

TOUCH: SENSUOUS THEORY AND MULTISENSORY MEDIA

Laura U. Marks

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 259 pp.

Reviewed by Melinda Barlow

In academic discourse, a new way of thinking expressed in a unique style of writing is a rare and beautiful thing. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, a collection of essays by scholar, curator, and critic Laura U. Marks, achieves this elusive fusion of scholarly erudition and lyrical expression as it traces her "intellectual, erotic, and spiritual journey" through the complex artistic and theoretical terrain of the last ten years. Written before, during and after her first book, *The Skin of the Film*, the essays gathered together in *Touch* draw upon a wide range of ideas: Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of "haptic visuality," and Charles Sanders Peirce's understanding of the indexical sign. Marks uses them with elegance and precision to illuminate an equally wide range of texts, from experimental films and videos, to interactive software designed to trigger olfactory memories, to the author's own dreams.

What distinguishes Marks' approach throughout is the originality of her synthesis, the fluidity of her writing, and the unabashed love of each critical object, which exudes from virtually every page. Her essays are about works that solicit her "uncool, nose-against-the-glass enthusiasm." Rather than "bringing objects in line with ready-made principles," she tries to form multiple points of contact with them.

For anyone schooled in the dense theoretical mix of structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, feminism, and post-colonial theory that dominated North American graduate programs in the 1980s and '90s, such statements fly boldly in the face of one's training, as bringing objects in line with ready-made principles was exactly what such programs once taught (and arguably still teach) students to do. A product of this training herself, Marks notes in her introduction that the series of essays presented here reflects her own wrestling with, and I would add ultimate relinquishing of, the theories of Lacanian subjectivity and film spectatorship that have attained hegemony in the academy over the last twenty years. *Touch*, however, is by no means an "anti-theoretical"

book; it simply embraces a theory that has been less popular in film and media studies, that of phenomenology, and throughout her book's pages Marks makes this theory her own.

Indebted to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and elaborated for the field of film scholarship by Vivian Sobchack in *The Address of the Eye*, a phenomenological approach to moving image media understands the act of viewing as a form of sensuous contact rather than a disembodied process of mastery through physical distance. In contrast to the decentered subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis, phenomenology proposes a subject that *does* have a center, which is continually transformed by its encounters with the world.

This embodied subject, material and inescapably mortal, identifies with other material "bodies," like those of film and video, and responds to appeals made by these embodied media to all five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. How this synaesthetic conversion occurs, and how our "intercorporeal relationship" with moving image media evolves, hinges on the notion of the haptic, the focus of Marks' book.

Marks builds her argument with care over the course of thirteen essays, starting with "Video Haptics and Erotics." Here we learn the various scholarly applications of the term haptic. Used by Alois Riegl in the late 1920s to distinguish between the tactility of ancient Egyptian art and the figurative tendencies of Roman art (the former he calls haptic, the latter, optical), the concept of haptic space has reappeared recently in writings by Deleuze and Guattari (for whom it describes a "smooth space" that must be navigated at close range, like an expanse of snow or sand); Noel Burch and Antonia Lant (each of whom use it to explain the visual contrast between flatness and depth in early and experimental cinemas); and Bill Nichols and Jane Gaines in the context of documentary theory. These last two claim that the visceral intimacy of certain documentaries engenders a haptic relationship in which the viewer mimetically embodies the experience of the film's subjects, at once acknowledging their physicality *and* essential unknowability.

From this complex etymology, Marks extrapolates a working definition: when our eyes move across a richly textured surface, occasionally pausing but not really focusing, making us wonder what we are actually seeing, they are functioning like organs of touch. Video, with its low contrast ratio, capacity for electronic and digital manipulation, and susceptibility to decay, is an ideal haptic medium, its graininess a lure for the roving gaze Marks describes.

Film, however, may also invite a haptic look by speeding up or slowing down imagery, enlarging grain, or deliberately enhancing already deteriorating nitrate. Pixelvision tapes by Sadie Benning, narrative features by Atom Egoyan, and experimental films by Mike Hoolboom, Phil Solomon, and Peggy Ahwesh, among others, create haptic sensations by utilizing such techniques—alternately drawing us into a disorienting closeness and allowing us to master barely perceptible imagery.

This perpetual oscillation is the stuff of desire, for true eroticism lies in the constant back-and-forth between control and relinquishing, the "robust flow" between haptic and optical modes of seeing. Good haptic criticism thus requires finely tuned erotic faculties.

