

Video haptics and erotics

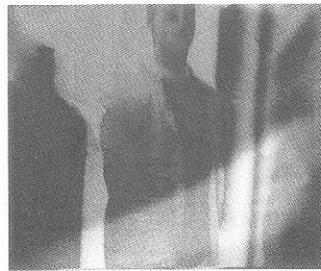
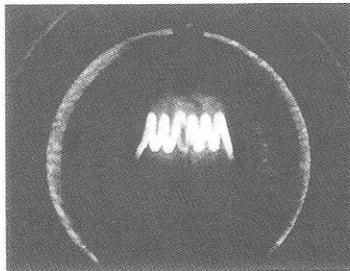
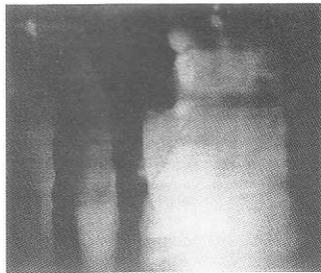
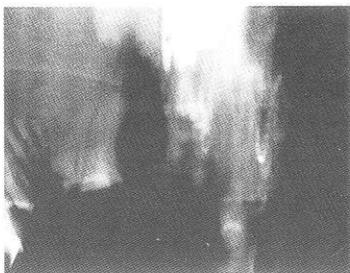
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I am watching *It Wasn't Love*, Sadie Benning's Pixelvision videotape from 1992. In it Benning tells the story of a shortlived love affair that began as a road trip to Hollywood but never got much further than the parking lot. Not much happens in its plot. The most arresting moment is when Benning slowly sucks her thumb, inches away from the unfocusable, low-resolution camera. Yet watching the tape feels like going on a journey into states of erotic being: the longing for intimacy with another; the painful and arousing awareness that she is so close to me yet distinct; being drawn into a rapport with the other where I lose the sense of my own boundaries; and the uncanny loss of proportion in which big things slip beyond the horizon of my awareness while small events are arenas for a universe of feeling.

Videomaker Seoungho Cho uses more expensive equipment for his work than Benning does, but here too the image gives up its optical clarity to engulf the viewer in a flow of tactile impressions. In Cho's videotapes the video image dissolves and resolves into layers whose relation to the foreground of the image and the position of the camera lens is uncertain. In his *Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again* (1994) people moving quickly past on a New York street at dusk are transformed, through long exposure and slow motion, into ghostly paths of light that swirl through the space of vision. The luminous images evoke the loneliness of a person in a crowd, the thousands of missed encounters leaving their traces on consciousness. An embodied view is encouraged, strangely perhaps, by these disembodied and floating images, for they approach the viewer not through the eyes alone but along the skin.

What is it about works like *It Wasn't Love* and *Forward, Back,*

Forward, Back, Side, Forward Again (Seungho Cho, 1994).

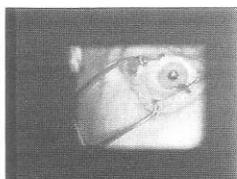


- 1 I find experimental media especially useful for this inquiry into tactile visuality, because this work is a laboratory for visual experiments: effects are thrown into relief here that manifest themselves more modestly in conventional cinema and television.
- 2 Jennifer Fisher has proposed a haptic aesthetics that involves not tactile visuality so much as a tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive awareness of the physicality of the art object. 'Relational sense: towards a haptic aesthetics', *Parachute*, no. 87 (July–September 1997), pp. 4–11.

Side, Forward Again that excite this array of responses? I believe that it is the visual character of the medium, as Benning and Cho use it, which appeals to a tactile, or haptic, visuality. In this essay I will examine some ways in which video can be haptic, and explore the eroticism to which the haptic image appeals. Although many visual media are capable of these qualities, it is particularly interesting to see how the electronic medium of video can have this tactile closeness, given that it is generally considered a 'cool' medium.¹

Haptic *perception* is usually defined as the combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies.² In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. Haptic visuality, a term contrasted to optical visuality, draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics. Because haptic visuality draws upon other senses, the viewer's body is more obviously involved in the process of seeing than is the case with optical visuality. The difference between haptic and optical visuality is a matter of degree, however. In most processes of seeing both are involved, in a dialectical movement from far to near, from solely visual to multisensory. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step towards considering the ways in which cinema appeals to the body as a whole.

Haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the video image. Thus it is not proper to speak of the *object* of a haptic look so much as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image. Because haptic visuality tends less to isolate and focus



Aletheia (Tran T. Kim-Trang, 1992). Pictures courtesy: Video Data Bank.

upon objects than simply to be in their presence, it seems to respond, if only formally, to Trinh T. Minh-ha's call, in the film *Re: Assemblage* (1982), to 'speak not about, but nearby'. As I will discuss, the relation between viewer and screen in haptic visuality has implications for a reconception of the erotics of the image.

Videomakers make many uses of the medium's haptic qualities. Electronic texture can protect the viewer from the image, or the image from the viewer. It can force the look to be self-reflexive by stressing the opacity of the video 'window', as in the work of Bill Viola, Shigeo Kubota, Mary Lucier and many other pioneers of electronic imaging. It can ease the viewer into a shocking image, as in Aline Mare's tape about her own abortion, *S'Aline's Solution* (1994) or Ken Feingold's shots of Thai villagers killing and cooking a dog in *Un Chien délicieux* (1991). It can work to skirt a potentially exploitative viewing relation, as in Edin and Edith Velez's quasi-ethnographic *Meta Mayan II* (1981), Philip Mallory Jones's video sketches of Africa, Gitanjali's blurry, oblique shots of Indian 'untouchables' in *New View/New Eyes* (1996), or Mona Hatoum's intimate images of her mother in *Measures of Distance* (1989). In fact, it was in looking at works which, like these, mediate between cultures that I first noted video's haptic qualities.

