The Cinema
of Sensations

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION:
POSSIBLE QUESTIONS IN "SENSUOUS" FILM STUDIES

ÁGNES PETHŐ

Cinema has always had a profound experiential quality: images not only move, but they move us and engage all our senses. Whenever we go to the movies we not only see the film, and the world of the screen not only communicates a message to us, but we also get to be immersed in a unique environment that stimulates our senses and our minds on different levels of consciousness and perception. In the past decades the incredible multiplication of the technologies through which moving images can be produced, distributed or received has produced new formats, new genres and new contexts for coming into contact with images that move, as well as an expansion of the "cinematic" experience itself that can no longer be connected exclusively to films seen at the cinema, but can also be found in video installations, new media art, or in a variety of "vernacular" forms enabled by these new, accessible digital technologies. Reflecting on this process a series of new theories emerged to describe both the interconnectivity between different kinds of audio-visual media and our interaction with them, yet, paradoxically, despite having to deal with the diversification of moving images and their new environments, in most of these approaches there has been a marked emphasis on the unifying effect of digital media, and on a general blurring of traditional media boundaries and medium specificities in what has been termed as "the post-media condition." Nevertheless, we might argue that, in the most general sense, new forms always entail new experiences, and the sensuous encounter with the medium (in its most basic meaning, as the concrete palpable form) still matters, perhaps more than ever now that moving images have moved out of the movie theatre to compete with traditional arts in the museums and exhibition halls, or have become ubiquitous in our daily lives, being permanently within our reach, providing us with diverse forms of entertainment and self-expression.

Some of the latest trends in art cinema have not only registered, but also made use of and reflected upon these changes by specifically moving

towards a "cinema of the senses" and a "cinema of the body," acknowledging the relevance of the embodied act of viewing and the sensory experience of moving images by exploiting the possibilities of the "haptic" gaze collapsing the distance between spectator and image. In the field of commercial cinema a great number of popular new technologies have been devised for the explicit purpose of heightening our sensations while viewing a film, moreover, cinema has not only found new outlets and dazzling new ways to capture our attention, but it has also been placed literally into our hands: the domestication of visual media has brought us "in touch" with images as never before, and produced new "hands-on" practices and new sensations, new sensibilities regarding moving images.

Following a previous international conference organized by a small group of teachers and researchers at the Department of Photography, Film and Media at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and the subsequent publication of a volume of studies with the title *Film in the Post-Media Age* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012) in the introduction of which we insisted that the "ecosystem" of contemporary moving images should be understood "not as a unified digital environment that nullifies differences, but as a thriving and highly diversified, "multisensory milieu" that poses ever new challenges both for the consumer/producer and the theorist," we decided to take a step further in this direction and organized a follow-up conference focusing this time directly on the "multisensory" nature of moving images, by pairing the keywords "cinema" and "sensation." We launched the call for presentations that offer a closer examination of the sensuous aspects of moving images from a variety of viewpoints, challenging the ideas that might downplay their relevance in the age of media convergence. And although the topic of the conference was suggested by contemporary phenomena, we defined it in the broadest possible terms by proposing to concentrate on the experience, on the sensations generated by the diverse forms of moving images and in various styles, genres and cultural environments throughout the history of cinema and screen media. In doing so our not so hidden goal was also to identify and map out through the distinct themes, approaches and methodologies at least some of the possible new directions in what we perceived as taking shape as "sensuous" film studies. The conference took place between the 25th and 27th of May 2012 with the title *The Cinema of Sensations* and attracted researchers from all over the world for what turned out to be three days of presentations on extremely varied subjects and lively discussions conducted in a memorably cheerful atmosphere. The present volume having the same title as the conference is the palpable outcome of these

debates, and publishes a selection of articles that have been written for this conference,[1] alongside essays written afterwards within the framework of a subsequent research project[2] focusing on questions of intermediality in the cinema of Eastern Europe, and which has also been premised on the sensuous nature of the complex medial experience of film.

In proposing the topic we knew we could already rely on a large array of theoretical sources that potential participants might draw inspiration from. Among others Thomas Elsaesser's and Malte Hagener's handbook *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* (2009) had already made its way into the curriculum of many universities, and as such had already proved to be a good starting point for junior researchers interested in theorizing the sensory experience of cinema. There was also the vast literature on the phenomenology of moving pictures from Vivian Sobchack (e.g. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 2004) to Martine Beugnet (*Cinema and Sensation: French Film and the Art of Transgression*, 2007). We explicitly referenced in our conference call Laura U. Marks's landmark books discussing haptic images and their connections to representations of cultural difference (*The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, 2000; *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 2002) and also invited her as a keynote speaker to give us a glimpse into her latest work. In the field of philosophy the spectrum of theoretical approaches to the role of bodily sensations and the interpretation of sensuous forms in art and cinema included, among others, Gilles Deleuze's ideas on the "logic of sensation," or Jacques Rancière's philosophical investigations into the politics of aesthetics and the "distribution of the sensible" (i.e. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 2006, *The Future of the Image*, 2007). Approaches in visual anthropology in the wake of Hans Belting's ideas on the connection between image, body and medium, or Paul Stoller's "sensuous scholarship" (e.g. David MacDougall's *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses,* 2005) could also yield theoretical foundation for researches into the manifestations of "the cinema of sensations."

