The Double Projections of Desire and Fear
In the Artificial Membrane of Cinema

In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognized by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized. All disgust is originally disgust at touching. Even when the feeling is mastered, it is only by a drastic gesture that overleaps its mark: the nauseous is violently engulfed, eaten, while the zone of finest epidermal contact remains taboo. Only in this way is the paradox of the moral demand to be met, exacting simultaneously the overcoming and the subtlest elaboration of man’s sense of disgust. He may not deny his bestial relationship with animals, the invocation of which revolts him: he must make himself its master.

-- “Gloves,” Walter Benjamin

Cinema is, perhaps, constructed upon fragmented imageries that are waiting for penetration and reconciliation through its lingering partial vacancy. It is like a trunk of human body without the limbs, or a flattened glove lying with its wide opening loosely enclosed, generating unconscious holes, to be filled or penetrated, for the eyes. In subjective connotation, such interpretation might lead us to think the conspiracy behind cinema is a sexual gesture; however, this metaphor is fundamentally an objective depiction of the exchange between the spectator and the screen. The ‘epidermal contact’ between the spectator and the screen is an active movement of reaching and receiving, the perception of the gazes and the projection of lights (thus, moving images) are rubbing against each other on the two sides of a thin layer of artificial invisibility. Therefore, rather than interpreting cinema as a heterosexual gesture of intercourse, the connection of the spectator and the screen is an imitation of sexual interaction; an extended desire to touch the epidermis of the screen with the phantom limbs of the gazes. Thus, cinema is a seed that impregnates not only desire, but also its double (or reflection): fear. The indiscernible exchange between desire and fear is stimulated by the constant potential of holes: bodily canals, abysses, voids, or even oceans.

Fear is stimulated by the unconscious or veiled awareness of the holes because its depth generates lingering turbulences, whether they are oceanic waves or echoes, in response to the concrete existence of the end/side. Because the other side is unseen, it automatically becomes an engulfing entity that is larger than what could be conceived visually. (For often, the shadow is the enlarged and stretched double of the being itself.) When a person is afraid of the vastness of the ocean, they are not afraid of the surface of the water, which is visible, but what the surface implies: the unseen depth of the impending turbulences that can never be mastered. However, the hole also generates, at the same time, the desire to reach for or dive in the unseen side. The actualization of such
desire always requires a ‘forceful’ action that is against the concreteness of gravitational axis (interruption of a state of stillness): to inflate a flattened balloon, to dive into the ocean with machines, etc. As in a cinematic experience, such interruption is already predetermined: a spectator is presumed to interrupt the ‘stillness’ of the moving images by looking at it. In other words, the moving images are only ‘moving’ or active when they are perceived by the eyes. The mechanical movements of the images on the screen need to be validated by the physical movements of the human body. This mutual relationship is parallel to the structure of fear reflecting/echoing the potential of desire on the other end. The correspondences between the two sides (desire and fear) guarantee constant displacements of the mind, wrapping the spectators in “sonorous envelopes” (Hongisto, 85); in Deleuzian terms: “contracting the image instead of dilating it.” (Deleuze, 68)

The parallel comparison between ‘two sides of the hole’ and ‘two sides of cinematic experience.