Many video artists have used the medium to critique vision, to show the limits of vision. And many of the haptic works I discuss in this essay spring from this suspicion of vision. An example is the video series by Tran T. Kim-Trang: *Aletheia* (1992), *Operculum* (1993), *Kore* (1994), *Ocularis: Eye Surrogates* (1997) and *Ekleipsis* (1998). These works carry a scorching condemnation of instrumental vision. But even as they do so, they begin to present to the viewer a different kind of visuality. *Aletheia*, for example, is a tape 'about' the desire to blind oneself. Yet it is dense with visual detail, layering many visual images as well as soundtracks: it begins with a shot of a piece of Braille writing; it overlays shots from a car window with a fragment of the map of Los Angeles. The effect of this surface density is to invite a kind of vision that spreads out over the surface of the image instead of penetrating into depth. Even the long quotes from Trinh and Fanon begin to dissolve into a pattern on the surface of the image. As I will discuss, this denial of depth vision and multiplication of surface, in the electronic texture of video, has a quality of visual eroticism. Ultimately, the erotic capacities of haptic visuality are twofold. It puts into question cinema's illusion of representing reality by pushing the viewer's look back to the surface of the image. And it enables an embodied perception: the viewer responding to the video as to another body, and to the screen as another skin.

In recent years many artists have been concertedly exploring the

- 3 David Antin, 'Video: the distinctive characteristics of the medium', in John Hanhardt (ed.), *Video Culture* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop, 1986).
- 4 For one example among many, consider the Canadian artist, Janet Cardiff's installation 'To Touch' (at The Power Plant, Toronto, 1995). In a dim room, visitors touch a worn, old table in order to activate various sounds from speakers around the walls: music, environmental sounds, whispers, dialogues, fragments of stories. The effect mimics the power of memory to arise from combinations of sensory experience.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed. and trans.), *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–52. See, also: Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork essay reconsidered', *October*, no. 62 (1992), pp. 3–41; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 6 See, for example: Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
- 7 See, for example: Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); David Howes (ed.), *Varieties of Sensory Experience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); and Vishvajit Pandya, 'Movement and space: Anadamanese cartography', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1990), pp. 775–97.
- 8 See, for example: Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

tactile qualities of video. Many of these works seem to express a longing for a multisensory experience that pushes beyond the audiovisual properties of the medium. Perhaps this longing is especially pronounced in video because its images tend not to have the depth and detail of film. For formal reasons alone, the flatness of video, or what David Antin termed video's 'cheesiness' early in its life as an art medium,³ begs to be challenged. Video art is defined in part by artists' resistance to the limits put on the medium by television, with its narrative- and content-driven requirements of legibility. But the desire to squeeze the sense of touch out of an audiovisual medium, and the more general desire to make images that appeal explicitly to the viewer's body as a whole, seem to express a cultural dissatisfaction with the limits of visibility. This dissatisfaction might be phrased by saying that the more our world is rendered forth in visual images, the more things are left unexpressed.

To dwell on the critique of hypervisuality over the past hundred years in western cultures (such critiques having different histories and trajectories in other cultures) would overflow the space of this discussion of haptic video. Let me simply point out that in recent years, artists in many mediums have taken renewed interest in the tactile and other sensory possibilities of their work, often to the diminution of visual appeal.⁴ Disciplines from philosophy to art history, anthropology and cognitive psychology have begun to posit an epistemology based on the sense of touch. Recall Walter Benjamin's suggestion that *aura* is a tactile form of visibility. His 'Artwork' essay implies that *aura* is the material trace of a prior contact with an object. Benjamin and other Frankfurt School theorists, as well as their contemporary followers, have bemoaned the atrophy of sensuous knowledge among western urban cultures.⁵ Historians of visibility remark upon connections between industrial and postindustrial societies and the reconfiguration of the senses.⁶ Contemporary anthropologists of sensory experience observe a wide range of uses of sense knowledge across cultures, and transformations in the configurations of sense knowledge within a culture.⁷ And feminists have theorized connections between visibility and masculine control, sometimes offering alternative epistemologies grounded in other forms of sense perception.⁸ This groundswell of interest in the limits of visibility supports the theorization of a tactile epistemology, which in turn underpins my definition of haptic cinema.

Of course, Benjamin saw film as destructive of *aura*, since it reported unique images and allowed them to be 'brought closer'. But, as Miriam Hansen points out, film's particular indexicality allows it to attribute physiognomic qualities to objects, certainly endowing them with the auratic power to return the look.⁹ Gilles Deleuze's analysis of the filmic object suggests many ways in which it can be precisely auratic, indeed fetishistic, in the way it embodies

9 Miriam Hansen, 'Benjamin, cinema and experience: "the blue flower in the land of technology"', *New German Critique*, no. 40 (1987).

10 Margeret Iversen, *Alois Riegl* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 78–9; Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1995), originally published as *Spätträmisches Kunstindustrie*, 1927.

11 Riegl, *Late Roman Art*, p. 13.

temporality, spatiality and memory. With these pro-tactile possibilities in mind, let us come into contact with the notion of haptic cinema.