We encouraged our authors to address a set of questions either from a theoretical point of view or through concrete analyses of films. The

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[1] Most of these essays have been published in the journal, *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: Film and Media Studies* (Vol. 7 and 8, 2013), and have been revised for this volume.

[2] The title of this research project is *Re-mediated Images as Figurations of Intermediality and Post-mediality in Central and East European Cinema.* (For more information see: *http://film.sapientia.ro/en/research-programs/cncs-uefiscdi-pce-idei-research-program*, last accessed 27. 11. 2014.)

questions raised in the discussions at the conference included: How can we re-interpret film history through the senses? What kind of paradigms, authors, and styles can be identified in the practice of a "cinema of sensations," of a cinema exploring the palpable presence of bodies in film history? What does the experience of so called haptic images entail in the cinema, and how is this different from what we see in other arts? How can sensory, audiovisual perception and cognitive knowledge be connected when watching moving images? How does an emphasis on sensations and the body relate to representations of social issues, cultural difference, gender, time, death, or the materialization of fantastic beings in cinema? How does this relate to representations of other arts (like sculpture or painting) in films, to the filmic image being perceived as a painterly *tableau*? How do images affect us in classical or avant-garde moving images, and new media practices? How does the experience of new images relate to the experience of "old" images, to what we have already become accustomed to see in previous forms? Should we re-examine questions of intermediality in the age of media convergence (and so called post-media cinema) from the perspective of the sensuous encounter with the medium? What is the difference between haptic images and "hyper" cinema, what is the sensual, intellectual, emotional import of images displayed as large format video installations or of images in 3D movies? How do we interpret the new naturalistic trends in contemporary cinema? The list, of course, is not complete, and we cannot even claim to have received definite answers to all of these questions, still the range of analyses in the articles covers quite a wide area, opening up the field of investigations in several directions proposed by our initial call.

The volume is structured in three parts, each of which groups the articles around three keywords diversifying the palette of subjects and theoretical issues tackled in the book. The first part is headed by the keywords *Perception, Body and Mind*, and includes essays that deal with the sensual experience of the moving images, with the way we conceptualize such experiences in approaches ranging from philosophical enquiries to the application of cognitive theoretical frameworks, and from meta-theoretical surveys to concrete case analyses.

The first part is introduced by Laura U. Marks's written version of her keynote speech. The article is titled *Thinking like a Carpet: Embodied Perception and Individuation in Algorithmic Media*, and constitutes her "return," as she confesses, to writing about cinema after a long visit to Islamic art and philosophy in her previous book, *Enfoldment and Infinity* (MIT Press, 2010). In this she proposes to examine the ways non-figurative, or aniconic images may appeal to an embodied way of looking

that gets out of a human perspective and into the perspective of a point. Yvonne Spielmann was also a keynote speaker at the conference that occasioned the writing of these articles, and brought a valuable contribution to the theoretical investigations of experimental cinema and video art. In her text, *Seeing to Believe – Sensing to Know. From Film Form to Perceptual Environment*, she surveys in a wider, historical and theoretical view over the cinematic medium in its expanded sense, how sensory perception and the cognitive knowledge of the underlying constructedness of moving images have been subject to various experiments with moving images. The study encompasses examples ranging from early cinema to structural films of the seventies, to the most recent experiments in video art making use of an intricate interplay of conventional film forms with human-machine interaction, or to even more complex perceptual environments that use computers.

The two introductory articles, both with a wide arch in theory and in their perspective over visual culture are followed by three articles dealing with different approaches to haptic visuality in cinema. The first is László Tarnay's essay titled *Learning and Re-learning Haptic Visuality* which proposes a re-assessment of haptic visuality, distinguishing indeterminate vision as a lack of things to see from what may be regarded as multimodal sensibility. Arguably, the first is evoked by highly textural images with scarce or no figuration like many of Stan Brakhage's films which call for the other senses, synaesthesia, to induce – even if in the imagination – the identification of the perceived object. In contrast multimodal sensibility is enhanced by real life and simulated situations when "associations" come naturally to the "embodied" subject. Vision is haptic but not indeterminate because it operates in tandem with other senses. The distinction can be projected onto the contrast between analogue (representation) and digital images (simulation). The author also argues that the possibility of re-learning the sensorium including haptic vision is offered as a conscious reversal of, or indexical regression from, figurative vision. Francesca Minnie Hardy's article, *Avoid Contact with the Eyes and Skin, May Cause Irritation: Agnès Varda's* La Pointe courte *(1954)*, as the title indicates, takes a closer look at Agnès Varda's first feature film criticized by some of contemporary commentators as hampered by "defects," "blunders," and "follies." The author proposes a more material, rather than, intellectual engagement with the film and its sensual imagery, and in doing so, draws on the thoughts of contemporary French thinker Jean-Luc Nancy, and examines a look mobilized thanks to the contact it makes with wood's textured, internal ornament, and which, she contends, may undo the material myopia by which the film's existing critical landscape has itself

been hampered. The next article, *Haptic Vision and the Experience of Difference in Agnès Varda's* Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse *(2000)*, also deals with the art of the French director. Romain Chareyron investigates how, in her famous documentary on gleaners and gleaning, Agnès Varda relies on the establishment of haptic vision in order to merge the experience of her own body with the representation of people living at the margins of society. In so doing, the article posits that Varda turns to a sensuous depiction based on the textural properties of the image to deter any form of instrumental vision regarding the representation of the body and its connections to pre-determined norms of conduct. The author shows that, in its portrayal of a socially and economically alienated group of people, as well as in the rendering of her aging body, Varda's *mise-en-scène* brings forth a tactile form of knowledge that calls for a humanistic approach, thus defusing any form of mastery of the gaze over the image.

