

Inherent Latency of Embodiment

>>> Interview with Laura U.Marks / Nov. 2004 / HKW Berlin

MJ: Knowing the two books of yours about film – both concerned with characterizing interpretations of intercultural cinema – it would be interesting to learn more about the background of the recent lecture u gave here in Berlin about Islamic art with special emphasis on the 'abstract line'. What kind of relation do you have to come to a specific theme like this ..

LUM: It is not related to my own background, not at all, but I always have been really interested in the Arab world, and it just seems to make sense. My research is partly based there, as I am doing work on contemporary video makers and film makers from this region. Beirut is the center for art from the Arab world, so it certainly makes sense to try to be based there to see that work, as well in other places like Cairo. I haven't seen much in Damascus yet, but Beirut where I go to try to catch up with what people are trying to do in the Arab world.

MJ: There I see a line and some relation to what I was reading out of your books. First I came across 'The Skin of the Film' (below) then along with different texts, found on the internet, e.g. 'How electrons remember' (below) and other essays I became curious especially by discovering a statement you made. In this response to a review of your book you already wrote about plans to go into an abstract direction with a focus on Islamic art expecting to eventually establish some congruent points concerning the algorithmic. Still I would like to recall, as also conference participants asked the other day, that there are other abstract art forms existing. So why the Islamic ...

LUM: Well, I can say what, for me, electrons and Islamic art have in common. It may have started three or four years ago when I wrote 'How Electrons Remember.'

I was getting more and more frustrated with representational images - that they are so easily colonized - and looking more and more to ways to escape representation. So I started thinking about electrons, as a kind of indexical medium that's 'under the radar' of representation, and also about smell. Smell is a medium that is hard to corral into being representational. Then I got interested in Islamic art as an art form that is really good in both being representational and collapsing all that down to a point.

Certain kind of calligraphy, for example, can start from a single point from which a whole line can be implicit, but then be reduced back to a single point. I found that Islamic art has that quality of latency that I also find really interesting in software art.

Digital video art explores the medium's embodiedness by playing not with the signal, but with a discrete set of information. (L.U.Marks, **Touch**, p.149)

MJ: Does this mean your interest for the abstract line in Islamic art is going back to the electronic/digital? Especially in the named essay, more than later in the books on film, you speak about the electron and refer to the digital - with digital I point specifically to algorithmic art and computer work - has this specific interest in the electron brought you to be concerned with the abstract line?

LUM: Well it is mostly because computer art and Islamic art have something in common. I mean not because they are directly related, but they both have algorithm. Algorithmic art and Islamic art has in common this property of latency. You can have just a line there, not doing anything, and then it can suddenly burst into life, and that I find really interesting. So I started to be interested in works of art that could remain latent, and sort of avoid representation and the limitations that come with representation.

This was at a really pessimistic point in my thinking career, when I was thinking that all images (including sound) are so easily open to colonization—a word I keep using [to imply that images can become vehicles for the abuse of power, rather than existing as themselves]. It just seemed that it doesn't make sense to make art anymore. And then that year [2002] I went to Beirut, and saw that there people are making art for really good reasons. This somehow of restored my faith in the image.

MJ: And you think art there refers much more to the idea of the algorithmic?

LUM: Oh no, no..

MJ: So as you drew a line here, is it that the interest in the Islamic art is bringing you back to the digital, to the media and new media works?

LUM: Yes, that's the idea. My next book will be the comparison between computer art and Islamic art, suggesting a sort of Islamic genealogy for new media art. To show that computer art has these deep intercultural roots, and that not only is it not new, but it is not western. So I am hoping to make this kind of polemical argument, to be able to show how Islamic thought, Islamic aesthetics, philosophy, and theology can say interesting things about computer art. That is how I began this project.

MJ: Do you want to refer with this argument that computer art is not western to its source - concerning the basics of coding - or is it related to a more general view?

LUM: Of course, it is western and contemporary, but as soon as you trace the roots of a technology and also of artistic practise and of the sciences and mathematics – as you go back you find the roots are historically deep and intercultural.

I love for example that the word algorithm comes from the name of Al-Khwarizmi, who wrote the book on algebra (al-jabr). Even the roots of mathematics that were build upon by European mathematicians have these deep intercultural roots, not only in the Arab world, but other places too.