The term *haptic* as I use it here originates with the art historian Alois Riegl, writing at the turn of the century. Riegl's history of art turned on the gradual demise of a physical tactility in art and the rise of figurative space. He observed this development from the haptic style of ancient Egyptian art, which 'maintain[ed] as far as possible the appearance of a unified, isolated object adhering to a plane', to the optical style of Roman art, in which objects relinquished a tactile connection to the plane. His narration dwelt on the moment in late Roman art when figure and ground became thoroughly imbricated.¹⁰ Interestingly, Riegl was initially a curator of textiles. One can imagine how the hours spent inches away from the weave of a carpet might have stimulated the art historian's ideas about a closeup and tactile way of looking. His descriptions evoke the play of the eyes among non- or barely figurative textures. In the late Roman works of art Riegl describes – sculpture, painting and, especially, metal works – optical images arose with the distinction of figure from ground, and the abstraction of the ground that made possible illusionistic figuration.

Consider, for example, this description of the difference between Byzantine and late Roman mosaics. The aerial rear plane of Roman mosaics

remained always a plane, from which individual objects were distinguished by coloring and [relief]. . . . However, the gold ground of the Byzantine mosaic, which generally excludes the background and is a seeming regression [in the progress toward depiction of illusionistic space], is no longer a ground plane but an ideal spatial ground which the people of the west were able subsequently to populate with real objects and to expand toward infinite depth.¹¹

The ascendancy of optical representation in western art represents a general shift towards an ideal of abstraction, with long-term consequences. While haptic space may be considered abstract in that the line and form of the image do not set out to depict as much as to decorate, it is concrete in that it creates a unified visual field only on a surface. The rise of abstract space in late Roman works of art made it possible for a beholder to identify figures not as concrete elements on a surface but as figures in space. Abstraction thus facilitated the creation of an illusionistic picture plane that would be necessary for the identification of, and identification *with*, figures in the sense that we use 'identification' now. In other words, optical representation makes possible a greater distance between beholder

12 Thanks to Paolo Cherchi Usai for this observation.

13 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, '1440: the smooth and the striated', in *1000 Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 493.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 497.

15 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

and object, which allows the beholder imaginatively to project her/himself into or onto the object. It should be remembered that the revolution in visual styles Riegl observed coincided with a revolution in religious thought. The Barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire precipitated a clash between the belief that the body could be the vehicle for grace, and the belief that spirituality required transcendence of the physical body.¹²

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari appropriate Riegl's findings to describe a 'nomad art' (appropriate to the idea of the small, portable metalworks of the late Romans and their Barbarian conquerors) in which the sense of space is contingent, close up, and short term, lacking a fixed outside point of reference.¹³ Riegl described the effects of figure-ground inversion in hallucinatory detail in *Late Roman Art Industry*. But where he saw this viral self-replication of the abstract line as the final gasp of a surface-oriented representational system before the rise of illusionistic space, Deleuze and Guattari take the power of the abstract line as a sign of the creative power of nonfigurative representation. 'The organism is a *diversion* of life', they write, whereas abstract line is life itself.¹⁴ They argue that the 'smooth space' of late Roman and Gothic art is a space of freedom before the hegemony of Cartesian space. Thus where Riegl justifies the tactile image as a step on the way to modern representation, Deleuze and Guattari see it as an alternative representational tradition. I concur with them in so far as haptic representation has continued to be a viable strategy in western art, although it is usually relegated to minor traditions.

Riegl observed tactile modes of representation in traditions generally deemed subordinate to the procession of western art history: Egyptian and Islamic painting, late Roman metalwork, textile art, ornament. One can add high art traditions such as mediaeval illuminated manuscripts, Flemish oil painting from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and the surface-oriented, decorative Rococo arts of eighteenth-century France. I would also include the 'low' traditions of weaving, embroidery, decoration and other domestic and women's arts as a presence of tactile imagery that has long existed at the underside of the great works.

All these traditions involve intimate, detailed images that invite a small, caressing gaze. Usually art history has deemed them secondary to grand compositions, important subjects and an exalted position of the viewer. However, a number of art historians suggest alternative economies of embodied looking that have coexisted with the well-theorized Gaze. Svetlana Alpers describes a way of seeing in which the eye lingers over innumerable surface effects – in seventeenth-century Dutch still life, for example – instead of being pulled into the grand centralized structure of contemporaneous southern European painting.¹⁵ Norman Bryson argues that the notion of the *glance* suggests a way of inhabiting the image without identifying

- 16 Norman Bryson, 'The gaze and the glance', in *Vision and Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).
- 17 Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987).
- 18 Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- 19 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 26.

with a position of mastery.¹⁶ Naomi Schor argues that the detail has been coded as feminine, as negativity, and as the repressed in western tradition, and constructs a complex aesthetics of the detail.¹⁷ Mieke Bal constructs readings of paintings around the navel, rather than the punctum: the viewer's look is organized around an inward-directed point (which people of all sexes possess) rather than a phallic point of penetration.¹⁸

There is a temptation to see the haptic as a feminine form of viewing: to follow the lines, for example, of Luce Irigaray that 'woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking', and that female genitalia are more tactile than visual.¹⁹ While many have embraced the notion of tactility as a feminine form of perception, I prefer to see the haptic as a feminist visual *strategy*, an underground visual tradition in general rather than a feminine quality in particular. The arguments of historians such as Bal, Buck-Morss and Schor supplant phallogocentric models of vision with those that seem to be grounded more in a female body. Yet their arguments seem not to call up a radically feminine mode of viewing so much as suggest that these ways of viewing are available and used differently in different periods. The tracing of a history of ways of tactile looking offers these ways as a strategy that can be called upon when our optical resources fail to see.

