

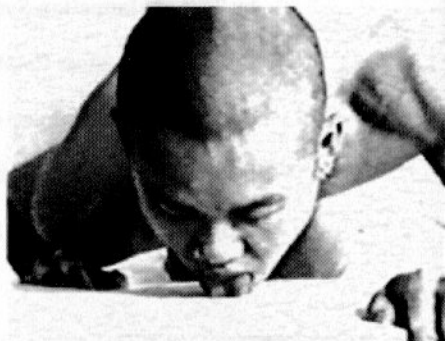
The Skin of the Film

Contents

# The Skin of the Film

Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment,  
and the Senses LAURA U. MARKS

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mimics the vision of one who has suffered so much that she must shield herself from perception, to whom images occur in the briefest of flashes and then are reabsorbed by an anaesthetic forgetting.

### A Tactile Epistemology: Mimesis

Tactile epistemologies conceive of knowledge as something gained not on the model of vision but through physical contact. Many of the sources for tactile epistemology may be regarded as unrigorous, romantic, or downright spooky: the Cabbalistic undertones of Walter Benjamin's theories of representation (Hansen 1987, Buck-Morss 1989); the exoticizing longing of anthropologists for other cultures' ways of knowing (Jay 1993b and the lively exchange between Tausig 1994, Stoller 1994, and Jay 1994); Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) nonlinear musings on navigation and insects, viewed askance by many academics; the perceived essentialism of feminists who describe a form of representation grounded in the body (see Grosz 1994, introduction, for a rejoinder). My effort here to describe a form of cinematic representation based on the sense of touch may also be susceptible to some of these criticisms. I would like to keep those critiques in mind but hold them in check until later in this chapter.

Tactile epistemology involves a relationship to the world of mimesis, as compared to symbolic representation. Mimesis, from the Greek *mimēsthai*, "to imitate," suggests that one represents a thing by acting like it. Mimesis is thus a form of representation based on a particular, material contact at a particular moment, such as that between a child at play and an airplane (Benjamin 1978a), a moth and the bark of a tree (Caillois 1984), or a Songhay sorcerer and a spirit (Stoller 1989). Mimesis, in which one calls up the presence of the other materially, is an indexical, rather than iconic, relation of similarity. According to Erich Auerbach (1953), mimesis requires a lively and responsive relationship between listener/reader and story/text, such that each time a story is retold it is sensuously remade in the body of the listener. Auerbach was describing the relationship between reader and written text; we might expect the relationship between "viewer" and the more physical object of cinema to be more convincingly mimetic.

Mimesis is a concept thoroughly rooted in Western thought (it appears in Aristotle). Although Deleuze and the philosophers upon

whom his cinema theory is based, Bergson and Peirce, do not use the term *mimesis*, it is quite consistent with all their conceptions of the relationship between the world and the sign or the image. Like memory in Bergson's theory, mimesis is mediated by the body. As Peirce's semiotics presumes a continuum between more immediate signs and more symbolic signs, mimesis presumes a continuum between the actuality of the world and the production of signs about that world.<sup>4</sup> This excursion into increasingly bodily forms of representation is thus consistent with the theories of representation and memory with which I began.

Mimetic representation, then, exists on a continuum with more symbolic forms of representation. It lies at the other pole from the symbolic representation characteristic of contemporary urban and postindustrial society. The highly symbolic world in which we find ourselves nowadays is in part a function of the capitalist tendency to render meanings as easily consumable and translatable signs, a tendency that in turn finds its roots in Enlightenment idealism. Consequently, critics of capitalism often seek a return to mimetic representation in order to shift the emphasis from the world of abstraction to the concrete here-and-now. Because vision is the sense that best lends itself to symbolization, contemporary forays in Western scholarship into a tactile epistemology are generally rooted in critiques of the current state of visibility in postindustrial, capitalist society.