The last two articles in this first part offer meta-theoretical incursions into two other important areas of "sensuous film studies:" the perception of the body in film and the cognitive-sensory aspect of film music. Daniel Fernández Pitarch publishes his findings regarding the "*geography of the body:" Jean Epstein's poetics and conceptualization of the body in his unpublished writings.* The author selects from the unpublished corpus of Epstein's oeuvre three books: *Ganymède* (a book on male homosexual ethics), *Contre-pensées* (a compilation of short essays on a wide variety of topics) and *L'autre ciel* (a literary work) in an attempt to better understand a major motif in Epstein's thought: the human body. He finds that these writings show Epstein's emphasis on the material side of any psychology, identity or thought, and that they address the topic of artificiality and humanity in a unique way by claiming that what is specifically human is to evolve through specialization and reification, even if it were "*contre-nature.*" And thirdly, the analysis also discloses the inherent sensuality of some Epstein texts (as demonstrated, for instance, by his descriptions of clos- ups).

Concluding this first part of the book, Steven Willemsen and Miklós Kiss engage in the research of film music in their essay titled *Unsettling Melodies: a Cognitive Approach to Incongruent Film Music.* As they explain, the notion of "incongruent film music" may refer to a soundtrack, either diegetic or non-diegetic, which expresses qualities that stand in contrast to the emotions evoked by the events seen. The article aims at covering two interconnected areas; the first is comprised of a critical recapitulation of available theoretical accounts of incongruent film music, whilst the second part of the paper offers an alternative, embodied-cognitive explanation of the audio-visual conflict which arises from this

particular type of incongruence. Rather than regarding it as a phenomenon that works through disrupting conventions, we stress a sensual, perceptual-cognitive reason behind incongruence's emotional strangeness.

The second part of the book is titled *Embodiment, Art and Media*, and consists of articles that not only deal with the embodied experience in moving images, but also present instances in which this is directly related either to the experience of the more traditional forms of art (painting, sculpture, photography, poetry), or the newest technologies of 3D that the different forms and genres of the moving image (fiction films, animations, video installations) establish an inter-art ad inter-medial relationship with, and through which we may feel that cinema has expanded its borders. In many of these examples we see also how a haptic sensation correlates with establishing an optical distance, or even self-reflexivity in the image, with an explicit thematization of technology, and the mechanical gaze.

The first article, Ivo Blom's *Of Artists and Models: Italian Silent Cinema between Narrative Convention and Artistic Practice*, takes us back to the beginnings of film history, and presents the author's research on the representation of painters and sculptors, their models and their art works in Italian silent cinema of the 1910s and early 1920s. This research deals with the combination of optical (painterly) vs. haptical (sculptural) cinema. It also problematizes art versus the real, as well as art conceived from cinema's own perspective, that is within the conventions of European and American cinema, relating this pioneering study to existing studies on the representation of art and artists in Hollywood cinema.

Marlène Monteiro's article, *The Body as Interstitial Space between Media in* Leçons de Ténèbres *by Vincent Dieutre and* Histoire d'un Secret *by Mariana Otero*, examines the ways in which the representation of the body in painting is the starting point of a broader reflection on the plasticity of the cinematic medium in two French autobiographical films. Both in *Histoire d'un secret* (*Story of a Secret*, 2003) by Mariana Otero and in *Leçons de ténèbres* (*Tenebrae Lessons*, 2000) by Vincent Dieutre the body is at the centre, albeit in very different ways. The first is a documentary about the director's mother who died of the consequences of an illegal abortion in the late sixties. She was an artist and her paintings, many of which depict lascivious female nudes, pervade the film. The second is a self-fictional essay that weaves together narrated episodes of the filmmaker's story as a homosexual and drug addict with close-ups of Caravaggist paintings. The way in which both filmmakers resort to light, the close-up, and, as far as Dieutre is concerned, the diversity of film formats, embodies what Deleuze defines as the haptic gaze to explore cinema's own materiality. In addition, the presence of the paintings

introduces the issue of intermediality which modestly points to a *mise en abyme* of the broader question of cinema's shifting ontology.

Ágnes Pethő defines the *tableau vivant* not just as an essentially intermedial image but as a typical post-photographic and post-cinematic image of our times, and singles out some remarkable extensions of the *tableau vivant* style into feature film length moving image projects in East European Cinema in the essay *"Housing" a Deleuzian "Sensation:" Notes on the Post-Cinematic Tableaux Vivants of Lech Majewski, Sharunas Bartas and Ihor Podolchak.* In examining some of the recent works of these authors from Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine as a unique corpus of "post-cinematic" films that can also be viewed as installation art, the essay presents how the inherent tensions and intricate relations between both elements of the syntagm, *tableau vivant*, i.e. *living picture*, are emphasized in these films: connecting the artificiality and stillness of the mediated "image" with the volatile phenomena of "life," and the sensuous experience of the flesh. The analysis deals with two, interrelated aspects: a) the interpretation of the *tableau* as a "container" for chiastic interchanges between body and image, "life" and "art;" b) the description of the *tableau* style pictorialism manifest in such post-cinematic images through the Deleuzian concept of "sensation" and its relationship with figurativity, gesture and composition.