The term *haptic cinema* has a brief history. Deleuze uses the term to describe the use of the sense of touch, isolated from its narrative functions, to create a cinematic space in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). He writes, 'The hand doubles its prehensile function (as object) by a connective function (of space): but, from that moment, it is the whole eye which doubles its optical function by a specifically "grabbing" [*haptique*] one, if we follow Riegl's formula for a touching which is specific to the gaze'.²⁰ To me Deleuze's focus on filmic images of hands seems unnecessary. Getting a sense of touch by looking at hands would seem to require identifying with the person whose hands they are. Yet to the degree that the hands become characters in the story, the haptic bypasses such identification, being instead an identification with touch itself. The first attribution of a haptic quality to cinema appears to be by Noël Burch, who uses it to describe the 'stylized, flat rendition of deep space' in early and experimental cinema.²¹ Antonia Lant has used the term 'haptical cinema' to describe early films that exploit the contrast between visual flatness (created by the use of screens and scrimms parallel to the plane of the lens) and depth.²² She notes the preponderance of Egyptian motifs in such films and posits that they are explicitly indebted to Riegl. These observations are quite true, but are distinct from my point about how films appeal to the tactile quality of perception itself. In this connection I would stress the

20 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1989), p. 12.

21 Noël Burch, 'Primitivism and the avant-gardes: a dialectical approach', in Phillip Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

22 Antonia Lant, 'Haptical cinema', *October*, no. 75 (1995), pp. 45-73.

23 Jacinto Lejeira, 'Scenario of the untouchable body', trans. Brian Holmes, *Public*, no. 13 (1996), pp. 32–47.

24 As Michael James Stock demonstrates, the 'blot' effect has the power to arouse desire by obscuring the place where desire ought to reside. Stock's argument rests on a psychoanalytic definition of desire as the longing for an impossible, obliterating encounter with an absolute other. In this essay I attempt to define an erotic encounter in which union does not obliterate the self so much as fray its boundaries – a sort of soft-core erotics perhaps. Michael James Stock, 'Bodies and the "blot": electronic obscuration in reality TV', *Spectator*, vol 16, no. 2 (1996), pp. 90–97.

25 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 16.

phenomenon of 'cinema of attractions', in which the illusion that permits distanced identification with the action on screen gives way to an immediate bodily response to the screen. In a formulation closest to my own, Jacinto Lejeira notes that Atom Egoyan exploits the contrast between video and film to create a more or less haptic or optical sensation.²³ These visual variations are not formal matters alone but have implications for how the viewer relates bodily to the image.

Haptic looking tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than plunge into depth, tends not to distinguish form so much as discern texture. It is a labile, plastic sort of look, more inclined to move than to focus. The video works I propose to call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what it is she is beholding. Haptic video resolves into figuration only gradually, if at all, inviting instead the caressing look I have described. For example, Reginald Woolery's tape *Converse* (1992) is a dance, choreographed to Miles Davis's 'Conchita's Lament', between the videographer and a person's feet running lightly through an urban streetscape. The camera swings and plays around its subject, and the image often dissolves into a pointillist play of light or, in Woolery's closeups, abstract colour forms. The title evokes not only the high-top sneakers worn by the tape's subject, but also the sense of a conversation between the camera and the moving body, and a visual conversation between the eyes and the poetically grainy image.

Of course, there are more and less successful examples of tapes that use these strategies. Any out-of-focus or low-resolution image is not necessarily haptic. The digitized blobs that replace the faces of crime suspects on reality TV do imbue them with a certain mystery, but generally they do not invite a lingering, caressing gaze, nor do they test the viewer's own sense of separation between self and image.²⁴

A visual medium that appeals to the sense of touch must be beheld by a whole body. As Merleau-Ponty wrote, 'To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body'.²⁵ I am not subjected to the presence of an other (such as a film image/film screen); rather, the body of the other confers intersubjective being on me. This is Vivian Sobchack's argument in *The Address of the Eye*. Sobchack's phenomenology of cinematic experience stresses the interactive character of film viewing. If one understands film viewing an exchange between two bodies – that of the viewer and that of the film – then the characterization of the film viewer as passive, vicarious or projective must be replaced with a model of a viewer who participates in the production of the cinematic experience. Rather than witnessing cinema as through a frame, window or

26 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 10–15.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

28 See Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

29 It could be argued that the intimacy of the television screen encourages a more 'embodied' relationship of viewer to image. However, given the use of video projection, giant screens, and so on, and also the increasing commingling of film and video in the same productions, I find this distinction less important.

30 Ron Burnett, 'Video space/video time: the electronic image and portable video', in Janine Marchessault (ed.), *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity* (Toronto: YYZ/Center for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions, 1995), pp. 142–96.

31 John Belton, 'Looking through video: the psychology of video and film', in Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (eds), *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1996), p. 71.

mirror, Sobchack argues, the viewer shares and performs cinematic space dialogically.²⁶ Cinematic perception is not merely (audio)visual but synaesthetic, an act in which the senses and the intellect are not conceived of as separate. 'The lived-body does not have senses [which require a prior separation and codification of experience]. It is, rather, sensible.'²⁷ Thus it makes sense to talk of touch participating in what we think of as primarily a visual experience, if we understand this experience to be one of the 'lived-body'.

