

The Skin and the Screen – A Dialogue

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DC-JM: At the beginning of your very inspiring book, *The Skin of the Film*, you write that this title “offers a metaphor to emphasize the way the film signifies through its materiality, through a contact between perceiver and object represented.”¹ And you define *haptic visuality* as “the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes.”² Between “materiality” and “touch,” on one side, and “metaphor” and “vision,” on the other, haptic visuality concerns two theoretically distinguished, though strongly related, aspects of cinema spectatorship. The first aspect concerns the real conditions according to which the spectator is connected to the film. The second aspect concerns the way the spectator’s eye functions insofar as the connection with film involves not only the organ of vision but also a range of other feelings mediated by vision, starting with the haptic ones. The issue of concern to us, to begin with, is how one can possibly consider the definition of screen and screening to include these two aspects and their interrelationships in order to build the kind of new reading you are aiming at.

LUM: You’re right that the theory has two sides, one of materiality, one of subjectivity. In terms of the real conditions of reception, I argue that a series of material connections maintains between the original pro-filmic entity and the means that captured it, through the media that reproduce, transform, and transmit it, and finally to the embodied receiver. (In the case of cameraless films and animation, the series begins with the originating act of image-making. In computer-based media, algorithmic transformations and compressions enter the series at various points; I argue that these do not completely rupture the connection.) This series of connections is what I term *enfolding-unfolding aesthetics*, which is grounded in the thought of Peirce, Deleuze, and Whitehead, among others. You see that the screen is just one point in a series of transmissions or unfoldings; but it’s an important point, the one where the film meets the viewer. And we mustn’t forget sound, another element that maintains a continuity of contact from its origin point, through various transformations, to the final reception.

In terms of the spectator, yes, of course, the beholder does not actually touch the film or the pro-filmic entity. Yet, to the degree that the encounter affects the

body, it produces subjective effects like those that arise from physical contact: it's not just a metaphor. I argued that the haptic image is more likely to give rise to an embodied and multisensory reception that awakens embodied memory. This is because a haptic image or haptic way of looking postpones the figure-ground differentiation that is required for identifying objects of vision as separate from oneself, and in turn psychologically "identifying with" them.

You mention "other feelings mediated by vision" (and again I would add hearing). I have developed a method of analyzing a film (or other things) that I term affective analysis. It analyzes reception by comparing a series of responses (which may be experienced simultaneously) that move from the extra-discursive to the highly discursive. They are affective response, embodied response, feeling, perception, and discourse or concept. Different theoretical approaches come in at each point: a Deleuze-Spinozan approach to affect, a phenomenological approach to embodied perception, and so on. Affective analysis has proven to be a useful method for arriving at an analysis by noting contrasts between affective, perceptual, and conceptual responses.

DC-JM: The skin metaphor raises several questions. First, to what extent can the screen be thought of as skin? And what exactly is it the skin of? Assuming the hypothesis, we wonder if the screen operates as a skin by itself or if it only underlines the material presence of the image. Similarly, can we consider the screen as a medium that bodily relates the viewer to the image, or does the haptic way of looking encourage a relation to the screen itself, to its materiality? This raises a subsidiary question over the specificity of screen definition: is there a difference between the skin of the screen and the skin of the image; in other words, between the skin of the screen and the skin of the film? Furthermore, in your conception of haptic visuality, the sense of touch as it is mediated by vision is considered significant, but your sensuous theory is also concerned with other synesthetic phenomena. In *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*,³ for example, you examine the "logic of smell," which suggests that you are more generally interested in the body and how its multiple sensations – which involves the coordinated use of multiple sensory organs – are activated by cinema? To what extent is it fruitful to consider the screen in light of such a body theory?

LUM: Interesting question. Haptic visuality relates to the materiality of the medium at several levels, including the medium of recording, of editing, and of the projection or transmission medium. I wouldn't over-emphasize the screen, for it is just one part of the material way the image reaches the viewer. Also, I used the term "the skin of the film" to emphasize that movies, especially those of which few copies exist, get changed in their material circulation – films gain scratches, analog videos demagnetize, digital media lose data. At the same time, they gain more meaning from the audiences among which they circulate.