Noting that the senses are formed in a social context, Marx argued that the modern individual's "alienation" is an alienation not only from the products of his or her labor but from the very body and the senses ([1844] 1978, 87-89). This observation informed many subsequent critiques of the apparent atrophy of sensuous knowledge in industrial and postindustrial societies. British critics such as William Morris critiqued the fact that capitalist culture alienated the "close" senses such as touch and smell, while honing the visual sense until it acquired the character of a weapon (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994, 87). Similarly, the Frankfurt School critics perceived an increasing process of abstraction stemming from the subjugation of nature in Enlightenment science and culminating in late capitalism. They do not confine this movement to the West, noting that in both Homer and the Rig-Veda the separation of subject and object in representation originates in periods of territorial



domination and the subjection of vanquished peoples (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 13). Still, they argue that capitalism enables the domination of nature and others to an unprecedented degree. Sensuous knowledges that rely on both body and mind, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, or what Benjamin called the mimetic faculty, have atrophied in the historical context of industrialism and capitalism. The Frankfurt School critics valued sensuous knowledge as a reservoir of nonalienated experience (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 71 and passim). Mimesis, they argued, is a form of yielding to one's environment, rather than dominating it, and thus offers a radical alternative to the controlling distance from the environment so well served by vision.

Recall Benjamin's enormously productive suggestion (1968c) that *aura* entails a relationship of contact, or a tactile relationship. The "Artwork" essay implies that aura is the material trace of a prior contact, be it brushworks that attest to the hand of the artist or the patina on a bronze that testifies to centuries of oxidation. Aura enjoins a temporal immediacy, a co-presence, between viewer and object. To be in the presence of an auratic object is more like being in physical contact than like facing a representation. In early drafts of the "Artwork" essay Benjamin posited a form of "sensuous similarity" that would find communicative correspondences between nature and perception (Hansen 1987). Sensuous similarity describes correspondences between one's body and the world that precede representation, such as the relationship between people and the heavens described by astrology (this controversial notion disappeared from the final draft of the essay). Benjamin's essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1978a) also took up this theme. This essay and the unfinished *Passagen-Werk*, like the early drafts of the "Artwork" essay, attempted, always evasively, to demonstrate a mimetic understanding of material reality. Benjamin valued children's ability to relate to things mimetically (Buck-Morss 1989, 263–67), and he suspected that the mimetic relationship need not be superseded by an "adult" way of relating to things as merely objects. He also suggested that the use of the mimetic faculty varied over history. "It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects have remained the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather, we must suppose that the gift of producing similarities—for example, in dances, whose oldest function this was—and also the gift of rec-

ognizing them, have changed with historical development" (1978a, 333). As I will discuss below, like Benjamin (and influencing him), art historians in the early twentieth century assigned a new value to a mimetic kind of vision that drew close to its object.

Writings on mimesis have a prescriptive implication: through mimesis we can not only understand our world, but create a transformed relationship to it—or restore a forgotten relationship. Mimesis shifts the hierarchical relationship between subject and object, indeed dissolves the dichotomy between the two, such that erstwhile subjects take on the physical, material qualities of objects, while objects take on the perceptive and knowledgeable qualities of subjects.<sup>5</sup> Mimesis is an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement in it. As Roger Caillois (1984) wrote, mimicry (he did not use the term *mimesis*) is "an incantation fixed at its culminating point," because things have been in contact leave their traces irrevocably on each other.<sup>6</sup>

Not all accounts of mimesis or of tactile epistemology call for a return to a state before language and before representation. They do, however, insist that symbolic representation is not the sole source of meaning. In fact, even in its most abstract forms, symbolic representation derives from a more fundamental, mimetic relationship to the world. Mimetic and symbolic representation are related in the way that the inside of a glove is related to the outside. Benjamin (1978a) argued that language is the highest form of the mimetic faculty. This does not describe language as the system of signs we have come to understand it to be. Rather it describes a language that draws close enough to its object to make the sign ignite. "The coherence of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man—like its perception by him—is in many cases, and particularly the most important, limited to flashes. It flits past" (1978a, 335). Merleau-Ponty described the same flash of embodied meaning in language when he wrote, "Words most charged with philosophy are not necessarily those that contain what they say, but rather those that most energetically open upon being" (1973, 20). Language is rooted in the body, its meanings inseparable from the sounds and gestures that bore it forth. Similarly, Derrida emphasized the sensual basis of philosophy in *Glas* (1974, 161), where he describes the tactile production of speech:

Derrida

shaped by the mucous membranes of the mouth, stuck together by saliva, and spat out. These accounts of symbolic production show that its embodied and mimetic moments, where the body of the speaker opens into the text and the space between speaker and listener thickens, are fundamental to its meaning. Even in the most sophisticated representational systems, such as writing or cinema, the iconic and symbolic coexist with the indexical: representation is inextricable from embodiment.