MJ: Thus your analysis of the new media or the digital is not going back to the pure information. There is this one sentence, which is from the earlier text 'How electrons remember', where you first agree to the loss of indexicality and then re-establish it by relating it to the subatomic level of matter .. as this movement of bringing back something lost, but establish around it a new point of access.

Excerpts from:
How Electrons Remember
Laura U.Marks
from Millennium Film Journal No. 34 (Fall 1999): The Digital
online at: <http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/lmarks.html>

... "digitization" has come to mean encoding. ...

Light waves whose frequency and intensity physically represent the color of the object are translated into symbols when the image is encoded in strings of numbers. At this point loss of indexicality is not a question of image quality -- a digital image may have higher resolution than an analog image -- but of the physical relationship of image to object. Digitization breaks the analogical relationship between object and image, henceforth rendered as information.

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In each pathway I have described, analog and digital, the transmission of electronic data can be traced to the actions of electrons, or, depending on your point of view, to the wave pattern that organizes them.

...

In the digital pathway, information is enfolded in the pulses that travel through the computer, but the initial indexical relationship is lost. Yet one does not have to agree with Bohm's principle of nonlocality to argue that a digital image is enfolded in its code

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The mimetic faculty is usually superseded by symbolic means of representation in modern society (we are more likely to represent an airplane with a word or a drawing than by zooming around with our arms outstretched). Nevertheless, mimetic representation still at least partially underlies abstract representational systems, such as language. Similarly, the physical interrelationships between subatomic particles underlie the symbolic transmission of digital information.

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In this cautionary tone I adopt Sean Cubitt's notion of digital aesthetics, which emphasizes the materiality and vulnerability of the medium. A digital aesthetics remembers that any technology is social, and looks for the social and utopian potential of technologies. To pursue the radical materialism of my argument above, I want to suggest that the interconnected universe of electrons offers more than just a metaphor for social interconnection.

MJ: Would you assume that this might open a possibility to enroot a kind of 'different language' or a new view with not everything that predefined. Can it be related to a view which would refer to the social context of people in

Beirut or Shanghai, or any other place, where it would not have to deal that much with the context where it is originally coming from – even though one has to keep in mind that the shape of technologies, this kind of extensions to the real world of the media, to a certain degree is still mainly developed by some engineers from the western world or coming from western influence ...?

LUM: So you are saying that the hardware begins, is invented and produced in the west, but travels all over?

MJ: I refer to its social context. What I want to point out is that breaking down the information which comes from new media - and eventually would have the possibility to open up a field of interpretation or 'different languages', still has to handle a specific 'source code' or 'programming background' as it is mainly developed from a certain type of group of people, (or let's say in a context of western understanding ..) ...

LUM: I mean, those poor programmers, it is not their fault, but I think in this case of software from the Microsoft corporation, for example. There are lots of ways to think about it in a material way. There is the fact that it is written by programmers working for this corporation, working very long hours, and there are moments they are falling asleep or losing attention. Those circumstances are coded into the software as bugs. So that already gives the software a kind of materiality and historicity and weight.

And then you think about how certain programs circulate all over the world. People use it, and even though it is the same source code it still builds up 'patina' or a kind of a stain of use. And then you think of bootlegging, pirated copies; for example in Syria and in China, there is all kinds of pirated software. So this is another way that the historical weight gets build around the source code. The source code itself does not change; it attains a chain of use and association.

MJ: If we now speak about source code. I think it refers back to what you said about the algorithmic of new media, which you want to relate to in your project, and as you mentioned in the beginning might not be that much westernized ..