Hajnal Király continues the incursion into contemporary East European cinema in the article *The Alienated Body. Smell, Touch and Oculocentrism in Contemporary Hungarian Cinema.* Based on a theoretical background defined, among others, by Jacque Rancière, Thierry Kuntzel, Yvette Bíró, and D. N. Rodowick, she examines the films of contemporary Hungarian filmmakers Kornél Mundruczó, Ágnes Kocsis and Benedek Fliegauf that show a striking homogeneity not only stylistically, but also in terms of distanciating the individual and social body through aesthetic practices such as allegorization, intermedial figuration and thematization of the gaze. She argues that while omitting the sense of touch and representing smell in a negative context, these films keep the individual, social, intercultural and transnational body under visual control and observation, thus managing to become "political" without depicting directly acute social or political topics.

The next article in this group, Élène Tremblay's *Sensations of Dysphoria in the Encounter of Failing Bodies: The Cases of Karaoke by Donigan Cumming, Last Days by Gus Van Sant, and Drunk by Gillian Wearing*, deals in a way with the opposite phenomenon of what we see in Király's article, where different ways of distanciating the body were presented. Tremblay discusses films and video installations that present

figures of the sick, dying, or intoxicated body, and that trigger sensations associated with fear of death and physical decline. In the presence of these suffering figures, the viewer feels discomfort in his or her own body through an empathetic response. The viewer's strongly dysphoric bodily sensations come to signal his or her empathetic bond with others – a bond that he or she may accept or reject when it provokes dysphoric sensations. She argues here, as she did in her recent book *L'insistance du regard sur le corps éprouvé. Pathos et contre-pathos* (2013), that these film and video works act as spaces for the viewer to negotiate and exercise empathy and the accompanying dysphoric sensations.

In the penultimate article in this part, *Visuality and Narration in* Monsters, Inc., Jens Schröter raises the issue how the overblown rhetoric concerning the "digital revolution" conceals deep continuities between traditional and new forms. He uses the example of the animated film, *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) to demonstrate how established forms of narration can be used together with new forms of computer generated image, and describes the complexities of this constellation by a detailed analysis of sequences from the film. The article is followed by José Manuel B. Martins's essay, Crows *vs.* Avatar, *or: 3D vs. Total-Dimension Immersion* in which he joins the debate on 3D versus classical cinema. He contends that 2D, traditional cinema already provides the accomplished "fourth wall effect," enclosing the beholder behind his back within a space that no longer belongs to the screen (nor to "reality") as such, and therefore is no longer "illusorily" two-dimensional. This kind of totally absorbing, "dream-like" space, metaphorical for both painting and cinema, is illustrated by the episode, *Crows* in Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990). Through an analysis of crucial aspects in *Avatar* (2009) the author shows how the formal and technically advanced component of those 3D-depth films impairs, on the contrary, their apparent conceptual purpose on the level of contents, and we will assume, drawing on Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze, that this technological mistake is due to a lack of recognition of the nature of perception and sensation in relation to space and human experience.

The third part of the book deals with *Sensation of Time, Reality and Fantasy* and contains two articles that dissect the phenomenon of realism occurring in some of the new trends in world cinema both as unconventional sensual imprints of contemporaneous times and as something performed through the images. Three articles revolve around the sensation of time and mortality experienced both through the mediation of the transient body and of the material vulnerability of the analogue film made visible in the film; and one article completes the survey of temporality, reality and imagination with theorizing the palpable

presentation of futuristic creatures in recent sci-fi films and visual artworks.

Ramayana Lira discusses *Affective Realism and the Brand New Brazilian Cinema* through the works of young Brazilian filmmakers such as Irmãos Pretti, Eduardo Valente, Rodrigo Siqueira and Sérgio Borges, which are a real challenge for the critic inasmuch as they escape the conventional vocabulary (aesthetics of hunger, marginality, national allegory, identity, bad consciousness) and propose other questions. She suggests that the films made by this young generation bypass traditional themes like urban violence and historical revisionism, thus demanding that we rethink the political potency of Brazilian Cinema. Moreover, these films are not concerned with images of Brazil, pointing out to a post-identity politics that go beyond narratives of nation, class or gender. Realism is considered no longer a referent for a sociological truth about Brazilian society, but as something that the image does, i.e., as an affect that challenges the viewer's response-ability. Fernando Canet's article, *The New Realistic Trend in Contemporary World Cinema* uses Ramin Bahrani's *Chop Shop* (2007) as a case study for a new movement for a rehabilitation of cinematic realism that throughout the history of film has touted cinema as an open window to the real world, a view particularly exemplified by Italian Neo-Realism. On the other hand, the author also contends that this new trend has given new life to realist film theories championed mainly by André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer.