I mentioned in chapter 1 that Bergson's *Matter and Memory* inaugurated a way to understand memory as being located in the body. Nevertheless, Bergson undervalued embodied memory, in part because he assumed that memory can be easily brought forth when necessary, not acknowledging the individual and social prohibitions on the actualization of memory. More fundamentally, he undervalued it because he privileged the intellectual intervention in the bodily actualization of memory. He distinguished two kinds of memory: memory images, and modifications of the body: "the one *imagines* and the other *repeats*" ([1911] 1988, 93). The former are ultimately action, since memory can only be brought to consciousness in action. The latter are mere habitual representation" (89-91). Lumping together the memory of children, dreamers, and "African savages," he notes that all have greater access to spontaneous memory, or memory that is immediately and unselectively actualized in the body: he refers to a missionary's account that after preaching a long sermon to some Africans he heard one of them repeat the whole sermon, "with the same gestures, from beginning to end" (199). Bergson dismisses such "impulsive" bodily memory as inferior to a more selective memory that actualizes only what is useful. In arguing for the value of mimetic knowledge I am giving greater value to what Bergson called "habit," which I will argue is a knowledge of the body more highly cultivated than he acknowledges. Clearly Benjamin, in his admiration of children's mimetic capacities, was already beginning to shift the value of Bergson's hierarchy.

Benjamin might have added that the mimetic faculty not only varies historically but is cultivated differently across cultures. When the European colonists and traders dismissed African practices as fetishism (Pietz 1987), as I discussed in the last chapter, they were simply unable to recognize the mimetic knowledge that the Africans had assiduously cultivated. Anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993)

Bergson

African memory

closely following the Frankfurt School theory of mimesis, suggests that some cultures retain the mimetic faculty that has been devalued in the West. Taussig historicizes the notion of mimesis as a form of knowledge by analyzing a number of non-Western cultures' forms of knowledge, primarily those of the Cuna Indians of San Blas Islands and environs. These cultures reveal that knowledge is far more dependent on bodily mimesis than conventional Western science can acknowledge. Taussig posits an epistemology of touch that would be less instrumental than the predominant visual epistemology. Sensuous knowledge implies "a yielding and mirroring of the knower in the unknown, of thought in its object" (45). Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), following Freud, had compared the yielding form of knowledge that is mimesis to the death instinct, the willingness to merge back with nature. In contrast, Taussig usefully aligns mimesis not with a state of nature but with an alternative, cultivated epistemology.

Similarly inspired by the Frankfurt School theorists, especially Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) also posits mimesis as an alternative way of being in the world, a sort of productive embrace. She is more cautious than Taussig about the capacities of mimesis. In her reading of Benjamin's (1968a) essay on Baudelaire, Buck-Morss notes that mimesis has become a way to shelter the individual from the shock of the world, such that mimesis is the form of alienation inscribed upon the body in modern culture. Echoing Benjamin's critique of remembrance, Buck-Morss notes that in modern, capitalist times perception shields the body from experience, rather than permitting sense experience to flow into the body. Factory workers who learn to coordinate their movements to those of the machines are practicing this murderous form of mimesis (1992, 17), what Horkheimer and Adorno called a "mimesis unto death" (1972, 57). Nevertheless, Buck-Morss hopes that a rediscovery of mimesis might inform a nonalienated consciousness. Like Taussig, though less optimistically, she posits a mimetic faculty that might counter the self-distanciation typical of modernity and restore the body to its senses.