DC-JM: Thinking of the screen in the frame of the “embodied experience of cinema,” it seems appropriate to consider whether the “images on screen” allow for a more embodied experience than natural perception would. Furthermore, we would also like to understand if, in your opinion, there is a great difference between the experience of the screen and the experience of the image. Specifically, can we separate these two experiences when watching a movie? How does the screen by itself increase the embodied experience of cinema? And, insofar as the images you call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen, does this haptic looking necessarily need the flatness of the screen or merely an impression of visual flatness? And to what degree can 3D images transform what you call haptic looking?

LUM: Yes, I think it’s important to distinguish between the experience of the image and that of the screen. I follow Vivian Sobchack’s observation that every medium and, indeed, every individual film or moving-image work perceives and expresses in its own way.⁴ When a moving-image work is exhibited on the platform for which it was designed, image and screen overlap. However, our response to the medium or platform may diverge from our response to the image. This is especially the case when time-based media are “remediated” for screens different from those on which they originally appeared, such as theatrical films being watched on a TV screen, a mobile phone, or a social-media platform like YouTube, or videos made for gallery monitors projected large. When this divergence occurs, I’ve noticed that new embodied experiences are made possible, but also the initial embodied experience may wane. Most of the 3D movies I have seen appear sculptural. I think Antonia Lant’s Riegl-inspired argument in “Haptical Cinema” would analyze them well.⁵

DC-JM: Subject to other aspects you would find more relevant, it seems to us that your questioning about the difference between film and video also deserves to be applied to the screen topic. Against the commonplace that film is a tactile medium and video an optical one, you consider video as a “haptic medium.”⁶ Contrary to the MacLuhian idea that “video is a ‘cool’ and distancing medium,” as you write, you argue that “video’s tactile qualities make it a *warm* medium.”⁷ You add: “It is the crisp resolution into optical viscosity that makes an image cool and distant.”⁸ On this basis, it seems possible to assume that the more or less “crisp resolution” depends not only on the medium, insofar as it would be definitively fixed, but also on the screen’s qualities and, by the same token, on the differences of the screen’s forms and contexts (as we experience it in theater, in front of our computer, or with a mobile phone).

LUM: Yes. Now that digital video has superseded analog video, and high resolution has become the norm, it’s best not to generalize but to consider each work

to determine how it achieves optical and haptic images and solicits optical and haptic looks. Low resolution images are not necessarily haptic. Compression algorithms for digital video are usually anti-haptic because they emphasize edges, proliferating figures on the screen. A sharp, high-resolution movie can include haptic passages that are all the more effective for the contrast. Recall that I defined haptic images as also including crowded images in which there is too much to see, making it difficult to isolate figures from the ground: these are high-resolution images. In terms of low resolution, we need to consider whether the work invites an embodied relationship with the pro-filmic entity or simply draws attention to its own materiality, as in the “poor” and precarious images that Hito Steyerl⁹ and Arild Fetveit¹⁰ analyze. I do find that looking at an extremely low-resolution or glitchy image invites a rather terrifying shared embodiment with the unfiltered noise of the universe itself.

DC-JM: When looking at all the different screens in different contexts for different uses a question arises that brings us back to the haptic way of looking, which depends not only on tactile connection on the surface plane of the screen, but also on a close vision. Is this close vision more determined by the sensuous closeness to the represented objects on the screen or by the closeness to the screen itself, whether we watch a movie in the front row of the theater, sitting in front of a computer, or on a mobile device?

LUM: Looking close up does not generally yield a haptic image. In fact, it's often the reverse: movies made for small screens tend to heighten figure-ground contrasts, to be extra-optical. Viewing movies on computers or mobile devices does tend to produce certain embodied responses, but these in themselves do not ensure a more sensuous reception. Indeed, when they include distraction, eye strain, and back pain, they distract from the embodied relationship with the film itself. In general, I think a distracted viewer is more likely to respond cognitively and not sensuously. Moreover, the media of the contemporary attention economy, while they certainly appeal to cognition, seem to bypass the perceptual in the attempt to directly produce affective responses.