Haptic visibility is an aspect of what Sobchack calls *volitional, deliberate* vision. It is distinguished from passive, apparently pre-given vision in that the viewer has to work to constitute the image, to bring it forth from latency. Thus the act of viewing, seen in the terms of existential phenomenology, is one in which both I and the object of my vision constitute each other. In this mutually constitutive exchange I find the germ of an intersubjective eroticism. By intersubjective I mean capable of a mutual relation of recognition, in Jessica Benjamin's term:²⁸ though here the intersubjective relation is between a beholder and a work of cinema.

How does video achieve a haptic character? It is commonly argued that film is a tactile medium and video an optical one, since film can be actually worked with the hands. Now that more films are edited and postproduced with video or computer technologies, this distinction is losing its significance.²⁹ (An exception are experimental filmmaking techniques such as optical printing and scratching the emulsion.) Many pro-haptic properties are common to video and film, such as changes in focal length, graininess (produced differently in each medium), and effects of under- and over-exposure.

The main sources of haptic visibility in video include the constitution of the image from a signal, video's low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital imaging, and video decay. Because the video image occurs in a relay between source and screen, variations in image quality, colour, tonal variation, and so on, occur in the permeable space between source and viewer, affected by conditions of broadcast or exhibition as well as (literal) reception.³⁰ Another source of video's tactile, or at least insufficiently visual, qualities is its contrast ratio. The contrast ratio of video is 30:1, or approximately one tenth of that of 16mm or 35mm film.³¹ While film approximates the degree of detail of human vision, video provides much less detail. When vision yields to the diminished capacity of video, it gives up some degree of mastery; our vision dissolves in the unfulfilling or unsatisfactory space of video.

A third intrinsic quality of the video medium, and an important source of video tactility, is its electronic manipulability. The tactile quality of the video image is most apparent in the work of videomakers who experiment with the disappearance and

- 32 Wolf Herzogsohn, 'Notes on video as an artistic medium', in Douglas Davis and Alison Simmons (eds), *The New Television* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 90.
- 33 The American toy company Tyco now manufactures a similar children's video camera.

transformation of the image due to digital and other effects.³² Electronic effects such as pixellation can render the object indistinct while drawing attention to the act of perception of textures. Interestingly, Pixelvision, the format of the discontinued Fisher-Price toy camera that used audiocassette tapes, is an ideal haptic medium.³³ Pixelvision, which cannot focus on objects in depth, gives a curious attention to objects and surfaces in extreme closeup. Thus some of the best Pixelvision works focus on scenes of detail. Sadie Benning tells her rueful love stories with props like tiny cars, Hershey's Kisses, and birthday cake candles. Benning's face looms close to the camera indistinctly, like a velvety orb: in *It Wasn't Love*, when she sucks her thumb inches from the lens, the image is an erotic universe (like an infant's vision of its mother). Azian Nurudin's lesbian s/m scenes in *Sinar Durjana/Wicked Radiance* (1992) and *Bitter Strength: Sadistic Response Version* (1992) become elegantly stylized in Pixelvision: she uses the high contrast of the medium to echo the effects of Malaysian shadow plays. Part of the eroticism of this medium is its incompleteness, the inability ever to see all, because it is so grainy, its chiaroscuro so harsh, its figures mere suggestions. Todd Verow's and James Dwyer's Pixelvision tape *Gun* (1992) abstracts small objects into erotic surfaces. And Michael O'Reilly's *Glass Jaw* (1993) powerfully demonstrates the embodied relationship between viewer and moving image. This tape, about the artist's experience of having his jaw broken and wired shut, evokes what Sobchack writes about the relationship between the body of the image and the body of the viewer. Again, small objects become tactile universes that have a visceral pull. A shot of the vortex in a



It Wasn't Love (Sadie Benning, 1992). Pictures courtesy: Video Data Bank.

blender where O'Reilly concocts his liquid meal takes on engulfing proportions. Over a shot of hands using an awl to punch holes in a belt, the artist speaks in voiceover about losing weight, about Louis Braille having been blinded with an awl, and about feeling that his slurred words 'are like Braille in butter': the closeup, minimal image creates a visceral relay with the viewer's own body. As in Tran's tapes, the image of blinding overdetermines the suggestion of a different kind of visibility.

Haptic images are erotic regardless of their content, because they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image. The viewer is called upon to fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces the image leaves. By interacting up close with an image, close enough that figure and ground commingle, the viewer gives up her own sense of separateness from the image.

Again, I am exaggerating the distinction between optical and haptic images in order to make a point. The ideal relationship between viewer and optical image tends to be one of mastery, in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision. The ideal relationship between viewer and haptic image is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose her/himself in the image, to lose her or his sense of proportion. When vision is like touch, the object's touch back may be like a caress, though it may also be violent – a violence not towards the object but towards the viewer. Violence may occur in an abrupt shift from haptic to optical image, confronting the viewer with an object whole and distant where she had been contemplating it closeup and in part. Haptic visibility implies a tension between viewer and image, then, because this violent potential is always there. Haptic visibility implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing.