Fabio Pezzetti Tonion turns to one of the best known authors of modern cinema, Ingmar Bergman, analyzing *The Sensation of Time in Ingmar Bergman's Poetics of Bodies and Minds.* He proposes that through the transitory fragility of the human body as represented by his actors, Bergman's cinema defines the possibilities of a perceptive horizon in which the experience of passing time becomes tangible. Even though the Swedish director's entire opus is traversed by this reflection, it is particularly evident in the films he made during the 1960s, in which the "room-sized" dimension of the sets permits a higher concentration of space and time. In this claustrophobic dimension there is an often inflammable accumulation of affections and emotions searching for release through human contact which is often frustrated, denied, and/or impossible. This situation creates characters who act according to solipsistic directives, in whom physiological and mental traits are fused together, and the notion of phenomenological reality is cancelled out and supplanted by aspects of dreamlike hallucinations, phantasmagorical creations, and psychic drifting. Starting from the *Hour of the Wolf*, the essay highlights the process through which, by fixing in images the

physicality of his characters' sensations, Bergman defines a complex temporal horizon, in which the phenomenological dimension of the linear passage of time merges with, and often turns into, a subjective perception of passing time, creating a synchretic relationship between the quantitative time of the action and the qualitative time of the sensation.

In the article titled *"Own Deaths" – Figures of the Sensable in Péter Nádas's Book and Péter Forgács's Film* Katalin Sándor examines the intermedial aspects of Péter Nádas's book, *Own Death* (2006), an autobiographical account of the author's heart failure and clinical death and of its screen adaptation by the experimental Hungarian filmmaker, Péter Forgács, with the same title (*Own Death*, 2007). Both the book and the film problematize the cultural, discursive, and medial (un)representability of a liminal corporeal experience (illness, death). In the film corporeal liminality and its medial translatability are not only thematized, but shape the embodied experience of viewing through the use of photo-filmic imagery, still frames, fragmented close-ups, slow motion, or medially textured images. These do not only foreground the experience of the body and "own death" as other, but also expose the medium, the membrane of the film. The haptic imagery directs the viewer's attention to the sensuality of the medium, to the filmic "body," enabling a "sens*a*ble" spectatorship, an embodied reflection on the image, on the "sensual mode" of becoming intermedial. Judit Pieldner deals with similar issues in the article, *Remediating Past Images: the Temporality of "Found Footage" in Gábor Bódy's* American Torso. Along Laura U. Marks's thoughts on the "disappearing image" as embodied experience, the article proposes to bring into discussion particular modes of occurrence of "past images," whether in form of the use of archival/found footage or of creating visual archaisms in the spirit of archival recordings, within the practice of the Hungarian experimental filmmaking of the 1970s and 1980s, more specifically, in Gábor Bódy's films. This practice reveals an attempt of *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin) that goes beyond the cultural responsibility of preservation: it confronts the film medium with its materiality, historicity, and temporality, and creates productive tensions between the private and the historical, between the pre-cinematic and the texture of motion pictures, between the documentary value of the image and its rhetorical dimension. The paper argues that the authenticity of the moving image in Gábor Bódy's *American Torso* (1975) is achieved through a special combination of the *immediacy* and the *hypermediacy* of experience, and a distinct sensing of the cinema. In contrast to these texts dealing with an acute and often painful sensation of the past, but also joining the discussion on the representation of the unrepresentable, the last

article in the book written by Andrea Virginás, *Embodied Genetics in Science-Fiction: from Jeunet's* Alien: Resurrection *(1997) to Piccinini's* Foundling *(2008)*, focuses on tangible creations of pure fantasy, on futuristic visions of the genetically engineered clones or mutants burdened by hereditary diseases that populate the panopticon of contemporary science fiction genre. The author examines these works that tend to be either on the low-budget or arthouse end of the media spectrum, and leaving aside the spectacular digital design and special effects well known from big-budget blockbusters, exemplifies how the representation of processes not perceivable to human senses like genetic cloning, genes mutating or genes being spliced may also be achieved through a series of other techniques transposing "abstract genetics" to the "sensual" screen.

The image of the dots of light emerging from a dark, velvety background like bubbles in the air, which was placed on the dust jacket of this book, was inspired by a similar cluster of spots of light used on the banner advertising the conference, deliberately chosen for its haptic qualities, rendering light in an almost tangible, synesthetic way. In retrospect, however, these evanescent forms seem more like simple but effective metaphors for the flexible "modulations" of the topic, of the various approaches and examples that the essays selected for this volume have been able to unfold from the key notion of "sensation" within the broad field of moving image studies, as a modest contribution to the study of "the cinema of sensations" defined not as a particular type of film, not even as a particular methodology, but as a set of intriguing questions that may arise through our contacts with images that engage our senses.

Acknowledgments

PART I.

PERCEPTION, BODY AND MIND

THINKING LIKE A CARPET: EMBODIED PERCEPTION AND INDIVIDUATION IN ALGORITHMIC MEDIA

LAURA U. MARKS[1]

I have been slowly returning to cinema from a long visit to Islamic art and philosophy: *Enfoldment and Infinity* (2010). There I learned: once you suspend figurative image making, a world of creativity opens up. Large-scale forms, such as figures and narrative, cramp the creative energy of the lines and colors that compose them. But as you know, Islamic art is often aniconic. Freed from representing figures, its lines and forms take on a life of their own. Figures are molar, but life is molecular. So I propose thinking like a carpet as a way to release the life contained by figures.