One might argue that Taussig's cross-cultural comparison and Buck-Morss's call for a return to a more sensuous time, like Benjamin's admiration of children and Horkheimer and Adorno's nostalgia for a time before capitalism when the senses were not alienated, hint of a sort of prelapsarian longing (see Jay 1993b). However, I



believe that these theorists are borrowing from other cultures and ages in order to “think at the edge of what can be thought,” to create a new language for a mimetic knowledge that exists in a nascent and latent form in the contemporary West. It is possible to take up theories of tactile epistemology without adopting the dire diagnoses of complete cultural alienation on which these scholars’ arguments rest. Sensuous forms of knowledge do not get wiped out as though by a plague. As Merleau-Ponty ([1969] 1973) argues, we humans have never ceased to cultivate mimetic knowledges. The issue is that these are not necessarily valued in a given culture. Yet cultures are diverse enough, and “development” is “uneven” enough, that different forms of sensory knowledge always exist in some form. Indeed the current Western cultural longing to rediscover sensuous knowledges, evident among scholars, artists, and consumers, is a sign of such life. These descriptions of tactile epistemology compellingly formulate the desire for a sensuously informed knowledge that is newly prevalent in the late-twentieth-century West.

I would argue, then, that rather than give in to the prelapsarian or primitivist longing for sensuous knowledge that motivates many accounts of mimesis, we acknowledge that many cultures have cultivated mimesis and other forms of sensuous knowledge. The perceived need for a mimetic visuality among the critics I have cited came as a reaction to several centuries of European oclarcentrism, in which vision alone was the ontological sense par excellence (Jay 1993a). Yet cultural traditions that do not separate vision so radically from the body have less need to deconstruct and reimagine visuality. Many of the works I discuss in this book draw on such cultural traditions and critically compare them to the predominant Western visual regime.

Theorists who call for a return to the senses often treat sense experience as prediscursive and, hence, as natural. This is a position I dispute. Theorists descended from Marxism and phenomenology appeal to the senses’ basically biological function in serving needs for shelter, nourishment, safety, and sociability. Yet they tend not to acknowledge that sensuous knowledge is cultivated. This, I believe, is a result of the Eurocentric mistake of thinking that because the proximal senses of touch, taste, and smell are not accorded much importance in Western cultures, they are outside culture in general. For example, Buck-Morss argues that the senses “maintain an

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The Memory of Touch

uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication” (1992, 6). Similarly, Steven Shaviro attributes a raw state to sensation: “I am violently, viscerally affected by *this* image and *this* sound, without being able to have recourse to any frame of reference, and form of transcendental reflection, or any Symbolic order” (1993, 32). What Merleau-Ponty called “indirect language” would supposedly bring listeners into contact with “brute and wild being,” in that it requires a mimetic relationship between the body and the word<sup>7</sup>: the same can be said for cinema, which would bring viewers into a mimetic relationship with the image. But just how “wild” is this being? I argue that, while much of sensory experience is presymbolic, it is still cultivated, that is, learned, at the level of the body. The senses are educated to a larger extent than these theorists acknowledge.

Thus my interest in focusing on sense experience (particularly in cinema) is to find culture *within* the body, more than to identify a “wild” strain outside culture. By paying attention to bodily and sensuous experience, we will find that it is to a large degree informed by culture. Perception is already informed by culture, and so even illegible images are (cultural) perceptions, not raw sensations. Once these primitivist understandings of the senses are put to rest, then we can explore what part of sensory knowledge is precultural, and thus what part of cinematic perception, if any, is universal in its visceral immediacy.

vs  
Deleuze

### Embodied Perception and Embodied Spectatorship

Film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole. This view of perception implies an attitude toward the object, in this case a film, not as something that must be analyzed and deciphered in order to deliver forth its meaning but as something that means in itself. In the following, I offer a theory of embodied visuality that revalues our mimetic relationship with the world.