DC-JM: Your “system,” so to speak, has another input, which also deals with the body: the cultural aspect. Because the body not only feels all kinds of sensations, it also embodies culture. This quotation of *The Skin of the Film* sums it up nicely: “I am exploring sense experience in cinema both to seek a primordial state of sensory innocence, but to find culture *within* the body. [...] We bring our own personal and cultural organization of the senses to cinema, and cinema brings a particular organization of the senses to us.”¹¹ Screen, as a matter of fact, gets in on this particular organization of the senses that cinema brings to us. How do you see the screen play a role in the functioning of such a cultural embodiment?

Reversing the perspective, the screen may be considered as the mediation of cultural embodiment, it also is determined by cultural specificities: do you agree with the assumption that the screen is conceived and experienced differently according to cultural characteristics? Can we precisely distinguish between different cultural ways of understanding and experiencing the screen? Incidentally, what do you think of the “dispositif theory” (by Jean-Louis Baudry) and the “screen theory” (feminist screen theory, specifically)?

LUM: Again, sorry, I don't see much relevance of the screen itself here, unless we are talking about the larger social and material circumstances in which a given screen is found. Audience studies help us attend to the cultural aspects of embodiment in viewing. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa observes that for women in Algeria, film viewing usually takes place in the privacy of the home, watching movies on the small screen with family.¹² Philippe Azoury's oral history of the Cinémathèque de Tanger involves all kinds of multisensory experiences, including the sounds of children, the soft-drink seller, the peanut seller, and sunflower seeds crunching underfoot.¹³

Dispositif theory remains useful for analyzing the normative reception that aligns the spectator with the production and projection apparatus. Dispositif theory and “Screen theory,” including the latter's feminist variants, generally rely on a conception of the subject drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis, which does retain value for analyzing the illusion of mastery that normative media work to instill in the viewer. My work, grounded in phenomenology and the philosophy of Deleuze, departs sharply from these approaches.

DC-JM: You are a well-known specialist of Islamic art. One of the key points in your book, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*,¹⁴ is that there is an analogy between Islamic art and media art, insofar as they both can be characterized by the crossing of abstract lines and haptic visuality. This aesthetics, apart from media art, has to do with a religion-dependent relationship. It is, as Dominique Clevenot puts it in *Une esthétique du voile. Essai sur l'art arabo-islamique*, “an aesthetics of the veil.” He writes: “The veil of the woman indeed, whatever it may receive various names locally, is designated in Arabic by the legal term ‘hijâb’: what hides, what separates. In that designation is tied a whole problem of Islamic culture as ‘hijâb’ is also a term of the religious lexicon, a mystical metaphor, a philosophical concept. This is the screen which prohibits any illusion of resemblance between man and divinity.”¹⁵ It is no coincidence that we find the veil and the screen side by side here. As far as we know, the word *hijâb* means both curtain and screen. In other languages the words that denote the screen have a comparable extension. We observe also, in most of these languages, the duality of the screen which hides and the screen which shows. Can we consider that the broad-based aniconism in Islamic culture has consequences

for the design of the screen? Is the “screen which hides” semantics a more topical question in this context than it is in other cultures?

LUM: Indeed, my theory of haptic visuality focuses on selective revealing and concealing. In particular, I argued that the partial revelation of a figurative image draws the beholder closer. That is one of the reasons I was drawn to the Islamic aesthetics of aniconism, which have developed many ways to withhold figuration so that the beholder’s relationship with the image can be more abstract or (and sometimes at the same time) more embodied and performative. The most useful way I have come across to integrate theories of the veil with theories of the screen is Walid El Khachab’s adaptation of Arab and other Eastern concepts of veil and fabric to propose a kind of spatial organization based on degrees of privacy and access.¹⁶

DC-JM: You say that the cinema functions as a fetish. Could we say that today it is rather the screen, in all its many forms, which functions as a fetish?

LUM: I didn’t say exactly that; rather, I argued that images act as fetishes when they condense a great deal of material history within themselves, and that these histories are activated not through sight but through physical contact (or a look that acts like a touch). This definition drew on anthropological theories of the fetish and also on Benjamin’s theory of aura. Using this definition, we can consider many images to be fetishes in that they contain within themselves the history of their production. This history can sometimes in turn be unpacked by the receiver. This observation developed into my theory of enfolding-unfolding aesthetics, which argues that a material connection maintains between the original pro-filmic entity and the means that captured it, through the media that reproduce and transmit it, to the embodied receiver.