Is it possible to release the energy contained in small units, instead of making them conform to human-scale forms? What would it be to inhabit the point of view of a point?

Thinking like a carpet can be a way to start at any point and connect to the universe. A way to unleash creative energy that's not available when we start at a larger scale. What I'm after is not only the thoughts and hands of weavers as they produce these astonishing patterns. It's not only the material of wool and silk, or for that matter of pixels and silicon in new carpet-like media. It's the way the carpet itself thinks, pulling forces from the weavers, the yarns, the matrix, the algorithm and producing something new: the carpet as a force of individuation.

In my book, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, I compared the media art of our time to the religious art of Islam. I was inspired by Islamic art and Islamic thought because, in avoiding a direct representation of God, they create powerful abstractions that indicate the divine presence/absence, are pulled toward it, demonstrate and perform it, but do not show it. This power of non-representation created the conditions of a kind of nonorganic life in Islamic art.

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[1] A similar but divergent essay appears in *Entautomatisierung [Deautomatization]*, eds. Annette Brauerhoch, Norbert Otto Eke, Renate Wieser, and Anke Zechner (Paderborn: University of Paderborn Press, 2013).

Enfoldment and Infinity ended by going beyond religion. In the last chapter I looked at some carpets that seem to have an internal life force that does not obey the injunctions of a benevolent (or any other kind of) God; carpets that suggest we do not need to ascribe creation to God because Life creates itself. This talk develops on that perception:

1. life of points
2. points connect to the universe
3. algorithmic media (carpets)
4. ways different kinds of carpets imagine the universe
5. carpet as machinic phylum
6. embodied response

I propose to examine the ways non-figurative, or aniconic images may appeal to an embodied way of looking that gets out of a human perspective and into the perspective of a point.

Aniconism

There are many reasons why Islamic *religious* art tends to be aniconic. Islam came about at a time when the other religions of the book, Judaism and Christianity, were iconoclastic. Aniconism helped distinguish Islam from other religions visually. The Qur'an cautions humans not to compete with God by trying to make living forms, and that it is impossible to conceive of God. God, being beyond comprehension, is also beyond representation. A branch of rationalist philosophers of ninth-century Iraq, called the Mu'tazili, argued that since God is indivisible, He has no attributes (such as sitting on a throne). Thus any attempt to identify the properties of God in art risks blasphemy (see Khalidi 1985, 84). Theirs was not the only view, and I must note that in the eastern Muslim world, dominated by Shi'ite Islam, there exist many figurative images of Muhammad and other saintly people − images that would be cause for persecution in the western, largely Sunni, Muslim world. Still, Islamic art for religious reasons almost always avoids depicting anything with a face, anything with a body, and even sometimes anything with an outline. It is an abstract religious art that shifts your attention away from the human scale and both out toward the infinitely large and in toward the very small.

The Interval: Perception of a Point

Looking at a carpet, entering its patterns from any point, our perception creates something new. The idea that perception must discover the world anew every time arose in the thought of the scientist of optics Abu 'Ali al-

Hassan Ibn al-Haytham (b. Basra 965, d. Cairo 1039), known in the West as Alhazen. Ibn al-Haytham introduced the intromission theory of vision in his *Kitab al-Manazir* or *Treatise on Optics* around 1000. Consulted in Arabic, and translated into Latin in 1200 by Gerard of Cremona (see Ahmad 1969, 37), the *Optics* remained the major work on optics until Kepler in the seventeenth century (see Lindberg 1976, 58−60). In it Ibn al-Haytham described a contemplative mode of perception. He argued that we do not automatically perceive form; form is a psychological concept, not a given in nature. This means that contemplation is necessary for the recognition of form, for it requires us to use our internal faculties, such as memory, comparison, imagination, and judgment. Ascertainment can only be relative, to the limits of sense perception (see Sabra 1994, 170−171). So form is produced in an oscillation between what we see and mental operations: it is created in time, in the embodied mind.

In *Enfoldment and Infinity* I noted the remarkable similarity between al-Haytham's theory of perception and that of Henri Bergson, 900 years later. Bergson's concept of the subject as a center of indetermination influenced Gilles Deleuze's Leibnizian idea that perception does not reproduce the world but unfolds it from its particular point of view. We humans, like other creatures, tend to act on our perceptions (we see food, smell danger, etc.). But, as Bergson argued, the wider the interval between perception and action – the more time you absorb the perceived world from your given perspective – the more of the universe you can perceive. The longer you look, the more you see (hear, smell, taste, etc.). Widening the interval requires undermining our creatural habits of perception-action. The wild boar seems to be attacking you, and instead of throwing your spear you take time to contemplate its fur, its tusks…. We might observe that widening the interval is in a certain way anti-human, for our basic human needs demand us to act decisively in order to preserve and sustain ourselves. Yet Ibn al-Haytham's conception of perception, like Bergson's, proposed that human beings have a necessary leisure to contemplate what we perceive before we can act on it.

By shifting activity to a smaller scale, aniconic art (and aniconic ways of perceiving) widens the interval. Aniconism liberates the molecular from the molar, another paired term from Deleuze and Guattari that reflects the scientific proportion 1 mole = 10^{23} units. While the molar scale deals with large-scale happenings and general states, the molecular scale deals with tiny events, bursts of energy that we don't experience when we are acting at the molecular level.