The dyad of fear and desire seems to create a dialectic; however, these two sides should be considered as indiscernible domains that bind to generate the wholeness of an experience instead of the distinct domains that serve the purpose of classifications of absolutism. In “The crystals of time,” Deleuze states that “indiscernibility constitutes an objective illusion” to suggest that the perceptual experience of moving images does not rely on classifying the validity of different sensations, but receives them as a mixture in a gaseous form. The immobility/stillness of the spectator’s physical body is then interrupted by the gaseous movement of moving images. The screen is providing the actual image, and through the immersion of the turbulences that are constantly reaching to the audience like extended arms, the virtual image is reflected by the surficial wavelengths and projected on the spectator. Thus, the perception of actual and virtual images is generated in the process of double projections that happen at almost the same time: the projector generates mechanical projection onto the screen and the screen, in response to the mechanical stimulation, projects the images, in the form of sensuous extension, back onto the spectator. The mechanical projection is actualizing the actual
image, which is image itself; the projection of virtual images happens when the images are permeating in the distance between the screen and the spectator, in which the perception of the human mind functions as the ‘node of uncertainties’ in this process. This process of double projections is echoing to the Deleuzian principle of ‘contracting and dilating the image.’ The range of the mechanical projection is expanding from a small point and enlarging the images on a screen, ‘dilating’ the images. The automatic routine of a machine functions to enlarge the images for the visibility of the human eyes. However, the range of reception of moving image from spectator is distributed in a reversed way: the moving images are reflecting from an enlarged field and as light waves are weaving through air, it narrows down to a focal point of the human eyes. The perceived moving images are contracted by perception. The overlapping circuits are creating an enveloping membrane around the spectator through the projections/reflections of the mirror-surfaces from the two ends; therefore, the membrane, created by the uneven distribution of light and darkness (in a theatre, etc.), is a space of coalescence, “a double movement of liberation and capture.” (Deleuze, 70) The doubleness of actual and virtual is fundamentally the exchangeable states of a mirroring image: actual images could be virtualized, and reversely virtual images could also be actualized. Deleuze, inspired by Bergson’s idea of actual and virtual, states: “the actual image itself has a virtual image which corresponds to it like a double or a reflection.” But as the medium of cinema is slowly drained out by functional norms that are condemned to become clichés, the mirror is misted by opaqueness; the dreams projected by the screen are no longer an unrecognized atmosphere but always a repetitive déjà-vu. It is important to realize that the virtual existence of moving images is wounded when the actuality of images is enforced and enlarged without a limit, stifling the possibilities of silent, mythical imaginations. (For example, the endless pursuit for high-quality and clarity of visual images can suffocate the romance of pixels.) Bergson summarizes the existence of the two sides in Matter and Memory:

Our actual existence, then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and recollection on the other… Whoever becomes conscious of the continual duplicity of his present into perception and recollection…will compare himself to an actor playing his part automatically, listening to himself and beholding himself playing.
In a talk, Trinh T. Minh-ha says that to immerse oneself in a process of praying is to shift oneself into a virtual reality: when you close your eyes, the actual image that lies in front becomes purely sensation, and you start to see the other side of the enclosed eyelids. She phrases such a meditative experience as a cinematic experience: “…as the night mutates, to one’s sudden encounter with one’s own abyssal light: the infinite self. In this (no) state of intense altered consciousness, one finds oneself being of both—of here and there, opening of a passageway.” (Trinh, xiv) This opening of a passageway does not appear to summon beings to realize an unfilled gap; it is there to signal us about the possible existence of an entrance or an exit. The virtual and actual states, in Trinh’s opinion, can be constantly altered and exchanged. The relationship of actual and virtual is very often utilized in cinematic works; an example would be Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*. The film begins with the montage sequence that consists of fragmented images of flashing objects and human arms reaching for the screens, making actual epidermal contact with the imaginary mirror of cinema. The metaphor of touching the screen hints the spectators that cinema, indeed, is fundamentally a platform for physical reactions—not intellectual responses. Tracing back to the time prior to the invention of cinema, the simple techniques such as moving along a mimed wall in ancient theatrical performances emphasize on the use of hands to convey a simple gestural message. To glide on an invisible wall and to persuade the audience that the wall really does exist in the air with purely hand gestures relies not only on good performance, but also the spectator’s desire to understand the feeling: to understand the feeling of being touched through the perspective of the wall (the object) instead of substituting oneself as the subject touching the wall. The extension of an invisible arm is an opportunity for our sensorial perception to shift and become the textural surface of another object.