These qualities may begin to suggest the particular erotic quality of haptic video. As the metalworks and carpets of which Riegl wrote engage with vision on their surface rather than drawing it into an illusionary depth, so haptics move eroticism from the site of what is represented to the surface of the image. Eroticism arrives in the way a viewer engages with this surface and in a dialectical movement between the surface and the depth of the image. In short, haptic visibility is itself erotic: the fact that some of these are sexual images is, in effect, icing on the cake. Erotic art videos use the veiling quality of the electronic image to a number of different ends. Some are devoted openly to the question of how to represent desire, given the well-theorized thorniness of pornographic representation, and they bring in video effects for this reason: examples are Meena Nanji's *Note to a Stranger* (1992) and Ming-Yuen S. Ma's *Toc Storee* (1993), and *Sniff* (1997). Others, such as Sadie Benning's *Jollies*

(1991) and *It Wasn't Love*, or Azian Nurudin's *Sinar Durjana*, are less overt. The electronic texture of digital media may facilitate a more self-reflexive gaze, cajole the cautious viewer to watch a violent or sadomasochistic scene, or simply distinguish the hot sex scenes of 'video art' from those of commercial porn. Appealing to the sense of touch provides another level of delight at the same time as it de-privileges the visual, as in Shani Mootoo's *Her Sweetness Lingers* (1994). In this tape a slow romance between two women in a garden plays under an anguished, romantic poem to love and loss that Mootoo reads in voiceover. At times digital manipulations make the garden dissolve into a play of flickering coloured lights. This over-the-top Monet effect complements the lush romanticism of Mootoo's poem, which is precisely about the fleetingness of love.

I am not interested in claiming the haptic quality of electronic manipulation as a sort of digital Vaseline-coated lens. The eroticism of haptic videos does not rest in their ability to make more tasteful, arty images – though certainly many do. Instead it is to multiply the forms of erotic contact and, as I have said, to replace the visual with the tactile, and identification with embodiment.

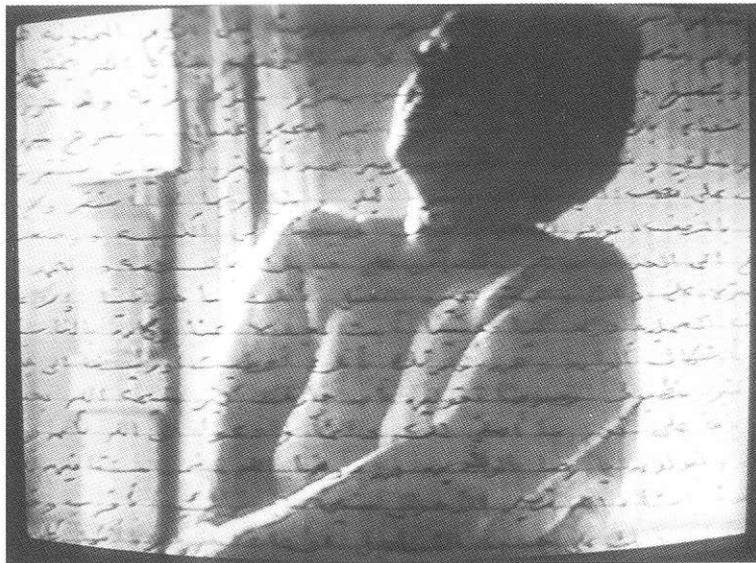
The reader may be asking whether pornography can be haptic. Pornography tends to be defined in terms of visibility – the inscription or confession of the orgasmic body – and an implied will to mastery by the viewer.³⁴ The erotic relationship I am identifying in haptic cinema depends upon limited visibility and the viewer's lack of mastery over the image. Haptic visibility suggests ways in which pornography might move through the impasse of hypervisuality that by this point seems to hinder rather than support sexual representation. This description of haptic visibility might suggest ways porn can be haptic, even if this is not usually the case. Haptic visibility frees the viewer from the illusion that cinema is capable of representing the profilmic event – what Stanley Cavell calls the 'inherent obscenity' of cinema.³⁵ The image indicates figures and then backs away from representing them fully – or, often, moves so close to them that they are no longer visible. Rather than making the object fully available to view, haptic cinema puts the object into question, calling upon the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction and to be aware of her or his self-involvement in that process. Where eroticism is based more upon interaction than voyeurism, haptic visibility is erotic.

Most cinema, pornography included, entails some sort of combination of these modes of seeing. I do not at all wish to subscribe to a distinction between pornography and erotica. By concentrating on art videos I am attempting to isolate the haptic mode of seeing in order to characterize it, not to set up a dichotomy between optical, commercial, porn and haptic, art, erotica. Nevertheless, it is significant that much of the video work that has

34 This definition is central to Linda Williams's description of pornography in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).

35 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

Measures of Distance (Mona Hatoum, 1989). Picture courtesy: Video Data Bank.



haptic qualities is made by women, often by feminist or lesbian makers interested in exploring a different way to represent desire.

Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* begins with still images so close as to be unrecognizable, overlaid with a tracery of Arabic text. As the tape moves, the images are shown from a greater distance and revealed to be of a naked woman with a luxuriant body, still veiled in the image's graininess and the layer of text. Meanwhile, Hatoum's mother's letters, read in voiceover, make us realize that these are images of her that her daughter made; further, they tell that Hatoum's father was very jealous of his wife's body and the idea of another – even and especially his daughter – being in intimate proximity to it. The pulling-back movement powerfully evokes a child's gradual realization of separateness from its mother, and the ability to recognize objects: to recognize the mother's body as a separate body that is also desired by someone else. It also describes a movement from a haptic way of seeing to a more optical way of seeing: the figure is separate, complete, objectifiable, and indeed already claimed. At the point where the image of the mother becomes recognizable, narrative rushes in.

