

## Haptic Cinema

workshop at DocsForum, Docs MX film festival, Mexico City

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October 20, 2016

### Intro

Useful to think that images do not represent but transmit, make contact.

My theory of haptic cinema a radical receptivity. Viewer does not interpret but receives with body.

Film experience is a dynamic between haptic and optical, affective and discursive.

Will discuss some ways we can experience films as tactile and physical: methods for filmmakers who want their work to make a quasi-physical contact with the audience, and ways for viewers to cultivate their tactile and multisensory response to a film.

### The methods

#### 1. Haptic *visuality*, a kind of intimate and embodied looking distinct from the more common optical *visuality*

Optical *visuality*: distant view of complete subject associated with Renaissance perspective. Renders the image as a figure distinct from ground. Viewer can receive it from a distance.

Haptic *visuality* (Alois Riegl): close, “grasping” view. Antonia Lant adapts for cinema<sup>1</sup>

Riegl’s concept of haptic image revised by Deleuze + Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*; I adapt it for cinema<sup>2</sup>:

viewer not completely distinct from object beheld. Figure-ground difference not clear.

Invites viewer to subjectively come forward and merge with the beheld. e.g.:

-low resolution: analog video, super-8, some kinds of digital video (though corrected for edge recognition)

-diminished figure-ground distinction



Nicky Hamlyn, *Autogrill\_Verghereto* (UK, 2008):  
found moiré pattern

-shallow focal plane

-some kinds of close-ups

-background activity that interrupts the figure, e.g. crowding, light flares

-calls on the whole body of the viewer, prevents separation subject-object

Note in most works there's a dynamic between optical and haptic visuality:



Arthur Jafa, *Dreams Are Colder than Death* (U.S., 2013)



Kali Jones and Maurizio Ruggiano, *The Certainty of Shadow* (Italy, 2011)

## 2. Tactile sound

sound can evoke texture, taste, atmosphere; invites embodied response  
haptic sound evokes confusing immersion in a scene, not clear distinction. Cf. multiple microphone placement in Robert Altman's *Nashville*

## 3. Material breakdown emphasizes physicality of the medium

paradox that when the image is weaker, the bond can be stronger. Poor quality indicates that the image had to travel a lot to get to the viewer:

-film: dust, scratches, splices

-analog video: demagnetization

-digital video: compression (codecs); glitch: physical voltage change, damage to support, or altering the integrity of the image through code.



DVD of *Butterfield 8* from my local library with glitch at climax of movie.  
Videos demagnetize, and DVDs glitch, at points where users paused them most often! Social connections increase as perceptibility decreases.

Ilia Shereen Sakr, *men Fire* (algorithmic photograph, 2015)



4. Other artifacts layered on the image: watermarks of copyright holders, piracy companies; comments on YouTube etc.

Note economics of the broken-down image. Who can afford a high-quality image, who makes

do with a poor-quality image?

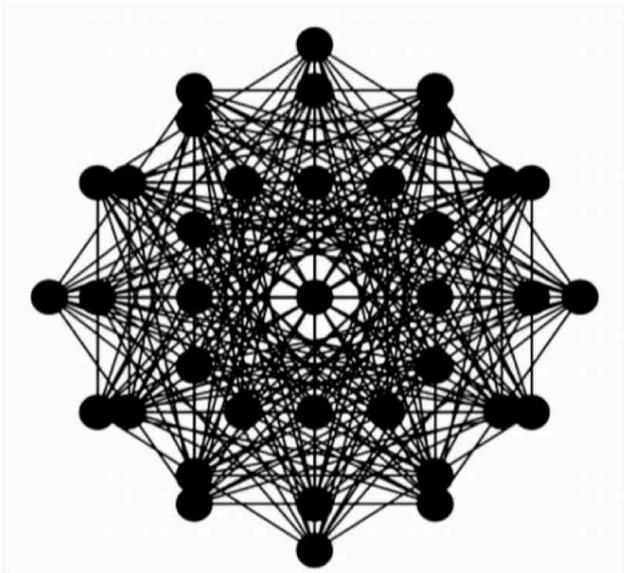
5. the index, a sign that builds a connection between the pro-filmic scene and the viewer

Index: C.S. Peirce, a sign that refers to its object by necessity. Often the result of physical causation--photograph, fossil.



Cao Fei, *Shadow Life* (2011)  
multiply indexical as recorded work, shadow play

More broadly, index is whatever the image points at. Simple fact that the initial gesture reaches the viewer. Image makes a social connection to other viewers and environments along the way from source to receiver.<sup>3</sup>



Ahmed Nagy, *The Holy Zero* (Egypt, 2010): meditative algorithms on screen 1 contrast with aggressively social and visually haptic TV call-in show on screen 2.

6. Embodied response occurs at several levels, building a physical and affective relationships to the image

-autonomic nervous system (sweating, arousal, etc.)

-mimesis, where the film elicits physical responses in the viewer. “Mirror neurons” actually a new term for Carpenter’s effect, 1876: how people reproduce the actions of others they see with their own bodies

-mirror-touch synaesthesia<sup>4</sup>

Possible to cultivate these responses

Shift in discursive-affective balance

affective response to the way a film feels, not cognitive responses to the film’s discourse  
Haptic-optical, affective-discursive, are dialectical. Need both.

Hot and cool

“hot” media reach out, “cool” media draw the viewer in (Marshall McLuhan)

high resolution, 3D, virtual reality are hot: can analyze with Riegl’s theory of grasping eye

low resolution, poor-quality images are cool; they draw us toward them

Thanks to the audience for great questions, including:

Truth in digital media: Not worried about breakdown of index.<sup>5</sup> Facts are social, built through communication; cf. Peirce.

Animation, immersive media allow us to experience non-human embodiments.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonia Lant, "Haptical Cinema," *October* 75 (Fall 1995): 45-73.

<sup>2</sup> Laura U. Marks, "Video haptics and erotics," *Screen* 39:4 (Winter 1998): 331-348.

<sup>3</sup> This update to the concept of haptic cinema is in Laura U. Marks, "Images in Motion, from Haptic Vision to Networked Space," *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Laura U. Marks, "I Feel Like an Abstract Line," in *Thresholds: Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia and the Social Life of Art*, ed. Daria Martin with Elinor Cleghorn (forthcoming, Oxford)

<sup>5</sup> Laura U. Marks, "How Electrons Remember," *Millennium Film Journal*, 34 (Autumn 1999), reprinted in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).