

JAZZING THE IMAGE: HAPTIC PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE SWIRL OF MELODIES

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"Designed to be touched, this object touches back, casually grazing the pores of my skin with its textured surfaces. In this mutual stroking of the flesh, object and image come together as one; behold the thingness of the visual, the tooth of its grain, even as I encounter the visuality of the tactile, the piercing force of its perception. Already, then, a number of my senses have been engaged. For this is an object that has both an inside and an outside, and to be fully experienced it must be handled as well as looked at."¹

INTRO

There is something to the rhythm of the photographs of the streets, the flow of the mass of people or the singled out passer-by wearing a funny hat, a woman with an umbrella hopping over a puddle, or elderly ladies wearing dresses that match the colour of the trash nylon sacks waiting for their transport. The smoke erupting from the sewers of the city at seemingly random intervals, the tooting horns of the yellow cabs, the strides of those on a deliberate race towards an aim, disrupted by the random criss-crossing, impromptu zig-zagging of fellow pedestrians avoiding puddles and collision. The general dissonance and cacophony of the street finds its compositional frame in the photograph, where it sings melodies accompanied by a set of instruments, complementing the leading tune or counterpointing it for greater effect.

Photography is – sometimes – jazz. It is the rhythm of the city; more primordial, hectic at first, but most of all, the whole body responds – it is its very sensorial quality, the haptic potential, its synaesthetic power that makes it akin to a goosebumps type of impro in a jazz jam. It is the *punctum* of the inexplicable and unexpected that we live for. One can understand music just as much as look at a scene on the street, perhaps document it. This attitude is aptly described by Roland Barthes as the *studium* or by Irit Rogoff in another context as the "good eye": imagery the studious eye contextualises, understands

¹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 32.

and explains.² As opposed to this, punctum (in a way connected to Rogoff's idea of the curious eye) is all about the special affect the perceiving subject feels when looking at an image: an "element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me",³ creates a situation rising out of the single visual encounter that is always already embodied, visceral, and elicits a haptic response.

Street photography – this special, virtually undefinable branch of documentary photography that defies any attempt at canonization as it is capable of tearing down the walls of the gallery just to merge back into the material it had been broken off of – and jazz together is something in the experience of indulging that pierces, questions, turns everything upside down, offering alternative points of entry into the carefully designed and designated frame, threatening to disrupt, to deconstruct, to reveal something the *studium* missed or refused to do. This happens when the arbitrary overcomes the well-composed, the pre-written melody thrusts open the hidden door of counterpoint.

It is quite natural to talk about audio-visual media in terms of film, for instance, however, it is rather uncommon to connect the still image with sound. The reason for this is obvious: while the cinema has always utilised different strata of the audiosphere or soundscape (even in the age of silent cinema: Edison's first attempts at recording the moving image were connected with the phonograph, and silent movie projections were never entirely silent), photography seems to operate entirely in the realm of the visible, without any dialogue with other channels of the perceptive apparatus.

IMPRO

In 1957, W. Eugene Smith decided to move onto the 4th floor of 821 Sixth Avenue in New York City's wholesale flower district and spent all his money on photographic and audio recording equipment. His goal was to record everything around him – to create an audio-visual database of the loft and its immediate surroundings that potentially documents the stimuli of all senses. The multimedial and ever growing project had an interwoven nature of street (noises and images), photography, jazz music (jam sessions and night time gigs), phone conversations, tv programs (news and shows), radio (classical and jazz music along with different programs throughout the day), and last – but certainly not least – conversations among the musicians and people visiting the loft. All this pulsating

² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 25; Irit Rogoff, "Studying Visual Culture," in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 18.

³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

through the architectural structure of the building complete with the creaking of the stairwell, the openings and closings of doors and windows, footsteps, hammering of a nail: life happening.

The project has grown into something gigantic, more than it was originally intended to be. During living in the loft, Smith took and developed approximately 40000 photographs both inside and outside (looking through the windows, visually connecting the jams of musicians with the noises of the street),⁴ blurring the boundaries of the walls, creating a sensual bridge through visual rhythm, as oftentimes he photographed the same sections of the street at different times during the day or week. The rhythm outside punctuated the music inside and vice versa.