It is not coincidental that a number of haptic images are made by daughters of their mothers; another example being Shauna Beharry's *Seeing Is Believing* (1991), in which the artist's camera searches a photograph of her mother, following the folds of the silk sari in the photograph as they too dissolve into grain and resolve again. Such images evoke a tactile mirror stage in which the infant's awareness of belovedness and of separation are learned in terms of touch. Changes of focus and distance, and switches between more haptic

36 See Gaylyn Studlar, *In The Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

37 Parveen Adams, 'Per oscillation', in Constance Penley and Sharon Willis (eds), *Male Trouble* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 3–26.

and more optical visual styles, describe the movement between a relationship of touch and a visual one.

These observations about infant's-eye vision lead to some suggestions about identification and the haptic. As I have argued, haptic media encourage a relation to the screen itself before the point at which the viewer is pulled into the figures of the image and the exhortation of the narrative. Haptic visuality has some of the qualities of Gaylyn Studlar's theory of masochistic identification, in which the film viewer gives her/himself over to an entire scene – sometimes literally a shimmering surface (as in the Dietrich–von Sternberg spectacles) – rather than identifying with characters.³⁶ Desire operates differently in such a space than it does in solely optical visuality, since it is not limited to the operations of identification.

The haptic is a form of visuality that muddies intersubjective boundaries. If we were to describe it in psychoanalytic terms, we might argue that haptics draw on an erotic relation that is organized less by a phallic economy than by the relationship between mother and infant. In this relationship, the subject (the infant) comes into being through the dynamic play between the appearance of wholeness with the other (the mother) and the awareness of being distinct. As Parveen Adams suggests, to define sexuality in terms of the relation to the mother is also to understand it as organized around a basic bisexuality.³⁷ This seems to corroborate a kind of visuality that is not organized around identification, at least identification with a single figure, but is labile, able to move between identification and immersion. In a sexual positioning that oscillates between mother- and father-identification, it seems that haptic visuality is on the side of the mother.

This excursus aside, my concern is not to anchor the definition of haptic visuality with certain psychoanalytic positions. I find it more compelling to suggest how haptics work at the level of the subject as entire body. The engagement of the haptic viewer occurs not simply in psychic registers but in the sensorium. The longing communicated by *Measures of Distance* and *Seeing is Believing* cannot be explained by an analysis of the cultural dynamics they exploit or the psychic states they bring into play; neither can the eroticism of *Her Sweetness Lingers*, nor the experience of the placeless traveller in Cho's tapes. To describe the effect of such video works requires that attention be paid to the body of the viewer, specifically to what happens when the video image dissolves out towards the viewer.

I have looked at how haptic cinema appeals strongly to a viewer perceiving with all her senses. Let me return to the notion of tactile epistemology with which I began, to suggest ways to think further about the significance of haptic visuality. Tactile epistemology involves thinking with your skin, or giving as much significance to

the physical presence of an other as to the mental operations of symbolization. This is not a call to wilful regression but a recognition of the intelligence of the perceiving body. Haptic cinema, by appearing to us as an object with which we interact rather than an illusion into which we enter, calls upon this sort of embodied intelligence. In the dynamic movement between optical and haptic ways of seeing, it is possible to compare different ways of knowing and interacting with an other.

Let me return to the word *caress* that I use to describe haptic visuality. Readers may remark the resonance with Levinas's statement that sight, in contrast to cognition, has a quality of proximity to its object: 'The visible caresses the eye'.³⁸ The circumstances in which Levinas finds such a caress possible are very close to the circumstances of visual erotics as I define them. Eroticism is an encounter with an other that delights in the fact of its alterity, rather than attempting to know it. Visual erotics allows the thing seen to maintain its unknowability, delighting in playing at the boundary of that knowability. Visual erotics allows the object of vision to remain inscrutable. But it is not voyeurism, for in visual erotics the looker is also implicated. By engaging with an object in a haptic way, I come to the surface of my self (like Riegl hunched over his Persian carpets), losing myself in the intensified relation with an other that cannot be known. Levinas calls the relationship of consciousness to sensibility 'obsession': I lose myself as a subject (of consciousness) to the degree that I allow myself to be susceptible to contact with the other. This being-for-the-Other is the basis of the ethical relation for Levinas; but as Paul Davies points out, it blurs with the erotic relation as well.³⁹

The common critique of vision as imperialist and bent on mastery should not be extended to all forms of vision. Vision has been the metaphor for cognition since Plato, and before. But a form of vision that yields to the thing seen, a vision that exceeds cognition, seems to escape the critique of mastery. "Sensibility" thus names not only a relation subservient to cognition but also a "proximity", a "contact" with *this* singular passing of what has always already made of the life of consciousness something more than a matter of knowledge. Something more which can perhaps only register as something less, as absence.⁴⁰ Haptic visuality activates this awareness of absence, in a look that is so intensely involved with the presence of the other that it cannot take the step back to discern difference, say, to distinguish figure and ground. A visuality that is so engaged with the present that it cannot recede into cognition would seem to inform the kind of 'yielding-knowing' of which Michael Taussig writes, following Horkheimer's and Adorno's plea for a form of knowledge that did not bend its object to its will.⁴¹

The various ways theorists have written of vision/knowledge as an act of yielding, of giving over to its object, can easily be critiqued as

38 Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 118.

