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Postscript: Empathy, Spectacle and Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia

Synaesthesia – the sensation of a sense other than the one being stimulated, such as tasting sounds or colours – has been known about for a long time, while the word itself is more recent, dating from the late nineteenth century. Then, in 2003, came the first report of what appeared to be a hitherto unnoticed variant, quickly christened ‘mirror-touch’ synaesthesia, with the first reference in a neuroscience journal dating from 2005, since when it has been generating rapidly increasing interest, along with controversy about its interpretation. A conference at Tate Modern in early 2014, entitled ‘Mirror-touch: Synaesthesia and the Social’, with speakers from neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, film and the visual arts, put it firmly on the cultural map, and served to bring out its wider significance.¹

Mirror-touch synaesthesia involves feeling touch when seeing another person being touched, a feeling that is experienced as just as real as if it had been the person viewing who had been touched, and is felt in exactly the same part of the body. It is as though the visual and the tactile sensory mechanisms are getting confused, or being triggered in tandem, hence the grounds for seeing this as another form of synaesthesia. The person being viewed may be physically present, or may be seen on a screen, so mediation does not seem to affect it. In the great majority of cases, it must be a human person who is being seen; if it is a puppet or inanimate object that is being touched, this will not have the same effect. But here, we can add that there is nothing inherently fixed about the clear distinctions we conventionally draw between the senses anyway: this is really a product of the eighteenth century. It has indeed been suggested that the infant experience of the world is strongly synaesthetic: clear sensory boundaries develop gradually, influenced by culture. Indeed, synaesthesia brings into play a vivid experience of sensory immersion, of existence in a world that is almost one of sensory overload, with the body as an interchange of messages between and across the senses.²

The particular conjunction of senses in mirror-touch makes it particularly challenging. We can recall here the eighteenth-century controversy over the

relative weight of sight and touch as foundations for human interaction and social life. Sight is a distance sense; touch is about proximity and intimacy. If the boundary between these senses is disrupted, so too is our relation to the world. We become open to it, our boundaries more porous. The world draws closer, drawn onto our body as we are drawn into it. As our relation to the other becomes more intimate, the possibilities and problems of identification loom, impacting our sense of self. Here, it is worth pointing out that if, in the great majority of cases, the other in question is definitely human, then the fact that for a minority this need not be the case is also significant. Possibilities for imaginative relationships with non-human, animate or inanimate others seem to be opened up. New perspectives on our ability to react to works of art, be 'moved' by them, come into focus. In short: do we encounter some intriguing, but limited, neurological pathology here, or a challenge to the conventional limitations on our ability to respond to the other, a capacity for radical engagement that is latent in all of us?

We can, after all, be 'touched' emotionally. We can relate this to the ability of some mirror-touch synaesthetes to respond to violence that they see on screen, or in real life, by feeling pain themselves. There is also evidence (both from first-person accounts and psychological experiments) that mirror-touch synaesthetes are more sensitive to other people's emotions: they can react to bodily signs and cues that most of us miss. In this case, it is as though the cultural shaping and projection of emotion, its framing as spectacle, is bypassed by the affective immediacy of sensory transmission. And if we position the body here as a kind of screen, through which we try to decode the other person's inner emotional state, so that we can assimilate this to the mediated image of the body, we can move towards a question that leads into the broader significance and implications of all this: are we affected by the emotional cues, or the sight of touch itself, *through* the screen, with the screen as a channel, or is it the *image* of touch, *on* the screen, that matters here? Is it an affective pulse, a physical transmission of energy, that is involved here, or is there an engagement with the image, involving the image-making capacity of mind, our imaginative grasp, that is in play? The omnipresent screen (television, film, video, computer, smartphone) hence becomes a physical 'embodiment' of these possibilities, an interface across which messages pass constantly, in whatever form, image and text, with an impact that has been explored particularly in contemporary Deleuze-influenced film theory.³ Naturally all this is a site of controversy: some scientists postulate a neuronal 'empathy circuit' as the basis for human social emotions, while critics of this emphasize our imaginative capacity to 'put ourselves in the place of the other'.⁴

Clearly we are on familiar ground here. Lurking behind the novelty, we find the old tension between the two strands, going back to the eighteenth century, that has been the central theme of the second half of this book. The characteristic language of sensationalist empiricism resurfaces, with terms like 'vibration' in widespread use in neurological accounts, and elsewhere, as writers struggle to find the appropriate expressions for the causal dynamics of the 'affective currents' postulated here. In art, Kandinsky, himself a synaesthete, used this language of 'vibration' and 'resonance' – a language that seems highly appropriate for describing the way sight itself seems to operate *as if* a form of touch in these cases. But if this language of the circuit of sensation is allowed to sweep all before it, then some of the wider implications claimed here for our understanding of empathy will become more difficult to sustain. For this, we need to draw on the alternative conceptual structure of the spectacle of sympathy, as theorized by Adam Smith and others, with their emphasis on the imagination, rather than the Humean tradition.

