

The agitation of the hand

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Leader, Darian (2016) **Hands: What we do with them – and why**. London: Hamish Hamilton. ISBN 978-0-241-25654-1 pbk. Pages vii + 120.

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What is the agitation that inhabits the hand? This is the question that animates Darian Leader's new book. His opening claim is that the continual human need to do something with one's hands – exemplified in the preoccupation many of us have with electronic devices – tells us something crucial about the nature of our embodied existence. What though?

Hands are longstanding symbols of agency and ownership. And yet they are more than just this. They also hold the potential – so memorably dramatized in films like Stanley Kubrick's **Dr Strangelove** – to turn against us, to be possessed, to be active beyond our wishes. The character of Elsa, from Disney's **Frozen**, is a case in point: she needs to keep her hands in gloves and avoid touching others, lest she turns them into ice. There is thus a part of herself – embodied in her hands – that is, to adopt a Lacanian turn of phrase, in her more than her.

Much developmental psychology is concerned with the dominance of the mouth in the earliest stages of development. Yet as Leader is quick to assert, babies cannot feed only with their mouths; there is a morbid alliance between mouth and hand. Little hands, in short, are continually gripping, stroking or clasp as the infant feeds. Freud's 'grasping drive' is invoked (a child's sucking is constantly accompanied by tugging and grasping activities), before Leader opines: "How different from a simple model of biological maturation. We see here what psychoanalysis calls the 'drive',

defined broadly speaking as everything that is happening in this scene beyond the level of pure need.” (p 23).

There are numerous sensations that accompany the child’s attempts at feeding, and many of these sensations come to be pleasurable in their own right, engendering patterns of repetition that outstrip mere biological need. The experience of feeding thus introduces an original splitting between the wish to relieve bodily needs and the desire to feel once again the satisfactory sensations that had accompanied it.

What Leader is broaching here is the Lacanian distinction between desire and drive. In desire “we reach out towards something beyond us” whereas the drive tries “to attenuate an agitation within us” (p 41). This is why the relentless, lifelong search for the lost object of satisfaction is never reducible simply to desire:

“We are caught from the start of life between the search for the satisfaction of need and the need for repetition of satisfaction, two quite different things. This generates an itching in the body, a state of internal restlessness that we seek to assuage by importing some further stimulation from the outside ... The unsolvable problem of drive tension means that there will always be an excess in the body, a ‘too much’ that our bodies – and hands – are perpetually trying to exile.” (pp 38-39).

For this reason the *search for more* (desire) is always simultaneously a *search for less* (drive). The hand is central in the experience of both: as an image of desire the hand reaches out for something beyond it; as organ of drive, by contrast, “it is overbrimming with morbid excitation” (p 41). This distinction sheds light on the two contrasting tropes of the hand mentioned above, that is, the hand as embodying agency as well as the hand as a possessed thing that is never fully part of ourselves. The latter consideration is perhaps why when we punch or hit something, we are also striking the hand itself, “as if to negate and expel from the body some of the internal turbulence we feel” (p 89).

Verbal communicative transactions rarely occur without us moving our hands. Visually impaired people use their hands just as much as do people with no visual impairment when expressing themselves. Many of us doodle while listening to others in meetings – psychotherapists, as Leader confirms, certainly do. In the course of some of our most focused cognitive activities we use our hands, to fidget, to take notes, to be drum our fingers. The activity of speech and indeed, of listening, argues Leader, needs to be embodied.

Leader makes short shrift of the idea that contemporary communication technologies have separated us from the less mediated and ostensibly more direct mode of face-to-face

relationships. The attempt to abstract ourselves from the immediacy of life is, he argues, a very traditional purpose. Technologies, old or new, complex or rudimentary, have always been used to generate distance.

Hands, is alas, more essay than book, and the truncated style Leader has employed in many of his other popular titles is particularly pronounced here. One is left feeling that many of the explorations begun here – such as that of idleness and work or indeed of piety - are barely introduced before being summarily resolved.

Towards the end of the book Leader does though offer a wonderful observation that makes good on his opening promise to speak to the broader theme of embodied existence. A man enters a public space – a restaurant, say – to meet some friends. As he moves through the room, aware that the eyes of others are upon him, he touches his face or his head. Such “curious self-anointments” (p 106), Leader says, are omnipresent, even if we barely notice or remark on them. As we enter a social scene or are fixed in the gaze of others, we tend to touch our own bodies, as if to protect ourselves against the look of others and affirm that we are actually there. The beauty of this insight – in addition to its reminder that we are less securely anchored in our bodies than we might imagine – is that it reminds us of the place of quiet, everyday observations of the social, for the psychoanalytic clinic.