Often informed by a newly revived phenomenology, theories of embodiment begin with the premise that our bodies are not passive objects “inscribed” with meaning but are sources of meaning themselves (Csordas 1994, 7). This is not to deny the power of semiotics to analyze cinema, nor the existence of cinematic codes.<sup>8</sup> Yet most

Let us examine how cinema may evoke the sense of touch by appealing to haptic visuality. Haptic perception is usually defined by psychologists as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies (see, for example, Heller and Schiff 1991). In haptic visuality, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch. I derive the term from nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl's distinction between haptic and optical images. Riegl borrowed the term *haptic* from physiology (from *haptein*, to fasten), since the term *tactile* might be taken too literally as "touching" (Iversen 1993, 170). His use of a physiological term indicates that he was aware of the experiments in the subjectivity and physiology of vision that also informed Bergson. Like Bergson, he argued that subjectivity is involved in perception: perception requires "the supplementary intervention of thought processes" (Riegl 1927, 28; quoted in Iversen, 77). Haptic visuality is distinguished from optical visuality, which sees things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms in deep space: in other words, how we usually conceive of vision, Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. Haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze.<sup>12</sup> I am changing Riegl's definitions somewhat. He associated the haptic image with a "sharpness that provoked the sense of touch," while the optical image invites the viewer to perceive depth, for example, through the blurring of chiaroscuro ([1902] 1995, 30-31). Most important in Riegl's distinction is the relationship the different kinds of images create with the viewer. Because a haptic composition appeals to tactile connections on the surface plane of the image, it retains an "objective" character; but an optical composition gives up its nature as physical object in order to invite a distant view that allows the viewer to organize him/herself as an all-perceiving subject (31).

To distinguish more terms, a film or video (or painting or photograph) may offer haptic images, while the term haptic visuality emphasizes the viewer's inclination to perceive them. The works I propose to call haptic invite a look that moves on the surface plane of

Haptic  
visualityproximity  
texture  
movement

the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding. Such images resolve into figuration only gradually, if at all. Conversely, a haptic work may create an image of such detail, sometimes through miniaturism, that it evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close. Such images offer such a proliferation of figures that the viewer perceives the texture as much as the objects imaged. While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image, haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality. Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole. The difference between haptic and optical visuality is a matter of degree. In most processes of seeing, both are involved, in a dialectical movement from far to near. And obviously we need both kinds of visuality: it is hard to look closely at a lover's skin with optical vision; it is hard to drive a car with haptic vision.

Haptic images are actually a subset of what Deleuze referred to as optical images: those images that are so "thin" and uncliché that the viewer must bring his or her resources of memory and imagination to complete them. The haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative. Thus it has a place in Deleuze's time-image cinema. Optical visuality, by contrast, assumes that all the resources the viewer requires are available in the image. Accordingly, the optical image in Riegl's sense corresponds to Deleuze's movement-image, as it affords the illusion of completeness that lends itself to narrative.

The haptic image, like other sensuous images, can also be understood as a particular kind of affection-image that lends itself to the time-image cinema. Recall that the affection-image, while it usually extends into action, may also force a visceral and emotional contemplation in those any-spaces-whatever divorced from action. Thus the haptic image connects directly to sense perception, while bypassing the sensory-motor schema. A sensuous engagement with a tactile or, for example, olfactory image is pure affection, prior to any extension into movement. Such an image may then be bound into the sensory-motor schema, but it need not be. The affection-image, then, can bring us to the direct experience of time *through* the body.

Body

sex

narrative



Haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure—a sensory-motor reaction—so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image. Consequently, as in the mimetic relationship, it is not proper to speak of the *object* of a haptic look as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image. Because haptic visuality tends less to isolate and focus upon objects than simply to be co-present with them, it seems to correspond, if only formally, to Trinh T. Minh-ha's example (in *Reassemblage*, 1982) of "speaking not about, but nearby" the object she is filming.

In revaluing haptic visuality I am suggesting that a sensuous response may be elicited without abstraction, through the mimetic relationship between the perceiver and a sensuous object. This relationship does not require an initial separation between perceiver and object that is mediated by representation.