LUM: Well, a language like C, or Photoshop, whatever language you have, is written in the west for a particular company. I like to think of a computer program as an example of a piece of code, a big algorithm if you like, that has 'logical depth'. This is a term from mathematics and also computer programming, which I apply to the notion of the abstract line. Logical depth is the term for the amount of labour that has gone into building an equation that is then discarded. This is beautiful to think about, if you think about an equation like $e=mc^2$ for example - a huge amount of other equations got tossed out in order to have this neat little equation. This is a very material way to think about equations or algorithms, because it means that all the labor of the mathematician or programmer and his or her predecessors, in this case Einstein, all of their labour is encoded in this equation. I even think that the labour of the women who brought him sandwiches is somehow encoded in the logical depth of this equation. So that's a way to think about contemporary software building on years and years of knowledge and labour, which is not present, it's not perceptible in the final result, but it is part of its logical depth. And so in that way you can trace the history of calculations and then of algebra, and of what the European mathematicians took from Arab and north African mathematicians, and what they in turn took from Indian mathematicians. So logical depth is a way to build this long line through history that makes turns and detours, breaks, and begins again. There is a lot of Arab mathematics that was never taken up by the Europeans, and kind of stayed where it was in history. There were other aspects of Arab mathematics that were taken up, and now they're being developed by Microsoft in California. So you see that historical travel of mathematics is also an abstract line for me. I really love to think about this line of material continuity in history.

MJ: Do you bring this together with the media work you said you are looking at from contemporary artists from the Arab world ..

LUM: I should explain that there are really two different bodies of contemporary art that I am looking at. The new media artists that I am concerned with are mostly western; there are not so many artists in the Arab world or in other poorer countries that are working in new media. For the most part the Lebanese and Arab artists whom I am looking at are experimental film makers, video makers, experimental documentarists. It is really a kind of separate project, in which I don't want to force too many parallels.

But I would say, for example, that Akram Zaatari, a Lebanese video artist and film maker, mainly working in experimental documentary, is really interested in the nature of the document and in what can be recovered and what can be lost. So he is interested in the question of latency, and the phenomenon that that everything that is expressed conceals many other things that have not been expressed. Lately Akram has been doing a lot of digital editing, and exploiting the ability of digital editing to make kind of fantasy worlds. So in his case there is a link,

because he is one of the film makers in the Arab world most formally concerned with digital aesthetics. He is using digital editing to show the fact that a regular indexical image actually does not tell the truth, and trying to force it to tell the truth, or to tell multiple truths, either by multiplying image or making an absence of image. So, come to think of it, some contemporary Arab video work has a lot in common with the quality of algorithmic work or the arabesque of islamic art, to remain latent as a line or to burst out in form.

MJ: So you don't combine those two projects on purpose, you want to have them kind of separated...

LUM: Yes, if they come together, that's fine, but it is really important not try to force an interpretation on what contemporary artists are doing. What the contemporary film and video makers in Beirut are doing that I find most interesting is mostly about what counts as truth, how do you represent what really happened. It is a kind of ontological question, which is mostly a result of political issues.

MJ: You just made the statement about the obvious loss of indexicality and evolving difficulty to handle a digital image. Eventually as everyday life occurrence this may not be obvious on a conscious level, but on an unreflective one, it even seems to be a problem of mainstream media nowadays. There is some unconscious persuasion for the loss of evidence and authenticity of the images. Isn't there an underlining pattern or string of thought where those two themes are coming together?

LUM: Well, there is certainly a problem with indexicality that the contemporary Arab media artists are dealing with, like a lot of artists, who are working in experimental documentary. Like Akram Zaatari, Walid Ra'ad, Mohamad Soueid, they are all working with the problem of mainstream media, the problem of indexicality, that there are so many images in the world that don't tell the truth. Any mainstream representations, whether they are from the west or overseas, or whether they are local, official images; for example in Lebanon the official histories of the civil war try to cut it up, erase it, and smooth it over.

So on one hand those images are not useful as is and need to be excavated in some way. And on the other hand there are indexical images, but those too need to be excavated. Especially because they are also working with the tradition of western anthropology, as in Akram Zaatari's most recent feature-length video called 'This Day'. It's partly about how anthropologists, in this case a Syrian anthropologist working in a western tradition, photographed Bedouins and camels and traditional life, and said 'Here is a document of what Bedouin life is like'. The photographs were taken in the 1950s, and everybody relies on this kind of document as the truth about Arab life. But the photos were fictionalized; here you have these indexical images that still need to be excavated. So in many ways these artists are trying to squeeze something out of the image that is not visible, not readily available.

MJ: One of the problems and theories I wanted to talk about and can be related to the given examples here is the predefinition of images, as you wrote: "it's important to distinguish between perceptions that arrive pre-symbolized, and perceptions that require a detailed sensory engagement with the world because their meaning is not already given."

