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Tactile epistemology: sensoria and the postcolonial

Abstract

In this article the author focuses on the so called “tactile epistemology” in postcolonial studies – different cognitive and representational modes that enable create subversive narrations negotiating new relations between centre and margins. Affective, multisensory, synaesthetic body is an archive of power relations, an experience of colonization and – most of all – a discursive transgression, reversing ideology based on the Western eye. The main goal of this article is to present three most influential theoretical stances connecting sensoria with the Other. The concepts of Laura U. Marks, Milena Marinkova, and Sara Ahmed are illustrated with the examples from Claire Denis’ and Urszula Antoniak’s oeuvre.

Keywords: tactile epistemology, senses, embodiment, Laura U. Marks, Sara Ahmed, Milena Marinkova

The distance from this sentence to your eye is my sculpture.

(Ken Friedman, Fluxus score, 1971)

Will Higbee coined the term “cinema of transvergence” in order to enable film scholars to “better appreciate how postcolonial and diasporic cinemas engage, function and produce meaning within and across national and transnational positionings.”¹ Through this notion he tries to ephasize the possible inversion between centre and margin, the dynamics of differences, and the negotiation of meanings and power relations. Furthermore, the concept alters cinematic experience by changing the form of storytelling. Its focus on minorities renarrates traditional relations in movies and its deconstruction of the cinematic form

¹ Higbee Will, „Beyond the (trans)national: toward a cinema of transvergence in postcolonial and diasporic francophone cinema(s)”, *Studies in French Cinema*, 7:2, p. 80.

constitutes the apology of *différance*. One of the most important methods of deploying it is, as Laura U. Marks calls it, a tactile epistemology.²

Affective and sensuous incentives improve subversive narrations in postcolonial prism. Body language helps in coping with dominant discourses and in expressing the experience of the other – the experience of physical and mental colonization. Marks introduced term “haptic visuality”, which highlights the meaning of defiance and a fact that receiving input is influenced by the experience of migration, exile, dispersion, eradication, etc. Such scholars as Marks, Milena Marinkova or Sara Ahmed, in their critique of the Western discourse of the other, confide in a multisensory experience and memory of senses. They link this discourse to ocularcentrism and – taking Foucauldian approach to depict mastering and objectification of others – reject gaze as a form of wielding power. We can find a cinematic depiction of this formula in *Black Venus* (2010, Abdellatif Kechiche) opening scene where the body of an enslaved heroine is being objectified by scientific (and, therefore, disciplinary) discourse. Another cinematic example is *Yes* (2004, Sally Potter) – a love affair between Irish-American biologist and Lebanese chef (medic doctor before immigration) is conflicted by stereotypical views and cultural prejudices. Their bodies „remember” uneven relations between centre and margin.

For this reason scholars like Marks and Marinkova focus on the body. The issue of embodiment is not only an individual matter, but also a map of cultural differences and power relations. Moreover, a multisensory perspective enables disrupting dominant discourses and creates a new language entangled in the postcolonial discourse. As Marinkova writes, “the tangible (in reality and in representation) becomes an uneasy witness to the impossibility of narrating incommensurable languages and experiences.”³ Tactile epistemology provides an alternative; it supports subversion.

Laura U. Marks: the skin of the other

In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* Laura U. Marks writes about a “turn to the nonvisual senses [which] has been in part a response to the perceived imperialism of vision, the alignment of visual information with knowledge and control.”⁴ American researcher finds a negotiating potential in haptic visuality – an embodied experience can be a very useful term for describing movies and their reception in the context of dispersion: “Haptic visuality implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that

² See: Marks Laura U., *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press) (2004).

³ Marinkova Milena, *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group) (2011), p. 17.

⁴ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 194.

characterizes optical viewing.”⁵ Marks reckons that this type of visuality is connected with discrediting viewing habits, enabling different level of involvement, suggesting the shift of meaning, and even giving the impression of seeing something for the first time. This perceptive renewal is not only a matter of aesthetics, but also ethics. The body might be a foundation for the redefinition of representational system. Based-on-body encounter with the other rejects a negative tendency to annex margins which is typical for the Western ocularcentrism. It emphasizes the incompatibility of some languages and experiences rather than the illusion of the possible identification.

In *Touch. Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* Marks writes about the hapticity as founded not on touch itself, but on body – viewers should stay on the image’s surface, contemplate its texture, shape, colour, etc. and feel affective resonance through them.⁶ Intercultural cinema is shaped by cultural memory, fingerprints left not by the disgraced, ideological and orientalist eye but an ambivalent sense of touch, which recalls aggression and enables emancipation through different bodily discourses. Marks seems to agree with Jennifer Fisher who contradicts Elizabeth Grosz’s statement that touch has no memory: “touch implicates what is most clearly the performative present of aesthetic experience.”⁷ It invokes memory so “[t]o describe the effects of such video [or, in general, cinematic – M.S.] works requires paying attention to the viewer’s body, specifically what happens when the video image dissolves out toward the viewer and invites the viewer to invest all his or her senses in the act of seeing.”⁸ Viewers open themselves for the experience of the other.