There has been an important shift in the language of the debate, however: now, as already hinted, it is empathy that has, in recent decades, replaced sympathy as the preferred term. Hence we need to reflect again on the relation between these, touched on briefly in the Introduction. As the translation of a term from late nineteenth-century German psychology, *Einfühlung*, 'empathy' seems to have occurred first in 1912, but even by mid-century had barely spread beyond this original psychological domain. An interesting case can be cited from the 1947 edition of the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, which, along with its more standard definition, gives this as another meaning of synaesthesia: 'Agreement of the feelings or emotions of different individuals, as a stage in the development of sympathy.' This is exactly the situation where, today, empathy would be invoked (just as it hints at the very real difficulties that would be involved in trying to distinguish them). The ostensible rationale for this shift is conceptual clarity: empathy refers to imaginatively entering into the situation of the other, hence gaining a better *grasp* of their feelings or perspectives, while sympathy is an immediate emotional response, characteristically of sorrow or pity, whereby we appear to *share* those feelings.

There seems to be more to it than this, though; lurking behind sympathy is the ever-present danger of sentimentality which, as we have seen, is both stigmatized and an omnipresent temptation in the culture. 'Empathy' is there, in part, to keep it at bay; and 'sympathy' effectively becomes the sacrificed term, to make this possible. Looming up here is the artificial tyranny of the of the 'reason' v. 'emotion' dichotomy, so important to the ideological self-image

of modern Western culture, and the associated cultural devaluation of that immediacy of emotional response that 'the sentimental' seems to imply. And this, together with the difficulty in practice of separating out these terms, is the reason why this book has maintained 'sympathy' as the umbrella term, in accordance with the underlying pattern that this cultural history reveals, while simultaneously seeking to bring out the tensions *within* this pattern and the way it has been theorized. And, in the light of all this, it might be unsurprising if 'empathy', in turn, as the aspiring successor to 'sympathy', might be found increasingly to embody the tensions between the two traditions, those of the circuit of sensation and the spectacle of sympathetic engagement, stemming from Hume and Smith, discussed in this book. In particular, the approach to empathy suggested in the preceding paragraph would be threatened by any wholesale appropriation of empathy by neuroscientific discourse, since this would be likely to lose sight of the issues that are *not* adequately theorized within the sensationalist tradition.

While these continuities are undoubtedly there, it might be good to speculate beyond these, and feel our way into other aspects, new possibilities opened up here, ways of thinking about all this that may bypass the dilemmas referred to. That was a deliberately loaded way of putting it: we 'feel our way' into problems, situations, relationships, artworks – and into the potential that synaesthesia may possess for disrupting conventional boundaries between literal and metaphorical. The senses have, after all, long been powerful sources of imagery, and synaesthesia, as an overt crossing of boundaries, is even more so, since it maps on to metaphor itself, as the boundary-crossing dimension within language, and questions whether this homology testifies to a certain priority of *relationship* itself, over 'entity'. Something of this is present in Goethe's colour wheel, where specific colours are tied to particular emotions. I may be 'touched' by your concern, and vice versa, metaphorically, just as we may literally touch each other, but with mirror-touch synaesthesia, the situation changes: although seeing an act of touching becomes feeling the act, you are not literally touching me, but neither are you metaphorically touching me. The distinction between metaphorical and literal becomes unclear; the sensory dislocation troubles our ontological certainties. And if I can 'feel' your emotion, I can be 'touched' by you in a sort of literalization of the metaphor. Clearly we are in the world of Baudelaire's 'correspondences', where *'Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent'*.

None of this takes us far from empathy, and the challenges posed for our understanding of it. In the poem just cited, Baudelaire tells us how 'man' passes

through forests of symbols, which '*l'observent avec des regards familiers*'. Here *they* – whatever exactly 'they' may be – are looking at *us*, in a reversal of what we conventionally think of as the spectatorial attitude. Yet the possibility of this reversal, along with problems this might pose, has always been there in the implications of empathy. Do we open ourselves *to* the other, or project ourselves *into* the other? The latter possibility, that imaginative projection may be more like a form of imposition, which is then misread as 'other', can be found in various contexts. We may, for example, project our feelings into an artwork, and then imagine that, in responding to the result, we are responding to qualities of the artwork itself. At the same time, the mirror-reversal of this – being overwhelmed by the other, taken over by it – is hardly the answer. What seems to be called for here is a move beyond the active/passive dynamic, in relation both to empathy and to spectatorship, into a mode of reciprocity or participation that accepts the inevitability of the fact of *encounter* itself: an aesthetics of the creative encounter, or indeed aesthetics *as* creative encounter.⁵ Being touched, being moved – to what extent this comes from self *or* other would always have an element of the essentially unknowable; and a culturally embedded aesthetics would seem to be the appropriate mode of theoretical exploration here.

Empathy and spectatorship are thus drawn more closely together, with mirror-touch synaesthesia now serving not only as a metaphor (for these relationships, these connections), but as a model for how we should approach these issues, how we should conceive of them and practice them – a model for new ways of seeing, positioning seeing as an embodied experience of participation in a creative encounter with otherness, a process in which distinctions between literal and metaphorical shift and slide, just as language, too, becomes situated, embodied. Our very notion of language as a mirror or reflection of reality becomes elided into a model of language – and art – as process, continuation of reality by other means, in other dimensions, ensuring that our capacity to grasp it reflexively is also, inevitably a contribution to changing it.

But all this is very speculative – a good place to end.