You presented different examples in your book about intercultural cinema where artists try to develop new methods of expression to escape these predefinitions. Many of them pick up kind of new media, avant-garde tools, like video, making small films, etc .. as there might be a possibility that the media itself is able to speak a not that clearly defined language. Would you follow this interpretation for the development of the haptic visuality you are writing about in 'The Skin of The Film' (below) and later in 'Touch'?

Excerpts from:

'Emergent Senses' - A Response to Swalwell

Laura U.Marks

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online at: <http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol6-2002/n36marks>

...The thinness of perceptual experience I refer to isn't a result of technology per se, but technologies that reduce sensation and perception to the recognition of signs. Yet to some degree it's up to the perceiver whether to recognize them as such. In Swalwell's nice phrase, 'a chance city symphony of noise', the instrumental urban sounds of sirens, car alarms, etc., lose their symbolic quality. As noise, they arrive to us less as signs with specific meanings than as an audible texture. Noise, one might say, is haptic sound. To some degree it is up to the individual hearer whether to experience them as a texture or to distinguish and perceive them, as in the difference between haptic and optical visibility.

...

Thinking this way, which Swalwell does well, allows us to understand mass-encoded images (visible, aural, tactile, olfactory and gustatory) as accumulating in layers on the world of experience. Any of these layers may be experienced as primary. In Peircean terms, they are Thirds (symbolic images, in this case) that return as Firsts, the stuff of new perceptions.

[...] For each generation growing up in increasingly and differently technologized societies, it is (and will be) interesting to see how they navigate the thickening texture of the perceptible and cognizable world -- what they choose to distinguish, what remains indistinct, what is the rhythm of this 'haptic-optical' shift. Also it is interesting to consider how various groups of people create their own 'texture maps' of technologized society. Immigrants continue to be my favorite agent of this process, because they have to creatively negotiate a differently technologized culture.

...

So Swalwell is right that technology need not be linked with sensory impoverishment. The question of instrumentality lies somewhere between the object and the perceiver. Nevertheless, I do find that sense experience is increasingly instrumentalized in the current state of global capitalism (if you'll excuse the condensed term). I don't want to bracket the enormous power of the corporations that attempt to encode our sense experience for us. I still think it's important to distinguish between perceptions that arrive pre-symbolized, and perceptions that require a detailed sensory engagement with the world because their meaning is not already given.

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[early art historian Alois] Riegl argued that Roman figurative, illusionistic art, clearly distinguishing figure from ground, was inherited by European painting. In a parallel historical development, a non-representational, falsely termed decorative mode in which figure and ground were inextricable became the province of Islamic art. This privileging of haptic imagery took place within Islamic art, I would argue, for both theological and geopolitical reasons. I am curious whether the haptic spectatorship of these works invites a similar dissolution of self as does the haptic spectatorship of the films and videos I discussed in *The Skin of the Film*. What is the mimetic relationship with this particular kind of abstract image? Also, in the history of Islamic art, images do not *represent* but actually *embody* and *perform* religious and philosophical statements. As such Islamic art, particularly mosque architecture and calligraphy, is algorithmic. Currently I am turning to this work as a fruitful prototype for computer-based art. Computer art is similarly algorithm-driven, often displays a lack of concern for the visual image, and is an exercise in making manifest the invisible, if not the transcendental as in Islamic art. This research may seem a great departure from the work on embodiment and sensory experience in *The Skin of the Film*. The common element is that both projects seek non-Western alternatives to the Western privileging of optical visibility, in order to turn these rich bodies of knowledge to the understanding of contemporary culture.

...

LUM: I am actually a lot more interested in narrative cinema now than I was when I wrote 'The Skin of the Film,' because I see now that any kind of avant-garde technique, including haptic images, can be scooped up and commercialised.

I had two students last year who decided to write essays about the haptic nature of the film 'The Passion of The Christ', if you know this horrible work of propaganda. This disgusted me, because it showed that any experimental technique can still be used for perfectly didactic propagandistic purposes. There is nothing radical in a technique itself.