So in privileging a non-human perspective we move not to a larger, God-like perspective, but to a tiny perspective: the point of view of a molecule. Or, say, an atom.

In Iraq in the 8th and 9th centuries, the Islamic atomist occasionalists, a group of the Mu'tazili rationalist theologians, argued that God was so powerful that nothing could endure except by His grace. The Mu'tazili argued that the world is composed of disconnected atoms and the accidents that befall them; and that rational inquiry can demonstrate how divine will causes atoms and accidents to come into existence and cease to exist. Later a conservative, mystical atomism (associated with al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazzali) asserted that humans cannot inquire into divine will and must instead submit to the random actions of the atomistic universe. God alone knows.Therefore, a body's tendency to hang together, to cohere, was simply an accident that befell its atoms. Those atoms could just as easily go their separate ways.

Lenn Evan Goodman describes their argument thus: "No substance extends beyond a point, for the givenness of one point of being does not imply that of another, … lest we limit God's omnipotence and the fundamental datum of contingency." Furthermore, "To the radicals of the kalâm [rationalist theologicans] this meant that God might create intelligence in an atom, or in no substrate at all, without the prerequisite of, say, Life" (Goodman 1992, 53). Here already is a sort of declaration of independence of points, of atoms: independent of each other, but not of course of God's will. The kalâm atomists prefigured a molecular life disdainful of molar habits − though of course all this was only to defer to God's freedom to reorganize the world, atom by atom, as He might see fit.

Writing on Greek atomism, Deleuze and Guattari observe, "The ancient atom is entirely misunderstood if it is overlooked that its essence is to course and flow." An aggregate of atoms, they write, is a war machine, "a physics of packs, turbulences, 'catastrophes,' and epidemics" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 489, 490). Atoms are not obedient to form but flow in smooth space, coalescing in all kinds of intensive ways.[2]

We hear from such free particles a couple of times in *The Movement-Image* when Deleuze describes how the smallest elements of "flowing-matter" are perceiving, acting; alive. We do not need to see things, for things themselves already see: "The eye is in things," he writes, referring to Bergson, who imagined that every point has a point of view that can be, as it were, photographed: "taken in the interior of things and for all the

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[2] "Smooth space" refers to space that is heterogeneous and intensively organized; "striated space" refers to territory that is homogeneous and subject to general laws (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 474–500).

points of space" (Deleuze 1986, 60). These kinds of photographs taken from inside particles are now cropping up in scientific imaging. Similarly, Deleuze identified a gaseous perception in the films of Dziga Vertov, American experimental cinema, and video (we might think of the analog video synthesis of Eric Siegel): works that do not connect movements together but privilege the energy of each freely moving particle. They attain "a pure perception, as it is in things or in matter, to the point to which molecular interactions extend." Gaseous perception, then, achieves the radical openness to the universe implicit in Bergson's philosophy of perception: the interval between perception and action becomes so minute that the particle's entire existence consists of perceiving and acting in a single instant.

Deleuze thus attributes life to the tiniest particles of matter. This theme occurs also in *The Fold*, where Deleuze extends Leibniz's already generous definition of the soul, or the monad, from organic entities to anything that "perceives," i.e. discriminates among and reacts to its environment. Thus cells, proteins, molecules, photons, and atoms can all be considered to perceive. The universe swarms with infinitesimal souls! This attribution of life to all entities calls to mind Charles Peirce's statement, "Viewing a thing from the outside, considering its relations of action and reaction with other things, it appears as matter. Viewing it from the inside, looking at its immediate character as feeling, it appears as consciousness" (Peirce 1935, 268).

The Deleuzian film theorist Elena Del Rio argues that a film (or, we can extrapolate, any artwork) often takes place on the dueling levels of molar/molecular: large scale/small scale, representation/hundreds of small events. The molar level of meaning, values, narrative may say one thing; the molecular level (affects, attractions) another (see Del Rio 2008, 26−55). Del Rio, analyzing the melodramas of Douglas Sirk, points out that while the narrative takes place on a molar level, trying to convince the audience into ideological beliefs such as the productive Oedipal family, on the molecular level a completely different kind of energy acts. Del Rio describes the "bad girl" character Marylee in Sirk's *Written on the Wind*: she's sexually voracious and frustrated − a "tramp" − wears hot colors, bubbles with swishy, provocative gestures, loves music, loves to dance. Marylee is a mass of molecular energy who cannot be contained by the molar morality of the film's plot. [Figs. 1–3.] Del Rio argues that representation is molar, performance is molecular. Representation re-presents, it's stuck with the precedent. Performance creates something new: becoming. Marylee is alive with an energy that bursts the bounds of representation − like a carpet.

Figures 1-3. Screenshots from Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind*

Points Connected to the Universe

So we have a conception of the universe as a swirl of lifelike particles, a dance of points. From an atomist perspective, the points are disconnected. But if we consider the universe to be a plenum, a space entirely filled with matter, points are the seemingly disconnected surface of an internally connected substance. Deleuze in *The Fold* argues the latter: all matter and spirit are inseparable, one fabric, deeply folded. What look like points are really the inflection points of folds (Deleuze 1993, 16). The fabric of the universe is matter; the powers that fold it from the inside are spirit. As Mario Perniola writes (1995, 3−21), the world is not empty, it's full: so full that everything has to be folded up to fit.

