. The reading of Woolf illustrated that the transformative potential of tactile experience is not a question of either change or continuation, but that transformation demands them both. The reading of Smith illustrated how tactile experience as reaching out is not a question of either closeness or distance, but that towardness demands them both. In both of these instances, the point does not seem to be to deny or overcome that it is either/or, rather it's an attempt to tender a passageway to explore, in Smith's word, the and/and/and of life; a possible answer to the question of *how to be both* close and distant, in order to reach a more profound understanding of tactfulness. A tactful approach asks: could it also be possible that distance and closeness are simultaneous, instead of exclusive? Could distance be understood not as the thing that eliminates closeness, but as the very thing that makes it possible, and as such, is integrated in it, part of it, present even as its apparent opposite is present? It's true that there is not one with the other, but it's also true that there is not one without the other. There is no closeness when there is distance, yet there is also no closeness if there wouldn't be distance. In the attempt, and even in the impossibility, in the existing side by side, lies an insight. If anything, a tactful approach gives deeper insight into closeness and distance, not in spite of the fact that they are contradictory, but because of it.

Finally, by allowing different artworks, contexts, and theories to come together, this thesis hoped to find a meaningful angle on recent innovative literary projects that respond to some of

[26] Because it aims to create a precise understanding of the text by looking at significant details and patterns, a tactful reading might still be considered a close reading in its entirety, despite its attempt to add distance into the reading.

today's most poignant issues regarding digital technology, tactility and human connection and capture it. In her book *Artful*, Smith writes: "Woolf was a great believer in art's capacity both to change things for us and to make visible crucial changes to us" (70). Arts collective Circumstance explores the narrative of experience and concentrates among other things on books that go beyond the page. Besides *Six Conversations* that was mentioned in the introduction, they also recently published *These Pages Fall Like Ash* (2013), a story told across two books. One is a handcrafted, physical object, the other a digital text that can be displayed on a mobile phone, creating a crossing between the analog and the digital. The two books come together to create a singular experience that allows the reader to move from place to place. The collective explains about *These Pages Fall Like Ash:*

> This is about a moment when two cities overlap. They exist in the same space and time, but they aren't aware of each other. It's a tale about two people who have become separated, one in each world, about their fading memory of each other and their struggle to reconnect. (Circumstance)

The work is a response to networking technologies that bring distant things immediately close to home, yet not always in a way that is purely tangible. By exploring the paradox of immediate connectivity and distance, it asks how we can seek something more than the trace of a living presence. Innovative literary projects like these require a reading that can not only closely interpret one book and the other, but that can also position itself in relation to what happens in the space between the two. A tactful reading, one that is able to shift between closeness and distance yet demands both, could be a start when exploring literary projects that work with the changing landscape not only of tactility and digital technology, but also of changing modes of telling, reading, and perhaps most importantly, of experiencing a story.[27] Not only can artworks like these make visible for us that tactility and human contact are transforming, a tactful approach to these innovate projects might be a way to read them. In a similar gesture, Ann Hamilton's project *the event of a thread* makes visible the state between solitude and communion that, as Rebecca Solnit observed, the recent round of technologies has put us in. Through her exploration of a condition that she calls 'being alone together', she creates experiences that can be intensely solitary and communal at the same time. Alone together, a state somewhere in-between, demands them both. Even listening to a voice coming from the radio, for example,

[27] Other examples of recent innovative literary projects working with tactility, digital technology and human connection are *Short Films For You* (2012) by Circumstance, *All This Rotting* (2016) and *Entrances & Exits* (2016) by Visual Editions and *A Novel Experiment* (2012 – ongoing) by Tom Abba.

joins you to all the others that are hearing it in the same intimate way, even in your aloneness (Tippett, "Making and the Spaces We Share"). In a time when accessibility to millions of people is instant, the quality of this experience questions all that it means to be truly interlinked with another human today.

There is a hall with 3.000.000 cubic feet of air. Swings suspend in squares of light. A white cloth hangs in the middle of the hall, its liquidity responsive to the movement of the swings. Beneath it, strangers lie on the wooden floor side by side, breathing in unison. A flock of birds is released into flight. At the eastern end of the hall a woman enters the space, breathes, and slowly walks towards the white cloth. At the western end of the hall a man enters the space, breathes in deeply, and also walks towards the white cloth. Both cross the space, walking among people on swings that lower and raise the cloth that registers their collective movement. They get closer and silently, almost invisibly, pass each other in this still but falling world. It is all, it is nothing. It is more than enough.

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