At the same time I have been becoming more patient with how narrative cinema also has a way of evading the encodedness of audio-visual image, and narrative too can sometimes get close to experience in a

phenomenological way, even more than avant-garde techniques. So now I just look for the phenomenon, wherever it happens, of film and video that finds a way to express something inexpressible, and brings that into an audio-visual expression, rather than simply reiterating something that has already been expressed.

MJ: You just answered my final question, like if you would not see a danger (as I was writing): “that the nowadays commonly exercised practice of en/de/recoding with which I also refer to the fact that the computer or the digital reading re-establishes the image through a specific coding”. This argument does not want to blame just those programmers, but to a certain extent I want to arouse a kind of consciousness for the social context, as for example one hardly ever imagines that there is a black woman programming - that is still an image people don't have.

LUM: Of course. I know someone {Jacky Sawatzky, The R.G.B. Project} who is researching the visual biases are built into consumer video cameras. And it is very interesting; she finds they are biased toward the optical, they are biased toward nicely recognizable figures against grounds, and when they are faced with a haptic image they don't know what to do. These programming decisions come from what they have decided people want. That is not, for example, a racist position per se; it is a decision that people value clear meaning, clear visual distinctions. This suggests that there are all kinds of ways to understand how programming is not innocent and how it encodes cultural norms.

MJ: Partially there exist already some patterns for a kind of stereotypic repetition in certain kinds of habits to create evidence. For example to define the videophone transmissions on CNN the interpretation of a haptic image could be used .. These transmissions consist of highly pixelated images seemingly aiming to prove the less one recognizes the more authentic it has to be considered. Similar were transmissions from the beginning of the Iraq wars etc.. Authenticity is gathered here on a very strange level.

LUM: Yes, strictly speaking the videophone image is haptic, but it signifies something. It signifies indexicality and immediacy by the very fact of its low resolution. No technique is innocent. No technique is good in itself. I have to say, now that people think of the haptic when they think of my research, and artists are always showing me their work and asking 'Is this haptic?', I can only say 'Look, it's just a technique. It is not going to save the world. It depends what you do with it.'

MJ: Your expressions about the haptic and the embodied spectatorship are pointing to a kind of extended perception. It makes me curious about the underneath and thus building a connection to coding. You mentioned these examples of fictionalized Arab photographs, which everybody took as a kind of indexical 'proof' just for being a photograph. So there is the idea to read this kind of unconscious insecurity about the image, the digital image in general, which takes over the place of the image (read as index), versus the eventually opened up gap or 'empty' space, allowing a kind of 'different reading/language' – some ambivalence. Here is a relation to the approach of embodied spectatorship and haptic vision. Usually it is not possible to see the unknown, one just decodes things already predefined. I don't want to sound too mythical and not fix it just on the unrepresented, but one is hardly able to decipher the unfamiliar beyond a certain degree. There is this specific experience one makes when confronted with something yet unknown - insecurity and ambivalence forcing the whole sensory system to react. In the earlier essay of the electron you refer to the electronic/digital medium as matter, interpreted as technology, even though not strictly – is it at this point where you see the possibility for a language that either might be slightly haptic or eventually a new narrative, which might not come from a western point of view, but from a different attitude?

LUM: On the one hand, new media are so deeply embedded in their commercial exploitation that it is very hard to use a new medium differently from the way that it was designed for us to use it. It is very hard to be avant-garde with a piece of software or with a digital recorder, for example. So I don't think that on the purely, hardcore technical level, there is as much room for innovation. It seems that 10 or 15 years ago artists were writing software, and of course there are still artists writing software and trying to intervene on the level of the code, but I am not sure how big an impact that is going to make.

I think it's more on the level of use and using things for slightly different purposes than to which they were put. The example that always comes to my mind is illegal immigrants, illegal immigrants using mobile phones. They are not the ones to whom these telephones are marketed, but they use them. Mobile phones are very important to create connections between people who have no stable place to live, sending text messages, inventing languages with text messages. And that is just one example of how an unconventional use that is strongly motivated can reinvent a technology.

So I think innovation has to be strongly motivated. Artists with avant-garde techniques may not have a strong enough reason to really reinvent. They may, and that would be great...

