In recent years the senses have re-emerged as an important site of scholarship within communications theory and cognate fields. As Lauren Berlant (2004) noted in an open letter to her colleagues at Critical Inquiry, terms such as “power” and “agency” are increasingly giving way to notions of embodiment—“a term that designates the closeness to the body of social, experiential and aesthetic affect” (p. 445). Similarly, Anu Koivunen (2001) has noted what she calls an “affective turn” within both feminist media studies and the broader field of cultural studies (p.1). This renewed interest in the senses is informed by a number of progenitors from various backgrounds: the critic Walter Benjamin and his work on synesthasia and the disciplining of the senses via technology, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his readings of Spinoza, or the psychologist Silvan Tomkins with his taxonomy of affects. These diverse thinkers have in turn produced a number of different approaches to this reinvestment in sensuous theory, and it was in the interests of exploring some of the contours of these various approaches that I came upon Laura U. Marks’ Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media.

Marks’ project in Touch is to inaugurate what she calls a haptic criticism. Notably, she cites as an influence here a young Walter Benjamin. Citing Rudolph Pannwitz in “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin (1996) observed that “the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (p. 262). In turn, Marks recognizes a similar problem in writing about film and video—which she also refers to as an act of translation. Too often, she notes, critics use preconceived theories to address film and video rather than letting the film or video generate the theory.

We critics cherish our ideas and forget that they become hard tools that chip at, or merely glance off without ever touching, the surface of the other. But if we measure with more delicate tools, fashioned for the occasion, our critical activity becomes less a hacking away and more a sort of precision massage. (p. xv)
Consequently, Marks’ haptic criticism, like the work of Steven Shaviro (1993) and Vivian Sobchack (1992), marks a transition from linguistics and Saussurean semiotics toward phenomenology or affect.

This haptic criticism or massage theory necessitates a collapse of distance between the critic and her/his object so as to allow for the sort of touching that Marks yearns for. It is abundantly clear that the various films, videos, and other digital productions that Marks examines engage what she refers to as her “uncool, nose against the glass, enthusiasm” (p. xv)—she does a fine job of demonstrating how these various pieces affect or move her. The book is made up of a number of essays written at various points over the past 10 years, and though it covers a range of themes that often seem unconnected—there are chapters dealing with animal identification (chapter 2), erotics (chapters 4-6), olfactory haptics (chapters 7-9), haptics and electronics (chapters 10-12), and the author’s dreams (chapter 13)—it is held together by a sustained focus on experimental film and video.

Perhaps one of the negative consequences of this lack of distance is the occasional slip into a universalizing tone and assumption of a specific audience, as in the introduction, where she refers to “our own” culture in contrast to that of First Nations people (p. xviii), or at the end of chapter 4, where she assumes that her readers are, like herself, “theory-heads” schooled in “phenomenological, early feminist, popular-cultural, new feminist and anti-racist” thought (p. 71). That said, the occasional hagiographic tendencies are tempered by the fact that the author uses these videos not to “preach to the converted” so much as to articulate pressing socio-political insights.

Three chapters I find particularly successful in this aim are “Animal Appetites, Animal Identifications,” “Loving a Disappearing Image,” and the concluding essay, “Ten Years of Dreams about Art.” In “Animal Appetites,” Marks discusses how feelings are ascribed to animals and the consequences of this personification. The important concept developed here, borrowed from Anne Friedberg, is “petishism.” Petishism, Marks says, “is built on a mechanism of disavowal similar to fetishism. A fetish is useful for its ability to distract from the anxiety inducing scene at the origin of difference, in order simultaneously to affirm and to disavow it” (p. 26). With petishism this fear of difference is effaced by projecting noble human qualities onto animals, a historical process that, as Marks points out, has had ironically negative consequences for certain humans who are in turn animalized—the Masai people of Eastern Africa, who have been displaced to make room for wildlife reserves, or the homeless and hungry Afghani refugees, who saw hundreds of thousands of private American dollars being donated to aid the surviving 40 animals at the Kabul zoo.

Whereas Friedberg draws on Christian Metz’s psychoanalytic cinema theory to talk about how petishism is enacted through familiar cinematic devices such as shot reverse shot, Marks, in contrast, looks at how such identifications are problematized in Kenneth Feingold’s Un Chien Délicieux (1991), Michael Cho’s Animal Appetites (1991), and John Choi’s Search for Peking Dog (1995)—all of which, in various ways, deal with the practice of eating dog meat. Of these three, Cho’s video struck me as the most successful intervention. The video chronicles the trial of two Cambodian immigrants living in Los Angeles whose legal troubles
stem from their diet of dog meat. As Marks points out, simple juxtapositions are used to highlight the hypocrisy of the allegations of “animal cruelty”: the prosecution’s assertions are superimposed over the bloody slaughter of more conventional livestock, and statistics about animals destroyed in overcrowded shelters or used as test subjects in experiments are played over images of pet cemeteries.