To match the visual connection of inside and outside, he recorded some 4000 hours of sound (music, late night talk shows, telephone and real life conversations etc.) on 1740 reel-to-reel tapes.⁵ While there is no perceptive map to combine the visual with the audio material, the simple routine of the ever present music and noises through the processes of taking and developing and exhibiting the images suggests an order in the database chaos. Indeed, Smith himself kept arranging and rearranging the sequences of the photographs to match the feelings and emotions of the moments he took them with the auratic ensemble of the occasions.⁶

One might say that the melancholy of the grain in the image emulates and recalls the raspy air resonating from the reed of the saxophone as it announces itself into the harmony. In this multisensorial arrangement, the project connected photography, jazz music, everyday life and the streets through – literally – the pulsing of the loft, of the building. As Bill Peirce, once assistant to the loft, notes on Smith's involvement in the 2015 documentary on the Jazz Loft project: "He was just there as part of what was happening. Like part of the band. He was part of the rhythm section. Only instead of playing the drums or the bongos or the bass or the piano, he was playing his camera."⁷

The design of the project (never fully designed, just as in a great jazz jamming session) is not only about recording and documenting what was happening during the period of the Jazz Loft, but is also about how the senses can be connected in a flux of perceptual input – and how one medium can evoke feelings and memories characteristic of

⁴ Sam Stephenson, *The Jazz Loft Project: Photographs and Tapes of W. Eugene Smith from 821 Sixth Avenue, 1957–1965* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sara Fishko, *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*, dir. Fishko, New York: Lumiere Productions, 2015, 87 min.

⁷ Ibid.

another. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Smith created a practical ensemble of some kind of phenomenology of photography, in which the image – reaching beyond the limits of the visual – works in tandem with the aural and audio environment, mutually extending the immersive nature of the experience.

The Jazz Loft project is haptic to the core, it is tangible, as the materiality of the multi-medial database amounts to an immersive, visceral experience, bursting with life without constraints, bordering on the transmedial, as one part of the medial endeavour flows into the other, not repeating or documenting but continuing, extending it. Michel Chion's coinage of *synchresis* seems to be a fitting critical trope here: it is composed of synchronism and synthesis, being "the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time. This join results independently of any rational logic."⁸ Photographs seem to be the anchor for this kind of synchresis, providing a visual map for the free flow of voices, noises and music inside and outside the loft: the walls, the floor, the desks, the chairs, virtually, whole rooms covered with photographs provide a navigable map, de-acousmatising the audible into something tangible, the images visualising sound.⁹

The way images tie inside and outside, life and art, acousmatic and deacousmatised sound together is reminiscent of how Jacques Lacan made an attempt at redefining the Freudian *unheimlich*, or the uncanny. For Lacan, the *unheimlich* is always a multisensorial and psychic phenomenon, which concerns the emplacement of the subject in the particular experience. It is the *extimate*, a term he coined to appropriate the Freudian term *Unheimlich* as related to the dichotomy of inside and outside, subject and other, the Real and the Symbolic. As Mladen Dolar explains,

It points neither to the interior nor to the exterior, but is located there where the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety. The extimate is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body; in a word, it is *unheimlich*.¹⁰

The extimate can also be linked to another Lacanian term, the *objet a*, that which is always already missing from the definition of the subject that in turn defines it: for instance, voice and gaze – objects that once had been somehow connected to the subject and

⁸ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 63.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ Mladen Dolar, "I Shall Be With You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny," *October* 58 (Autumn, 1991): 6.

got foreclosed. But here foreclosure is not a clear denial: it is the incorporation of the very act of foreclosure, which takes the foreclosed object right into the core of subjectivity.¹¹ This is precisely the collapse of the inside into the outside and vice versa, the knot of the de-acousmatised auratic environment located in the visual field mapped through and in the photographs.