#### Haptic Visuality and Cultural Difference

Though Riegl was concerned to show the relation between sensory organization and cultural expression (as opposed to a universal ideal of art), he presumed a teleological development in which the haptic must necessarily give way to the optical, in order to realize the achievements of Renaissance perspective. This teleological view required Riegl to ignore optical illusionism in early Roman painting and to otherwise rewrite the history of art. Thus it is all the more interesting to examine the cultural biases that would have caused him to so value the optical over the haptic.

Cultural difference in the representation of space was of great interest to Riegl and some of his contemporaries. They needed both to take these differences into account and to argue that European art was superior to other cultural traditions. Riegl's student Wilhelm Wörringer noted that historians were having to revise their assumptions when confronted by "cultures of import" (1928, 81; quoted in Lant 1995, 49)—probably the Near Eastern, Asian, African, and Oceanic art that entered European markets in the wake of colonial adventures.

Riegl was one of several art historians who were reevaluating the spatial qualities of visual art around the time that the new medium of cinema was impressing its audiences with the apparent physical immediacy of the moving image. Riegl and Adolf Hildebrand, in

books each wrote in 1893, were the first art historians to theorize spatiality in art with an eye to cultural variations in the representation of space. Soon after, other art historians, including Bernard Berenson (1896) and Wörringer ([1908] 1948), drew attention to the tactile quality of vision. In *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance* (1896), Berenson argued that the quality most essential to painting was "the power to stimulate the tactile consciousness" (5). Like Bergson, he was influenced by new research in perceptual psychology, and argued that touch is the first sense an infant experiences (4). Through retinal impressions, a painting can stimulate perceptions of volume and movement in the imagination, even the body, of the viewer. According to Berenson, in terms that sound like a volumetric version of the mirror stage, tactile values simply make life better. "The stimulation of our tactile imagination awakens our consciousness of the importance of the tactile sense in our physical and mental functioning, and thus, again, by making us feel better provided for by life than we were aware of being, gives us a heightened sense of capacity" (11).<sup>13</sup>

These early theorists of tactility in visual art generally considered it to appeal to the viewer's kinesthetic sense, and thus to recreate, through reception, a sense of the three-dimensionality of the depicted object. But in addition Riegl made an important distinction between the materiality of haptic representation and the abstraction of optical representation, as when he wrote, "With an increased space and three-dimensionality the figure in a work of art is also increasingly dematerialized" ([1927] 1985, 74). This distinction between concrete and abstract describes a cultural difference as well. 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 (Iversen 1993, 78–79; quoting Riegl [1927] 1985). His theory dwelt on the moment in late Roman art when figure and ground became thoroughly imbricated (Riegl [1927] 1985).

According to Riegl, the rise of abstraction in late-Roman works of art (sculpture, painting, and especially metal works) made it possible for a beholder to identify figures not as concrete elements on

a surface but as figures in space. Optical images arose with the distinction of figure from ground, and the abstraction of the ground that made possible illusionistic figuration. Listen, for example, to Riegl's description of the difference between late Roman and Byzantine 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. ([1927] 1985, 13)

It is important to note that the creation of abstract space in Byzantine art made it possible for a beholder to identify figures not as concrete elements on a surface but as figures in space. By contrast, haptic space is concrete, in that it seeks unity only on a surface. The rise of optical representation marked a general shift toward a cultural ideal of abstraction, with significant consequences. Abstraction 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 and object which allows the beholder to imaginatively project him/herself into or onto the object. Antonia Lant notes this implication as well when she writes, "Riegl's understanding of the relation of viewer to art work is not derived from his or her identification with a represented human figure, but rather operates at the level of design, suggesting an additional avenue for discussing film figuration besides narrative and plot" (1995, 64).

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 transcending the physical body.<sup>14</sup> Barbarian notions that the spirit transcends the body seem to be reflected in the development of a figurative picture plane that transcends the materiality of the support. Hence the origin of modern illusionistic representation can be traced to the cultural clash between beliefs in transcendent and

immanent spirituality, represented by the late Roman battle of the optical and the haptic.