The Baroque paintings of El Greco interested Deleuze for the way they depict the universe as a field of folds. El Greco's harsh white highlights and slashing dark crevices emphasize the folded texture of matter. The tips of these folds look to us like points, but if you take one and drag it out you unfold a section of the universe. Certain parts of the image bulge out toward us, others remain hidden. In El Greco's *Annunciation* at the Prado, some of the universe remains enfolded, like the vague area behind the dove or holy spirit that flies down between clouds, the squashed-together mass of angel musicians, and the deep folds of Mary's robe. This is because heaven and earth are on the same plane, a deep fold between them.

The accordion-like space in El Greco also suggests we could unfold it in the opposite direction, the peaks becoming valleys and the valleys, peaks. It gives a sense that not everything is available to vision, but rather it is a struggle to make things perceptible, to unfold the world to perception. The composition tips and tilts: it does not offer the scene to one privileged viewing position, as in Renaissance perspective, but *inflects* at certain points (as Deleuze writes, calling upon Leibniz's calculus-based conception of the universe), emphasizing that the universe appears differently to every point of view. This point of view is, of course, the perspective of the monad, Leibniz's soul that perceives the entire universe

from its limited perspective. The monad is a kind of dependent universe (Deleuze 1993, 53).

Reading the *Monadology* you perceive that the religious premise underlying Leibniz's folded universe causes it (as in much Islamic thought) to be closed in on itself. Nothing is free in this universe except for God: this is because Leibniz needs to guarantee the liberty of the deity at the expense of His creatures. God even foreordains the amplitude of the soul, i.e. whether the soul will be saved or damned (Deleuze 1993, 71). Thus we encounter in religious thought a universe that is not really free because it is subject to the freedom of God. Deleuze overturns this almost casually in *The Fold*, asserting that in modern thought an open universe replaced the closed one and Process has replaced God. Yet he retains the powerful model of a universe connected by folds, in which a single source can individuate infinitely.

The Fold, in short, attributes a capacity for life to non-organic things: molecules, atoms, points of matter. Furthermore, it suggests that these points have an intensive perception, freed from anthromorphic perspective, that connect them to the very source of life. So we get a sense that the universe appears as a series of disconnected points that are, in fact, all connected by folds. If we can relinquish a human point of view for a while, we can enter into the perception of these points, perceive the universe the way a point, a molecule, an atom might perceive it. An infinity of dispersed, tiny points of view that connect us to the universe.

Carpets as Algorithmic Media

All carpets have some degree of automatization: the square matrix of the loom, determination of number of threads per inch, knot style, and design. Given their basis in calculation, carpets are a fundamentally algorithmic medium, where an algorithm is an instruction to be executed. It's important to note that carpet designs are not necessarily determined by the materiality of their medium. Many carpets borrow their designs from other media, such as painting. So the algorithms that carpets carry out are somewhat independent of the medium. Carpets don't only express the material, they express a relationship between material and idea: an algorithm.

We can say carpets *index* their algorithms, for examining a carpet we can figure out the algorithms followed by the weaver (Soderman 2007). For example, the pattern of the Lotto carpet (so called because it occurs in the paintings of Lorenzo Lotto) applies algorithms of recursion and mirroring to basic motifs in order to fill a field with them. And, thinking in

an unfolding way, we can say those algorithms in turn index their weavers, designers, and programmers. Looking at them we see the expression of the instructions for their making, a communication between the designer and the weaver.

Algorithms are created by humans, of course, so far from being a cold impersonal medium, algorithmic works like carpets indicate all kinds of decision-making, reflection, even emotion − and of course error. For example, a carpet in the collection that Joseph McMullan amassed in the early decades of the twentieth century and donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, allows us both to image the model (the algorithm) that the weaver followed and to intuit the decisions she made that deviate from themodel in executing it. It is a funny-looking carpet with asymmetrical touches of color. The collector described it this way: "This is a very close but hilarious descendant of no. 97 [another carpet in the collection].... The design is basically faithful.... But there is no comparison between the sloppy drawing in this rug and the sophistication of its model, while the use, or misuse, of colour, particularly blue in the central medallion, is strange indeed, without system or sense. Again green is used in the corner pieces at one end only. It is all a refreshing reminder that the human spirit can, and does, produce wonderful effects impossible to the trained and sophisticated mind." (Joseph McMullan 1972, 52.)

Algorithmic media, when executed by hand, permits all kinds of decisions, felicities, and mistakes to occur. But what about algorithmic media executed by machines, such as computers? I shall return to this question.

Carpets Imagine the Universe

Art historians sometimes interpret carpet designs as models of the universe, and I have adopted this slightly old-fashioned practice. For example, a number of Persian carpets look a bit like a universe in which everything emanates from God, as in Islamic Neoplatonism. From a central medallion radiate patterns that become ever more complex: sometimes their motifs are entirely abstract, sometimes they are floral, and sometimes their vinelike forms intertwine tiny creatures. The most complex such carpets were woven during the Safavid period, 1501−1732. They imply a relationship between infinitesimal and infinite, for from any point of view you can reconstitute the generating center, as the monad reconstitutes the universe from its point of view. Ultimately they confirm a whole, though, because the individual motifs do not make sense independently of the center that gives rise to them.