The candid and intimate images Smith created are visual signs of an uncanny return of the intimate moment of the clash of subjectification and objectification in the making of those photographs. The intimacy of those moments when Smith clicked the shutter turns into extimacy precisely because they tie to the impossibility of the aural design of the loft and its outside coming together through the scopic ensemble. Thus, acting as a kind of literal “screen memory” (from the Freudian term playfully arriving in the loft’s project),¹² the photographs covering the empty spaces of the room resonate with both the particular sounds of the moment of the shutter clicks and also of their being spotted as part of the audial wallpaper of the womb-like spatial organisation of the building.

This is how the *objet a* becomes extimate: this is precisely how through Smith’s photography jazz, street noises and happenings, all the sounds on the tapes return from the tangible database of the project. This is also how, with the same gesture, the visual points of view recreated in the pictures collide with the multiple points of audition provided by the scattered lines of microphones recording music and the inner life of the loft building (literally, as mics were drilled into the ceiling and stairs as well). As the subject is drawn into the experience of the Jazz Loft project, they cannot but find themselves in the multisensorial and primarily visceral flux of immersion that defies objectivity and studious critical framing, raising curiosity and giving way to the piercing-tickling act of the *punctum*.

CHORUS

So how do we *feel* photographs? It is easier to think of how to feel music, jazz is all about feeling, as a matter of fact, all our senses are connected to feeling but our sight. Yet, as Barthes alleges, once we venture into the shady territories of unconstrained semiosis in the image, we risk being pierced, shaken, pricked – in other words, we are haptically involved in conjuring feelings out of the picture. Punctum ties the Thing (*das Ding*) into the

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Screen Memories,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 1999), 299–322.

thing (*die Sache*), the uncanny thing that haunts the observer by its very thingness that unites object and image.¹³

Feeling and the critical assessment of it seems to be tricky at first, since theory usually focuses on some particular sense (e.g. studying film as a visual artefact, looking at its editing technique, composition, colour scheme even the material) rather than assessing the whole sensorial spectrum (after all, we sit in a darkened room focusing our attention on the cinema event with the presence and active engagement of our entire body). Moreover, “feeling photographs” seems to be a strange approach inasmuch as a photographic image is there to behold through vision, part of the scopic regime in the immediate mastery of the subject. However, the way a photographic image engages the subject through visibility is always already imbued with a spectrum of sensorial data: colours, shapes, textures, shadows and highlights emulate emotions, smells, touch and spatial depth, in a string of perceptive hits, resulting in a truly visceral and bodily response beyond the obvious spectatorial experience connected to the eye.

To help us navigate the multiplicity of sensorial interactions when looking at photographs, I refer to Laura Marks’s term “haptic visibility” in the first place, which she uses as “a metaphor to emphasise the way film signifies through its materiality, through a contact between perceiver and object represented” suggesting that “the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one’s eyes.”¹⁴ While Marks uses film as a primary example for her analysis, the ways she tackles the filmic image is indicative of photography as well, therefore I intend to adapt her approach as a general framework for discussing visual media (and beyond). The argument for the haptic nature of looking finds its roots in Henri Bergson’s conviction that memory is not something virtual and mental but is embedded in the senses.¹⁵ Marks uses the term “haptic” not as a preference of tactile experience but as borrowed from the differentiation made by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari between the haptic and the optical, in which the haptic becomes a signifier for every sense involved beyond the purely visual.¹⁶

Clearly, the term “haptic visibility” is therefore not connected exclusively to the cinema, but is a metaphor for the perception of visual material in general, as photography has close ties with memory as almost all critics of the medium argue. If we agree with Bergson on memory being embedded in the senses, or in other words, embodied, pho-

¹³ Batchen, *Forget Me Not*, 32.

