

- Approach via the 'Smooth Space' -  
Laura U.Marks' Research on Intercultural New Media Practice

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'Haptic Visuality'<sup>1</sup> is an expression associated with the experience of sensual memorizing within visual representation. Its development as a concept is intensively interlinked with the inquiry of Laura U.Marks, a media theorist, and curator, who currently is a Professor at Simon Fraser University, Canada<sup>2</sup>.

Marks coined the term 'Haptic Visuality' to indicate an exploration into redefining notions of the perceptible, which extends the argument on representational expressions towards an understanding of the embodied experience intercultural cinema conveys for a postcolonial and transnational world view. The definition and argument Marks develops through her theoretical research and analysis of filmic material should prevent this terminology from reduction to a simple technical method, while it provides for an understanding of the logical elements which chart the consequence up to her enquiry into visual translations composed by algorithmic patterns. The enhanced concern exceeding mere interpretations into those yet not congruently transposable representations initiated an interest in comparable intercultural roots which directed Laura U.Marks' recent research into the field of Islamic Art.

Since the beginning of the 1990s Laura U.Marks has published a large number of articles on experimental films and film theory with a specific focus on artistic practice and the development of expressions related to groups of various backgrounds. The initial notion of interrogation involves the theories of Pierce and Bergson, though specifically her understanding of the sensuous approach shows influences of characteristically Deleuzian interpretations. Outlined by this triangle of well established concepts Laura U.Marks' research developed an understanding of perceptive strategies along definitions and interrogations of a more sensuous approach. This also included specific comparisons and influences of the fractal algorithms of digitization in new media with its general differentiating impact on the 'allegory' (understood as *figurative mode of representation*) of their content.

Her work attempts to escape dominating theories of representation and interpretations of the Gaze as derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis with one important point of departure being Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the 'smooth space' in contrast to the 'striated space' of a pure optical consideration. Their understanding of the *smooth* as an element of the haptic space defines a distinction between optical and haptic visibility. This requires for a difference in the attitude of accessing space thus demanding a decision for the intimate approach rather than the distant occupation that turns space into a territory. The selected definition of this movement of access also defines a changed subject - object relation. Consequently this assigns the approach as being respectively sensuous or distant, and regulates it into the significant differentiation of either an embodied or disembodied perceptual experience.

This derivation from the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of a smooth space relating to an embodied spectatorship enabled Laura U.Marks to establish the terminology of the 'haptic' as a distinction between optical and 'sensuous' visibility. Along the line of difference between these definitions she undertook an extensive research of footage to draw her interesting conclusion with a focus on the specific approach of diasporic experience in film.

Her publication *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Duke University Press, 2000) traces the described multi-layered approach through an extensive examination of mainly film and video works in link to artistic practice. By a careful analysis of the examples, her work models a specific immigrant/migrant experience in regard to the notion of 'haptic visibility'. The investigation explores a visibility which more likely connects to routes created through memories on any level of the sensuous apparatus rather than to what can be found in actual surroundings as visual representation. Marks excavates here a tendency/attitude of perceiving which successfully translates a synthesis of the actual and the (in that particular context) non-representable into the format of new media like video/film.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes', Frameworks 02/2004; [http://www.framework.fi/2\\_2004/visitor/artikkelit/marks.html](http://www.framework.fi/2_2004/visitor/artikkelit/marks.html)

<sup>2</sup> **Dr. Laura U. Marks** is a theorist and curator of independent and experimental media for international festivals and art spaces. She is Dena Wosk University Professor in Art and Culture Studies at Simon Fraser University, and has published two books *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (2002) and *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000). Her new major research topic concerns relationships between computer media and Islamic art.

The conclusion of this analysis indicates the political/sociological impact inherent in any notion of vision, which in turn points to the difficulties arising from the lack of criticism. Nevertheless the rejection of either visual concept only allows a fixed interpretation of the flow of the perceived. In this sense 'haptic visuality' can be seen as the attempt to redefine notions of the visual field, in taking up these explicit demands to explore the borderlines of the perceivable. However it never can be simply interpreted as a just technique, which would be able to explain a terminology solely through an attitude.

Laura U. Marks' research into the field of the more abstract visual mode of embodied spectatorship emerges along the dividing line of the missing flow between the haptic and the optical in the dominant culture of vision. It follows an expression that is as fragile as an eluding smooth smell in an overall smoky room, which – if perceived – could call up memories and interests. Thus 'haptic visuality' might stimulate an ambivalence of openness, just to eventually conclude on the interesting existence of crucial and paradoxical overlappings within the underlying algorithmic patterns across seemingly dividing cultural definitions.

An important characteristic of Laura U. Marks' work is the critical treatment of interpretation. She resists the temptation of applying preconceived patterns and speculative meanings to less identifiable images, well aware that 'preferred reading'<sup>3</sup> attitudes tend to relate to limited and already pre-assembled misconstructions. Perceptive attitudes are always in search for patterns and likely to define their own symptoms in connecting to a resolving background via a more or less paranoid interpretation. This resistance to an application which would not relate to a profound research, but instead apply simple schemata, constitutes the fascination of her specific thinking mode.

Reading and following her conclusions of a pragmatic, though cautious metaphorical approach introduce a way of seeing which attempts to relate transposable forms to the perceptible, while not flattening its expressions. This explicit thoughtful attention to avoid imaginative interpretations, as a necessary tribute to the difficulty to embark on this route, can be traced underlining various facets of her research. It reappears throughout the work as a consequent thread from the mentioned 'haptic visuality' to new media algorithm to abstract traditional forms as laid out in recent lectures like *Islamic Aesthetics, Attention, and the Abstract Line*<sup>4</sup>. Consequently it follows a logic appeal as an extension of her research in direction of *The Infinite Genealogy*<sup>5</sup>. In a recent call for papers for the conference she organizes under this topic she thus outlines '... that contemporary new media are already informed by the histories, knowledges, and worldviews that come to us from Chinese, Indian, Arab, African, indigenous, and other worlds of science, mathematics, cosmology, spirituality, and technology'.

The outlined concept thus emphasizes the focus of Laura U. Marks' interest as not just being a simple concern on non-Western adaptations in combination with critique of new media. Her enquiry instead explores relations and interconnectivities between traditional attitudes, new media approaches and artistic/cultural practices which explore stigmatizing borderlines in any perceptual mode. It is a coherent research into ones own attitudes developed through a projection of the evolving results (comparable to thin transparencies) in regard of the various cultural paradigms. A project to recollect into one's awareness that each of these *contributions* is just one layer of the matrix which form the entire kaleidoscopic field of perceptions.

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Encoding and Decoding in the Media Discourse', stencilled paper no.7, Birmingham, CCCS, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> (conference: 'Sense and Sensation – On the Performativity of Perception' in November 2004 at the FU Berlin, section 'Kulturen des Performativen' <http://www.sfb-performativ.de/index.html>)

<sup>5</sup> The Infinite Genealogy: Intercultural Approaches to New Media, upcoming Conference at Art Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, May 2006; Organizer: Laura U. Marks