Making bodily responses to the textural surface of a dead object is an attempt to allow the object enwrapping around us; we can say that the ‘personification’ of the dead object is caused by its double. Besides being the object that is visible in an actualized form in reality, it also exists in a virtual form. It is through a virtual state that the spectator senses the feeling of being touched and embodied. These experiences of embodiment and synchronizations of feelings between objects and subjects can be
considered as ‘mirror-touch synaesthesia.’ Mirror-touch synaesthesia, according to Michael Banissy, is related to “empathy” because of “the shared affective neural systems in which common brain areas are activated during both experience and passive observation.” (Pisters, 78) Mirror-touch synaesthesia transports us back to our infant stage when we are so curious to touch different objects to recognize the boundaries of the surrounding world. (Along with the infantile behavior of perceptual exploration by grabbing onto things, putting things into ‘holes,’ such as the mouth, is also very important. Related to this topic, Deleuze states: “If you utter something, that something goes through your mouth; therefore, when you utter “a chariot,” a chariot goes through your mouth.”) But the accumulations of epidermal experiences would generate fear because we would learn there are things to not be touched. Yet, cinema provides us with extended arms to touch the things we are fearful to touch in a safe distance. Eisenstein has mentioned in The Magic of Art that cinema turns the spectator to “the norms of a primordial sensory [perception] — he is ‘returned’ to the magic stages of normal sensation.” (Pisters, 73) This thought is somewhat optimistic, for it suggests that the continual regeneration of cinematic perception comes from the fundamentality of our behaviors, our primordial senses. But on the other hand, this could also be a curse, for we can never immediately master or resist the powerful impulsions of synchronizing with synaesthetic echoes. Therefore, we might become the victims of the manipulations of synaesthetic affects in cinema. Perhaps Eisenstein has not been aware of the possibility of such threat, therefore he criticizes Wassily Kandisky’s experimental theatre piece for being too conscious about divorcing “all formal elements from all content elements from all content elements, which evokes obscurely disturbing sensations.” (Pisters, 75) The exploration of primordial senses in cinematic experiences also requires analytic observations. The mirror-touch synaesthetic, through both synchronization and manipulation, extends its branch into the realm of fetishism.

In the psychoanalytical framework of cinema studies, the validity of mirror-touch synaesthesia could be confirmed through the differentiation of the outside and the inside. In the Lacanian ideology, the partial objects (voice and gaze) are used to describe the primary alienation of oneself and the surrounding world (the other). However, the scholars, such as Kaja Silverman and Michel Chion, who study and utilize Lacanian ideology as the prototypical framework for their research might realize this alienation in the process of creating structure might be too absolute. Rather, Kaja Silverman describes the ‘other’ as the external image projecting toward a subject, whose “identity would be glimpsed [at the very moment],” and that “partial objects enjoy very little otherness and are not totally severed from infant subject; external to subject but nevertheless have a bind to subject’s body.” (Hongisto, 84) These scholars reinterpreted the partial objects into lingering extensions of an entity’s organic wholeness; they often use a form of maternal structure to represent that lingering extensions as if they obtain a sort of nurturing element. Kaja Silverman suggests that the mother’s voice binds the ‘self’ and the ‘other,’ while Michel Chion describes it as an “umbilicus” that returns oneself back to the embodiment of indiscernibility in the womb. Nevertheless, these new interpretations are still based on the separations, which generate a perpetual absence embedded in the social structure of an individual. However, since the collaboration of Deleuze and Guattari, the partial objects are suggested to be considered a cut (a narrowed version of a hole), opening a small leaking orifice in the circuits of cinematic perception for
exchangeable interpretations. Nick Davis, in “The Desiring Images,” proposes the ‘seven pillars of schizo homo pomo,’ which is enacted by the desiring image (inspired by Deleuzo-Guattarian ideology) of queer cinema. Among the seven pillars, Davis emphasizes that desire has no ideal forms (like time and movement) and is at the root of all things. The ‘desiring production,’ a concept proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in Anti-Oedipus, suggests that desires are generated in a mechanical process and the identities of individuals are like “forces of flux” that fluctuate and flow through the circuits. Since desires in the society are carried in flux of machinic resonances, just as the desires of cinema might be delivered through the flux of pixels, the reflections of desires are almost automatic and ongoing because it is the desire’s responsibility to continue on producing. The automatic productions of desire eventually generate norms that are repetitively interpreted, becoming habits that can be called: fetish.