Both Riegl and Auerbach were tracing the history of a shift in the nature of Western figurative representation. According to Auerbach (1953), in the figural tradition (for example, in the Christian Old Testament), the symbolic characters are *figures* of transcendental events, existing not on the horizontal plane of earthly history but on the vertical axis of divine teleology.<sup>15</sup> Both were concerned with how the means of representation become more transparent in order to awaken sensuous response in the viewer/listener. That is, both described how Western art came to achieve sensuous similarity to its object through representation, rather than through contact. Riegl, especially, argued that increasing abstraction, or increasing membership in the symbolic, characterizes the history of Western art. As Margaret Iversen (1993, 125–26) points out, Riegl's theory of the relationship between subject and object is based on Hegel's *Aesthetics*, in that he argues that the increased disembodiment of painting, its existence as pure appearance alone, corresponds to a disembodied subject represented by (optical) vision alone. In his 1902 essay on the Dutch group portrait, Riegl wrote, "The history of mankind up to the present is intelligible in this regard in terms of two simple extremes: in the beginning, the conception that every subject was at the same time an object—that is, only objects exist; today, the opposite whereby there are hardly any objects and only a single subject" (quoted in Iversen, 125; Iversen's trans.).

Obviously my project here contrasts absolutely with Riegl's teleological assumptions. What these historians of Western art and literature saw as a necessary development was in fact only typical of a particular (albeit long) period in a particular (claimed as Western) history of representational practice. They were unable to acknowledge aspects of Western art that did not fit into their teleology, a teleology that was founded in the first place on assumptions of Western cultural superiority. Riegl's bias, for example, leads him to ignore early signs of the modernist revaluation of tactility, such as the visible brushstrokes in works before 1825 by artists such as Goya, Géricault, and Delacroix.

Both Riegl and Auerbach were writing about their respective fields on the cusp of modernism, which could be characterized as the return of materiality to the mediums of art and literature. Paint became



opaque again, words became dense, and meaning came to reside in the embodied and intersubjective relationship between work and viewer or reader. After modernism it is easier to conceive that contact, and not only representation, is the source of sensuous similarity between a subject and an object (or between two subjects). Meaning occurs in the physical, sensuous contact between two subjects before, and as well as, it occurs in representation. The current intellectual embrace of embodiment, and the increased interest among artists in haptic and sensuous work, repudiate Riegl's teleology of disembodied and singular subjectivity (or, if one interprets Riegl more generously, they demonstrate a shift in his proposed dialectic). These recent changes reflect a reevaluation of the non-Western and "minor" Western cultural traditions of material and sensuous art that Riegl saw as inferior.

Deleuze and 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) whose sense of space is contingent, close-up, short-term, and lacking an immobile outside point of reference (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 493). Riegl described the effects of figure-ground inversion in hallucinatory detail in *Late Roman Art Industry* (1927). But where he saw this viral self-replication of the abstract line as the last gasp of a surface-oriented representational system before the rise of illusionistic space, Deleuze and Guattari take the abstract line as a sign of the creative power of nonfigurative representation. "The organism is a *diversion* of life," they write, whereas the abstract line is life itself (497). 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 insofar as haptic representation has continued to be a viable strategy in Western art, although it is usually relegated to minor traditions.

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 close-up and tactile way of looking. His descriptions evoke the play of the eyes over non- or barely figurative textures. The surface of video (generally more than film) is itself like a loosely woven fabric. I have come across a handful of works that use images of fabric to appeal to memory, to invite a more tactile kind of vision, and to call

upon specific cultural knowledges associated with specific fabrics. Shauna Beharry's silk sari should be quite familiar by now. Another memory-fabric is a roll of silk in Leila Sujir's *India Hearts Beat* (1988), which the artist electronically processes to become an electronic tapestry, weaving together three women's stories of homesickness. And a work in progress by Palestinian-born scholar and videomaker Alia Arasoughly uses the close-up image of an Oriental carpet as the ground for an excursion into the memory of exile. It recalls how one might lie on a carpet and stare at its patterns, daydreaming; or, how patients might have gazed at the patterns on the carpets covering Freud's couch.