¹⁴ Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

tography may be the *parexcellence* medium to evoke a bodily response through the act of looking. It is then not just an organisation of visual signs, but – as Marks notes with reference to cinema – “it bears witness to an object and transfers the presence of that object to viewers.”¹⁷ This makes it possible for the viewer

to respond to the image in an intimate, embodied way, and thus facilitate the experience of other sensory impressions as well. These sense experiences are not separate, of course. They combine to form culturally defined “sensuous geographies”, or our sensory experiences of place. More fundamentally, they inform each person’s sensorium, the bodily organization of sense experience.¹⁸

Turning to a Deleuzian reconfiguration of memory through the mediation of the cinema, Marks claims that “if vision can be understood to be embodied, touch and other senses necessarily play a part in vision.”¹⁹ Following this logic, she argues that visuality (perceived through visual media) “functions like the sense of touch,” activating “a memory that necessarily involves all the senses.”²⁰

The activation of the senses through visual means is a pivotal function and working logic of photography in general, and in Smith’s project in particular. The synaesthetic modality that is at play in Vivian Sobchack’s definition of the cinesthetic subject “who, through an embodied vision in-formed by the knowledge of the other senses, ‘makes sense’ of what it is to ‘see’ a movie – both ‘in the flesh’ and as it ‘matters’.”²¹ While Sobchack’s examples come from the cinema event, her descriptions relate to how the viewers experience (perceive and make sense, or even, feel) the image in front of them and are virtually akin to the perception of the photographic image. For the experience that enhances the sensuous moment of looking is effectively touching it and being touched by it at the very same time,²² that results in experiencing the image as “both here and there” rather than locating the visual and sensual experience either in or outside of the frame of the image.

The recreation of the inside and outside of the loft through photographic images is therefore how the project opens up for us, contemporary onlookers, invited into the

¹⁷ Ibid., xvii.

¹⁸ Ibid., 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 70–1.

²² Ibid., 71.

smelly and gloomy rooms, unable to contain the general olfactorial orchestra of the flower district. Following Kaja Silverman's treatise on photography, one might say that Smith's project properly analogizes the referent,²³ that is, it does not strive to compose and arrange the media elements that are records of the partial perceptions but keeps them intact and interactive in a potentially dialogic nature. Silverman's claim is that while we think of the history and technology of photography as a development and evolution of the camera that is operated by the human master, in effect it is the world around us that reveals itself for us. In other words, it is not the vision of the creator that frames the image, but the way reality allows us to see it.²⁴ This version of the history of visibility (as it transcends that of photography only) has long been central to Silverman's endeavour to develop an alternative way of seeing in critical framework. One cannot but read her *World Spectators* (where she connects the concept and role of the gaze to Roger Callois's notion of mimicry and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodied vision) as a novel take on the earlier Lacanian-induced version of the deconstruction of the power of the look to shift attention to the gaze that is outside of the subject's mastery and control.²⁵ In a genuinely anamorphic move, Silverman shifts from the post-structuralist notions to open up the discourse for a more inclusive and phenomenologically oriented account of how images allow us to peek into the ontological connection to reality through sensorial experience.²⁶

Anamorphosis was also central to how Jacques Lacan envisioned the scopical relation in which the subject comes to be seen – curiously, also taking Merleau-Ponty as a reference point, taking his phenomenological insights as psychoanalytical cues (the chapters in the part *"Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a"* are in fact meticulous studies on Merleau-Ponty).²⁷ The oft-cited example that he used to shed light on the structural ambiguity of the mastery over the visual event is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, a painting that depicts two gentlemen dressed to communicate their socio-political status surrounded by objects that also express and thus strengthen the "vision" one studiously comprehends.²⁸ This is precisely how Barthes defines the studium: enlisting the knowable, creating a data-

²³ Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10–1.

²⁵ Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 134–38.

²⁶ Silverman, *Miracle of Analogy*, 12.

²⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (London: Vintage, 1998), 65–119.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

base of perception provides a masterly position in which the onlooker (or the subject in Lacanian parlance) occupies the vantage point of the look. There is, however, a curious, undecipherable, therefore unexplorable and inexplicable object (that seems to be a non-object) at the front of the painting's space that eludes comprehension but insists by its very unintegratable state. As Lacan describes, it is only upon leaving the room of exhibition and looking back away that the subject is able to fathom the pictorial arrangement of the object – a skull, the realisation of which makes the rest of the painting recess into invisibility.²⁹ This *trompe l'oeil* effect, however, is not a mere visual gimmick: what it reveals is that the masterly position that the subject occupied could not frame the skull, and thus the skull had been sort of "looking at" the subject before the subject could really take a look at it, displacing the position of the subject and rendering it as the place of the object. In a chiasmic fashion, once again, subject and object come to be mediated through what Lacan calls the screen,³⁰ the unidentifiable, invisible point where inside turns outside and in reverse.

Silverman stays on the level of the visual in her new conceptualisation of the history of photography, but her argument – relying on the concept of a reality of experience rather than an idealised concept of what is outside the purview of the subject dislocated from its frame, dispositioned into a separate, objective, masterly point in the scopic scheme of a scene as an observer – can easily be extended to invite the haptic through vision. The visual scenes composed through the photographic frames are also envisioned (or analogised) soundscapes that dictate the rhythmic pattern for the sequence of the developed images pasted onto every square centimetre of the walls. It makes a circle, or better yet, a loop: the way the microphones pick up the sounds and rhythms of human traffic and chatter through the building, punctuated by the jazz sessions, engulfed by the street noises coming from the district are photographed by Smith's cameras only to be developed and pulled into a constant re-organisation as a sequence back on the walls, where the process seems to have started. This is how the loft becomes the sensuous geography through the haptic image and the chiasm it creates via its ongoing referential capacity to all the aural and tactile feeling.

Analogising the referent through photography is, therefore, the very process of feeding the multisensorial mobius strip through which the Jazz Loft project can be comprehended in its entirety. Images of the street and street life, gestures and movements of cars and pedestrians enter the inside of the loft, literally putting on a second skin as the

²⁹ Ibid., 92.

³⁰ Ibid., 108.

wallpaper covering the very walls that would serve as borders between inside and outside – a spatial geography rendered obsolete. Instead, it is the sensual aspect of the unnoticeable switch between inside and outside, between real and analogy that brings us towards the feeling the haptic nature of Smith's project amounts to.

OUTRO / CODA

The zig-zagging of streets and sidewalks and cars and pedestrians amount to an orchestration of the city that forges a new rhythm to life – other than the dichotomous constitutive of nature. Street photography evokes the pulsating bebop to forge a lasting memory of city life, visually framing the visceral: sounds and smells, tactile impressions and taste, creating a synaesthesia reminiscent of Gillespie's trumpet solos or Monk's unruly piano raves. The click of the shutter, the chick of the hi-hat; the drag of the winder, the rustling of the snare drum – all composed, visually or musically. The street comes alive with all its bustling sensorial stimuli by which the photography comes to be jazzed: tactile, material, and haptic, imbuing the here-and-now with the concrete sense of the then-and-there.

Photographs entomb the presence of people unwittingly working together on a multimedial and multi-sensorial project, mapped onto constantly decentralised surfaces, opening the closing doors and windows and closing in on the outside. Engulfing and spurting out: inside and outside indistinguishable, street noise and jazz fusing into a hitherto unimaginable rhythmic and musical ensemble. The images glued to a three-dimensional spatial arrangement analogise the sounds and voices pulsing, resonating, beating through the strata of bricks and mortar, of membranes and molecules of the magnetic tapes held in canisters like exposed rolls of film, rolling into endlessness – and then back to themselves, de-acousmatised.

Smith leans out of his window on the 4th floor of 821 Sixth Avenue, his lens aimed at the traffic, trying to catch movements, gestures, feelings, lights and shadows, smells, voices: the street. The click of the shutter, the zipping of the winder fall in rhythm with the drums and take the beat through the open window, to the street, and the street responds. The endless to and fro, the chiasm opens up into a mobius strip, one side of it leading to become the other when crossing. Optical, literary and aural chiasms all collapse into the haptic experience of the project.