39 Paul Davies, 'The face and the caress: Levinas's ethical alterations of sensibility', in David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1992), p. 269.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

41 Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 45.

romantic, organicist, exoticizing: Deleuze's and Guattari's metaphor of the mutual knowledge between wasp and orchid that causes them to alter themselves on contact with each other; Taussig's example of Cuna Indians' ways of imparting knowledge to the ritual object; Levinas's seemingly occult attribution of cognition-arresting power to 'the face of the Other'; even Trinh's call to 'speak not about, but nearby'. But perhaps these potential criticisms can be averted if we accept that it is necessarily through metaphor that we approach such models of knowledge. Because to describe a non-mastering form of knowledge is already to master the object by description. It is difficult to describe such a state, except indirectly. Hence the power of film to offer a way of speaking not about, but nearby, its object: a power of approaching its object through poetry with only the desire to caress it, not to lay it bare.

A videotape by Brazilian artist Ines Cardoso, *Diastole* (1994), uses haptic visuality to approach poetically an ineffable object. Dedicated to a loved one who died, *Diastole* is a brief and moving meditation on death, occupied with only a few images. It makes use of the wide range of resolution possible in video, and manipulates colour with extreme subtlety, from naturalistic to digitally altered (in the age of digital media, this is of course a stylistic choice). The image of the moving hands of an old-fashioned clock appear in clear focus, with the subtle tones of a daylit interior. An image of two children laughing and rolling on a bed is slightly pixellated, giving a pointillist effect to the dark expanse of their hair and the glowing edges of the tumbled sheets. Other images, shot through different sorts of screens, play overtly with the inability to see what you are looking at: a barely recognizable sunlit outdoor scene turns out to be shot through a sheet of plastic bubble wrap; a hand is shot through a fine screen.

What captures me most is this last image. The hand gently presses against the screen, and as it does its boundaries blur and merge with the even mesh of the screen, which in turn merges with the digital texture of the video image. Colours shimmer around it in the camera's reaction to overexposure: pastel, barely-there colours, blue-green, a pinkish flesh tone, edged with darkness but dissolving into light. As the image of the hand dissolves into the double grain of the screen and the video image, the soundtrack carries the voice of a child reading a poem about death (translated from Portuguese into English subtitles). The tape ends with the words, 'How can we ever understand death?'. Perhaps this seems an overly diagrammatic illustration of a haptic medium: a verbal text about the limits of knowability reinforcing a visual play with the limits of visibility. Nevertheless, the effect is a powerful expression of respect and relinquishment at the border of the unknowable experience of death. The 'something more that can only register as something less' is doubly figured as the dissolution of the optical image into the

42 In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

intimacy of the haptic, and a reverent non-understanding in the face of death.

The point of tactile visuality is not to supply a plenitude of tactile sensation to make up for a lack of image. Similarly, when elsewhere I discuss images that evoke senses such as smell and taste,⁴² it is not to call for a 'sensurround' fullness of experience, a total sensory environment, to mitigate the thinness of the image. Rather it is to point to the limits of sensory knowledge. By dancing from one form of sense-perception to another, the image points to its own caressing relation to the real and to the same relation between perception and the image.

What is erotic about haptic visuality, then, may be described as respect for otherness, and concomitant loss of self in the presence of the other. Unlike the alterity posed by Freud or Lacan, or by Hegel for that matter, this alterity is not the means of 'shattering' the subject. The giving over to the other that characterizes haptic visuality is an elastic, dynamic movement, not the rigid all-or-nothing switch between an illusion of self-sufficiency and a realization of absolute lack. It is with the same recognition that Sobchack describes the relation between perceiver and perceived as one of mutual embodiment, dynamic rather than destructive.

It may be more obvious now why I first began to recognize haptic visuality when looking at works that dealt with intercultural relationships. The apprehension of being seen, categorized and killed into knowledge informs many works that speak from a place between cultures, given the ethnographic (in the broad sense) tendency to fix its object in a harsh light, or conversely to flatten its object into a broad projection screen. The critique of visual mastery in such works speaks from an awareness about the deathful and truly imperialist potential of vision. For the same reason, intercultural cinema is one of the most important sites of work on non-mastering visuality. From an impulse, which informs much intercultural cinema, to protect the objects (people, cultures) represented from the prying eyes of others, some works also begin to experiment with a visual erotics – a visual erotics that offers its object to the viewer but only on the condition that its unknowability remains intact, and that the viewer, in coming close, gives up her or his own mastery.

Distribution information:

Ines Cardoso, R. Theodor Hertzl 111/43, cep 05014-000, São Paulo, Brazil may be contacted for *Diastole*.
Electronic Arts Intermix, New York (001 212 337 0680, eai@interport.net) distributes works by Seoungcho Cho, Ken Feingold and Philip Mallory Jones.
Frameline, San Francisco (001 415 861 1404) distributes works by Azian Nurudin.
Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Montreal (001 514 271 5506, giv@cam.org) distributes works by Shauna Beharry and Mona Hatoun.
The Kitchen, New York (001 212 255 5793) distributes *S'Aline's Solution* by Aline Mare.
Third World Newsreel, New York (001 212 947 9277, twn@tmn.com) distributes works by Ming-Yuen S. Ma.
Video Data Bank, Chicago (001 312 345 3550) distributes works by Sadie Benning, Meena Nanji, Michael O'Reilly and Tran T. Kim-Trang.

Video Out, Vancouver (001 604 872 8449, video@portal.ca) distributes works by Mona Hatoum, Ming-Yuen S. Ma and Shani Mootoo.

Women Make Movies, New York (001 212 925 0606) distributes works by Sadie Benning, Gitanjali and Mona Hatoum.

V Tape, Toronto (001 416 351 1317, video@astral.magic.ca) distributes works by Gitanjali and Mona Hatoum.

Reginald Woolery, New York (rcw4461@acf4.nyu.edu) may be contacted for *Converse*.