As in any discussion of desire (a phenomenon predicated upon the absence of an object), loss occupies an important place in *Touch*, and a theory of melancholy is therefore crucial to the book as a whole. Lucidly presented in "Loving a Disappearing Image," this theory eschews the Freudian presumption that equates "successful" mourning with complete abandonment of the lost object in favor of a theory of devotional melancholy derived from mysticism. Marks suggests that letting go need not involve fear nor preclude love and may, as thirteenth century Sufi poet Rumi put it, "draw you toward union."

She uses this theory to frame an examination of works that exploit the unique beauty of disintegrating film stock, multigenerational analog images, and the "bit-rot" of digital video. Decaying films and videos, in other words, precipitate an embodied response that enables us to identify with, rather than disavow, processes of entropy. "Things, people, and moments pass, they age and die and can never be duplicated," writes Marks, "so materialism's close corollary is cherishing."

Developing a method that combines cherishing with analytic sophistication is perhaps the most substantial contribution *Touch* makes to contemporary scholarship. Simply put, this book dares to analyze *and* feel, and perceives the two as ultimately inseparable. Marks is not the first to adopt this approach (she cites B. Ruby Rich, Scott MacDonald, Coco Fusco, and Bruce Jenkins as kindred spirits; to this list I would add video historian Deirdre Boyle, and memoirists of exile Andre Aciman and Svetlana Boym), but she may be the best, for her ideas on loss, melancholy, decay, and embodied identification are so supple I can imagine using them to explore other things, from the mysterious animated films of Janie Geiser to the fugitive medium of installation.

It is the very suppleness of Marks' method, her ability to think "outside the box" and to synthesize critical approaches rather than adopting a single system wholesale, that leaves me wishing that the final, and most intellectually risky, essay in her collection had gone even further. Titled "10 Years of Dreams About Art," in this creative experiment in "synechism" (Charles Sanders Peirce's term for the "deep connectivity produced by constant communication"), she finds in her own dreams traces of the evolution of experimental media during the 1990s. Despite her claim that she will not "analyze" these dreams, following each one is an italicized passage that interprets its contents in Peircian semiotic terms. Granted, I am less enchanted with this method than is Marks, but there is something about the gesture as a whole that seems too literal and easy in the context of a book otherwise dedicated to the creative fusion of critical methods.

That said, one dream provocatively titled "Deleuze Overcharges For Drinks" contains an image that emblemizes Marks' achievement in *Touch*, an achievement

due in part to that elusive quality called *tone*. In this dream, she is on her way to a reception for Gilles Deleuze, careening down streets on roller skates, feeling exhilarated because she is on her own. This is precisely what Marks does throughout her book: fly ahead with clear direction, buoyant, adventurous, if somewhat vulnerable (not only to disappointment by her unexpectedly entrepreneurial hero, but perhaps to the uncertainty accompanying all ventures into uncharted intellectual terrain). Such vulnerability is brave, and in *Touch* Marks is a maverick, primarily because her book is a model of intellectual generosity and liberation rarely found in academic studies.

Her Introduction is exemplary in this regard, for when Marks re-evaluates her own work as an "uppity" graduate student, her warm self-awareness has tremendous pedagogic value. Students and scholars will read *Touch* and learn how to become more attentive to tone: how to write with passion rather than contempt, and how to fuse intellect with affect. A call for a new form of scholarly writing as rigorously analytic as it is full of feeling, *Touch* does what Marks says that contact with another language ideally should do, namely, "deepen one's own."

University of Colorado at Boulder

NOBODY'S PERFECT: WRITINGS FROM THE NEW YORKER

Anthony Lane

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, 752 pp.

Reviewed by Colin N. S. Burnett

Though perhaps not an axiom, it is most commonly the case that academics write for academics; whereas, critics write for filmgoers. Undoubtedly, this is the well-spring for much of the tension that exists between the two factions. Many academics see popular criticism as a source of pseudo-intellectual embarrassment and may overlook the contributions of a critic like Anthony Lane, whose film criticism for *The New Yorker* is now available in the massive *Nobody's Perfect*. Many critics are no less adamant about the matter, blaming the alleged decline of American film culture on academics and theorists. Lane is unflappable, almost nonchalant, in the face of such a timely debate, plugging away at what should really be pre-occupying these warring parties: the movies themselves.

Lane's confident stance is grounded in his admiration for what he calls "old criticism," and while it may be tinted with a sense of irony, it reminds one of the virtues and pitfalls of film reviewing in the first half-century of cinema. Many critics, as Greg Taylor argues in *Artists in the Audience*, sought to lead but not to be followed. This impulse imbued the writing with unquestionable originality,