So many experience escape expression. Almost every experience, in the track of my day and in the course of your day, we have an infinity of experience that is barely acknowledged or expressed. For me these things are valuable in themselves. And this is what feminist art in the 70s was working on - the fact of this infinity of experience. So rich, so detailed, already political, but also just a wealth of potential discovery. If we could free a bit of room to express these experiences, it would surely be interesting to a few other people...

MJ: The question about the possibilities of the application of new technologies occurs, as due to lacking predefinitions of the output, also mainstream media has problems to create evidential expressions for its representational intentions ..

LUM: I like to think that the answer is not about technologies per se, but there is an infinity of things that are not represented. There are more things, which are not brought into the world of conscious - let's say presentation, instead of representation. More things are not consciously presented than are; a good task would be for artists and thinkers and various kinds of people to present these things. just to say 'Here it is, here is this experience' with no other reason, before some kind of imperial interest comes along and takes it up. This is, if you like, a somewhat political reason to keep on doing phenomenology.

It is not a question of true images, but of (more) tenacious and continuing representation. Television, cinema and other public imagery comprise official history, while the unpreserved present-that-passes is more like unofficial history or private memory, its traces perhaps to be found in the confrontation of one with the other.

after Laura U. Marks

Deterritorialized filmmaking: a Deleuzian politics of hybrid cinema

Screen 35.3 (1994): 244-264

found online at: http://www2.centrepompidou.fr/beware/eng_critique/clearly.html

MJ: My questions derive from a point of interest into invisibility and related experiences of perception. Immigrants and marginal groups have to deal with similar problems. I also would agree on your statement about the feminist and expression of artists in general, though today there is as well the difficulty to find these expressions which are not colonized yet, which are not covered by imperial view and so forth ... and to get heard/seen ..

LUM: .. and also artists should not colonize those things themselves. I mean there is a lot of bad art that's didactic, that says 'Oh well, you did not know about this, but here it is.' That is just as bad in my opinion as a state art or capitalist art. So the point would be not only to bring something to perceptibility, but to do it in a way that was creative and stimulating. I'm a Deleuzian and I like things that stimulate life, rather than just say: 'Oh, you are bad' ...

MJ: Your lecture yesterday went very much into details and gave a kind of inside view, which I have hardly heard recently. I can only speak for Europe and there is a lot of fear and a kind of ambivalent attitude against what is 'outside' – means always accompanied by a lot of prejudices, thus I find a different attitude in your work.

LUM: I think that most people on the left, artists, intellectuals and activists on the left, who are, for example, critical of the recent war in Iraq, and the one before that, and who are in principle supportive of Arab issues - these people who are my allies - are not really able to just look calmly at things. Politicized people don't have time to ask, 'Why did Shi'ite mosques tend to have more floral decoration?' I think there is a certain kind of politics of not being so urgent to say the right thing, right now, and instead of just calmly being with a history or with a culture and trying to learn things.

MJ: Though finally, as you are working on the Islamic art project already for a while do you have plans about publishing?

LUM: I started off just having a general interest in immigrant art and intercultural art. I have always been involved in pro-Arab activism. But as I learned more and more about Arab cultures, I started to feel a real attraction and

stimulation to this part of the world and its history. And so it became less for political reasons and more for my own pleasure that I involved myself into the Arab world. When everybody started worrying about terrorism, it was almost irrelevant to me.

In any case, I have been doing this research for 2 years now, but it seems that it will take a while to come together as a book. I am just beginning to publish a couple of articles about this research [in Leonardo and the Journal of Semiotic Inquiry]. It is going to take some time. If it would be out in 3 years that would be fantastic.

Related links:

Related links for website: The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses
<http://www.dukeupress.edu/cgi-bin/forwardsq/search.cgi>

Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media
http://www.upress.umn.edu/Books/M/marks_touch.html

How Electrons Remember, Laura U.Marks, Millennium Film Journal No. 34 (Fall 1999)
<http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/LMarks.html>

A Response to Swalwell, Laura U.Marks, Film Philosophy Vol.6 No. 36, October 2002
<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol6-2002/n36marks>

Deterritorialized filmmaking: a Deleuzian politics of hybrid cinema, Laura U.Marks, Screen 35.3 (1994): 244-264
<http://www.screen.arts.gla.ac.uk/archive/backg.html>

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http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25805&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
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