All three of these works draw attention to the overt racism that often elevates Westerners’ identification with animals over their identification with members of the Third World. Marks suggests that a possible explanation for this might be “that dogs—so understanding, and so conveniently mute!—are much more conducive to projected fellow-feeling than are humans who speak an alien language, practice strange customs and, well, eat dogs” (p. 31).

In “Loving a Disappearing Image” Marks looks at the ways in which artists are incorporating the physical decay of film and videotape into their works. There are some interesting insights here into Benjamin’s thoughts on art and mechanical reproduction. For example, the assertion that the aura of experimental works—often rare and hard to come by—increases as the nitrate in the film breaks down or as the videotape becomes demagnetized. The real theoretical intervention, however, takes the form of a challenge to conventional psychoanalytic conceptions of melancholia—the negative alternative to mourning in which the individual refuses to give up an investment in the thing lost. Reference is made here to a passage in Barthes’ Camera Lucida (1981) where he discusses how the inevitable disintegration of a cherished photograph ultimately leads to its disposal as it eventually fails to represent the object of mourning. Barthes notes the irony of history and photography being born of the same age yet serving opposite functions—photography, he claims, stands in opposition to memory. In contrast to this Marks argues that through loving a disappearing image we can be brought into a deeper relationship with the thing represented. This argument is brought forward through a discussion of the following works: Phil Solomon’s Twilight Psalm II: Walking Distance (1999), Frank’s Cock (1993), Mike Hoolboom’s Letters from Home (1996), Steve Reinke’s The Hundred Videos (1989-1995) and Everybody Loves Nothing (1997), Lawrence Brose’s De Profundis (1996), Peggy Ahwesh’s Color of Love (1994), a performance by Ken Jacobs entitled XCHXE/XXRXIX-EKSX as well as images from Tom Waugh’s book Hard to Imagine (1996). Specific attention is drawn to how decaying images are utilized in representing the AIDS crisis.

Marks’ argument is a compelling one, and I am inclined to agree with her position. At the same time, I can’t help noting that Barthes probably would have been in agreement with her as well. Although it is true that Barthes states that photography can block the act of memory and that there comes a point when the photograph becomes so desiccated that it should be thrown out, he does not, as Marks states, throw away his most prized photograph: the worn image of his mother in the winter garden. Barthes says that he is “too superstitious for that,” which suggests to me that Barthes, like WJT Mitchell and others, recognizes that there is something in excess of the image in photographs. Perhaps this is the auratic quality that only becomes legible through the decomposition of the image.

“Ten Years of Dreams about Art,” which serves as the book’s conclusion, is
by far the most unconventional and, by virtue of this, the most interesting chapter in the book. Marks reflects upon her dreams over the past 10 years and finds within them markers of major movements within experimental video. C.S. Peirce’s notion of “firstness, secondness and thirdness” provides the theoretical lens for this reflection. For Peirce, signs exist at various levels of abstraction. Firstness, for him, describes a perception that is not yet a sign—a colour, sense, or emotion; it is emergent. Secondness is the level of observable phenomena, while thirdness is the realm of interpretation. Following this logic Marks describes 15 of her dreams between 1989 and 2002 (the dreams being on the level of firstness). She then progresses to an account of some actual transformations that were taking place during this period (secondness) and concludes with a reflection about how these two things fit together (thirdness). Themes include AIDS, identity politics, diminished arts funding, the apparent de-radicalization of the arts, the turn from critique to affirmative practice in feminist video, and the move from linguistic to phenomenological accounts of cinema.

This chapter is full of profound insights coupled with bizarre dreams. Dreams of a jazz-playing bug named Habermas are associated with the importance of experimental video. Dreams of exchanging one’s brain in Tokyo are brought into association with the turn toward theory in the art-producing community. In many respects this chapter serves as an ideal conclusion in that it is here that she most concretely realizes her haptic criticism. The method is certainly unorthodox, but the dreams and their expositions, like the rest of the book, are thoroughly readable and thought-provoking, while at the same time very personal and singular.

By way of conclusion, I must note one recurring element of her dreams that Marks did not comment upon—her isolation. In the majority of her dreams the author seems to be out on her own or, at least, alone among others. I find this reflected in her work as well. The book might have benefited from a more sustained dialogue with other contemporary thinkers of sensation, and it seems somewhat ironic that a book with such a title would fail to touch on the works of others in the field such as Brian Massumi, Steven Shaviro, or even Vivian Sobchack—who is credited as an influence but scarcely mentioned. Clearly, Marks is an innovative thinker with a talent for writing and a keen sense of the importance of experimental film. The chapters in this book were most successful at drawing in this reader. My only hope is that, in the future, she is able to facilitate a dialogue with her theoretical contemporaries as successfully as she does with her objects of study.

References
Reviews


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