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, and ornament. One can add Western high-art traditions such as medieval illuminated manuscripts, Flemish oil painting from the fifteenth to 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 a correspondingly exalted position of the viewer. However, a number of art historians have suggested alternative economies of looking that are more appropriate to tactile images, and, not incidentally, more embodied. For example, Svetlana Alpers (1983) and Naomi Schor (1987) describe ways of seeing seventeenth-century Dutch still life, in which the eye lingers over innumerable surface effects instead of being pulled into centralized structures. Mieke Bal (1991) proposes a way to read paintings not around the phallic Barthesian *punctum* but a gender-neutral *navel*. Jennifer Fisher (1997) proposes a haptic aesthetics that involves not tactile visibility so much as a tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive awareness of the physicality of the art object. As I am here, Fisher is concerned to redeem aesthetics from their transcendental implications by emphasizing the corporeal and immanent nature of the experience of art.

Finally, there is some temptation to understand haptic visibility

as a feminine kind of visuality; to follow, for example, Irigaray's assertion that "woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking" (1985, 26). Nevertheless, rather than embrace the notion of tactility as a feminine form of perception, I prefer to see the haptic as a visual strategy that can be used to describe alternative visual traditions, including women's and feminist practices, rather than a feminine quality in particular. The arguments of historians such as Bal, Buck-Morss, and Schor supplant phallogocentric models of vision with a vision that is more ambient and intimate. Yet their arguments do not 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. To trace a history of tactile looking offers a strategy that can be called upon when our optical resources fail to see.

### Haptic Cinema

Whether cinema is perceived as haptic may be an effect of the work itself, or it may be a function of the viewer's predisposition. Any of us with moderately impaired vision can have a haptic viewing experience by removing our glasses when we go to the movies. More seriously, a viewer may be disposed to see haptically because of individual or cultural learning. The works I describe here have intrinsic haptic qualities, to which a viewer may or may not respond. Similarly, there may be historical periods when cinema is perceived more or less optically or haptically.

In its early years cinema appealed to the emerging fascination with the instability of vision, to embodied vision and the viewer's physiological responses (Gunning 1990, Lastra 1997). Like the Roman battle of the haptic and the optical, a battle between the material significance of the object and the representational power of the image was waged in the early days of cinema (at least in the retrospection of historians). The early-cinema phenomenon of a "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1990) describes an embodied response, in which the illusion that permits distanced identification with the action on-screen gives way to an immediate bodily response to the screen. Noël Burch (1986) also notes this connection, suggesting that early cinema appeals to the viewer not through the analog representation of deep space but more immediately. As the language of cinema became standardized, cinema appealed more to narrative identifica-

tion than to bodily identification. In theories of embodied spectatorship, we are returning to the interest of modern cinema theorists such as Benjamin, Béla Balász, and Dziga Vertov in the sympathetic relationship between the viewer's body and the cinematic image, bridging the decades in which cinema theory was dominated by theories of linguistic signification.

The term *haptic cinema* has a brief history. 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 (1986, 497). Antonia Lant (1995) has similarly used the term "haptical cinema" to describe early films that exploit the contrast between visual flatness and depth. She notes the preponderance of Egyptian motifs in such films and posits that early filmmakers were, like Riegl, fascinated with Egyptian spatiality. 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" (1989, 12). To me, Deleuze's focus on filmic images of hands seems a bit unnecessary in terms of evoking a sense of the haptic. Looking at hands would seem to evoke the sense of touch through identification, either with the person whose hands they are or with the hands themselves. The haptic bypasses such identification and the distance from the image it requires. A writer whose use of "haptic cinema" is most similar to my own is Jacinto Lejeira (1996), who discusses the relation between haptic and optical visuality in the work of Atom Egoyan. He notes that Egoyan uses different processes, such as speeding up video footage in the film, enlarging the grain, and creating *mises-en-abîme* of video within film, to create a more or less optical or haptic sensation. "These techniques function in such a way that the overall image . . . seems to obey an instrument capable of bringing the spectator's opticality or tactility to a vibratory pitch of greater or lesser intensity" (1996, 44). I agree with Lejeira that these visual variations are not formal matters alone but have implications for how the viewer relates bodily to the image (46).<sup>16</sup>

How does cinema achieve a haptic character? Many prohaptic