In “Fetishism and Sex Appeal of the Inorganic” by Mario Perniola, fetish is described as “a caricature of the sex appeal of the inorganic, of which it offers a grotesque and extravagant version.” (Perniola, 53) This definition implies that fetish is completed in a virtual reality where the dead objects are ‘personified’ (projecting empathy). Fetish is a form of synaesthetic sensation that has been kept as a taboo or secret; cinema functions as an passageway for the exchangeable desire and fear embedded in fetish to leak out. The obscure awareness is stimulated by the enlargement of images on the screen; the leaking orifice gradually grows bigger and the gaseous flow consolidates into a thin layer of membrane. The extended/reaching arms of both the screen and the spectator are also donning thin layers of artificial membranes, wrapping the source of synaesthetic sensations (which, in this metaphor, are represented by hands/arms) tightly to obscure the direct contact. But why is it necessary to obscure the direct sensation? That might be because both sides of desire and fear unconsciously demand for the hole that cannot be fully filled; the hole is always maintaining vacancy. The invisible arm becomes an organ that is always slightly numb, triggering the desire for reaching closer to the itchy target and guaranteeing the overwhelming fear from fully grasping onto the ‘taboo’ zone. As a fetishist may say: “I lend you what I’m missing, that is an organ that feels me. The indirect impression gives me a surplus that adds to my direct excitement.” (Perniola, 60) Fetish is as complicated (or simple) as the lightness and weight buried in the swaying arbitrariness of an autonomous arm deciding to embody itself within a glove (a membrane).

The arbitrary consciousness of moving images guarantees the survival of fetish. Especially on the platform of YouTube, where the immediacy and convenience of generating moving images drastically increase, the imageries that are explicitly related to fetish are shared among users. The newborn opportunities of exposing and generating fetishes, which were once considered as taboos, are eagerly craved by the hungry eyeballs of spectators. The fetishes become somehow ‘edible.’ With the popular fetishistic videos such as ASMR, the spectators can now easily play with the exchangeable modes of desire and fear—which are too inconvenient to grasp onto due to the partial immobility of bodies—through the mobility of internet with a click of button. A typical plot in an ASMR video would be to perform a role-play of a cranial nerve examination. In the role-play, the performer would act as a doctor and the spectator would be positioned as a patient. The artificiality in the performative gestures of the “doctor” is a fallacy and excuse necessary for the spectator to engage in the delusion;
they crave for flaws in order to realize they are safe to linger in pleasure. The reenactment of involuntary sensual desire is, therefore, supported by the virtual reality. I have written about the viewing experience of this type of role-play ASMR video before, and concluded with this thought:

The gloved hands of the doctor are sometimes gently gliding on the lens surface, leading the spectator to feel a slithering itchiness for the screen, which is an extension of their own skin texture. It might even lure the spectator to scratch the screen in order to solve their own epidermal itchiness. To be more precise, maybe it is actually an itchiness that is gliding on the spectator’s watery eyeball. Desire, perhaps, is an itchiness waiting to be scratched; thus, an eye (the perspective provided by the screen) is exchanged for an itchy eye (the eyes of the spectator). It is an echoing synaesthetic relation.

Perhaps the imagery of a gloved hand is a metaphor for the gesture of “contraction”; the moving images are waiting to be contracted by our sensuous eyes.

Another example of contraction of images would be the moving images that obtain no cut in the duration of the video and keep on moving like the window of a train. In some videos that are focused on the audio information, such as radio shows archived by other audiences, the images are usually a continual long take. Usually the long takes are the moving images recorded by the surveillance camera placed on the frontal mirror of a car. The combination of the audio as a radio show and the image as a ongoing landscape that a driver would see from the front window of a car is an attempt to create an interpretive, mechanical virtual reality. Sometimes, the spectator just gazes into the ongoing landscapes with a conscious purpose, but contracting the possible vacancies that are waiting for interpretations. If the car happens to drive by some crowded bushes, the
spectator might be gazing into the gaps in between the plants to look for the vague existence of imagined creatures that are crawling swiftly across the screen. The contraction of images, in a way, reflects the long-forgotten detail of the hometown that you have arrived to after a long journey at sea. Rimbaud concludes his long poem with the metaphor of contracting the sense of nostalgia through the most mundane detail of life, of humanity:

If I want Europe, it’s a dark cold puddle
Where a small child plunged in sadness crouches
One fragrant evening at dusk, and launches
A boat, frail as a butterfly in May.

Bibliography