Haptic visuality and sensuous aesthetics create counter-memory in spite of the discourse of “empowered eye.” Marks writes about the Western type of visuality which objectifies others, and separates and masters external and internal words.⁹ One cannot trust visual information and traditional techniques used in postcolonial statements as they are made of oppressive material. In a spirit of Edward Said: eyes are tools of imperialistic inclinations. Do not believe what you see – it is only an ideological discourse. It is possible to gain knowledge through physical contact,¹⁰ but one should remember that visceral, haptic or tactile epistemology can be used arbitrarily. And this is the case of Terrence Malick’s *The New World* (2005) where Powatan Native American tribe’s communication – or tactile epistemology – is depicted as simpler and harmonious but primitive, insufficient and limited. John teaches Pocahontas how to speak – through knowledge he reaffirms his authority as male and “civilised” (an already ideologically and eurocentrically inflicted term).

⁵ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 185.

⁶ Marks Laura U., *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press) (2002), p. 13.

⁷ Fisher Jennifer, *Relational Sense: Towards A Haptic Aesthetics*, <http://www.david-howes.com/senses/Fisher.htm>, date accessed 20 September 2016.

⁸ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 189.

⁹ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 133.

¹⁰ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 138.

This example shows possible limitations of haptic poetics but simultaneously it legitimizes this aesthetics by underlining the cultural and political dimension of the sensorium. Returning to Marks, “[u]ltimately phenomenology can account for how the body encodes power relations somatically. It can acknowledge that embodiment is a matter of individual lifemaps as well as cultural difference. These matters are important for understanding intercultural experience, where traumas and more ordinary histories become encoded in the body. When intercultural films and videos appeal to the different power relations involved in looking and in touching, they remind us that these power relations are built into cultural organizations of perception.”¹¹ Therefore tactile epistemology enables dialogue between an image and its viewer – through his or her body. Marks makes a list of possible aesthetic means – for example blurred, grained image and decaying film.¹² Phenomenological intentionality and activation of the viewer though, is what interests her most in subversive potential of haptic visuality. Marks states that “[t]he ideal relationship between viewer and image in optical visuality tends to be one of mastery, in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision. The ideal relationship between viewer and image in haptic visuality is one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose herself in the image, to lose her sense of proportion.”¹³ Tactility is constructed around dialogue – oscillation between identification and immersion, dialectical movement between surface and depth. Interaction supersedes cinematic illusion, while making place for alternative narrations or simply for the story of the other.

Claire Denis’ oeuvre helps embody theoretical approaches to sensoria and the postcolonial. The French director narrates postcolonial relations using mostly multisensory aesthetic. Films such as *Chocolate* (1988) show how an embodied vision develops engaged spectatorship. Denis is known for rejecting classical film conventions, using static and extended shots without many dialogues, being sensitive to the form of an image, and creating poetic, sensual atmosphere. These distinctive traits place her in the middle of haptic cinema’s concepts. The director focuses on her characters’ bodies and their relations with space. Her trade marks converge with her autobiography and political views too – raised in West Africa in few French colonies, Denis shows engagement in postcolonial issues which is perfectly depicted in her debut film.

Chocolate tells a story of a young woman, France, who comes back to Cameroon where she lived as a child. She reminisces her childhood and her family’s houseboy, named Protée. Names of these characters are significant as they unveil power relations in French colony. As a girl, France was fascinated with him who seemed to be very different from her family and other employers and simultaneously she was humiliating him transferring her elders’ condescension. Nonetheless, their proximity was starting to dissolve borders between center and margins embodied in

¹¹ Marks Laura U. (2004), pp. 152-153.

¹² See: Marks Laura U. (2004), pp. 171-176.

¹³ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 184.

these characters. This is a work in progress, searching – or building – an intimate relations which was not easy. There is also a counterexample – France's mother feeling sexual tension towards Protée and, after being rejected (because of her master attitude mostly), forcing her husband to post the houseboy to outdoor duties.

In one of the sequences the father explains France what the horizon line is: a line which does not exist in physical sense but is still recognized by everyone. It is not only a symbol of racial boundaries – the definition shows how the figure of the other operates as an embodied entity as long as the horizon line is something that is embed in space. The hapticity of Denis' film can be shown in three short scenes. First one represents the mutual fascination and blurs seemingly natural lines. Protée, France and her mother visit Nansen, a fanatical missionary – an artificial dialogue between the priest and the young woman is being intersected with strange *rite de passage*: Protée and France watching dead, bitten house animals when the houseboy puts a crow's tarsus near girl's hand and smears her arm with the bird's blood. The director emphasises skin and touch in a close-up. Hapticity is hightened through cross-cutting with a theatrical scene (in long shot) in which, main representatives of colonial power are involved. An oscillation between optical and haptical visuality confers a texture to moving image. Viscerality of this sequence shows that real dialogue is not necessary lingual and colour of skin can be hidden. Although the second mentioned sequence presents an over-exposure of the skin of the other. In his free time Protée was trying to have a shower when he was peeped by France and her mother coming back from a stroll. This event causes a breakdown – Protée starts crying as he feels abused and objectified by the (white) gaze. His subjectivity and embodiment are limited to the level of the skin and its colour causing internalization of being not-a-norm. There is no balance between embodiment and image in the imperial eye paradigm.

The last scene I chose to explain tactility of power relations in *Chocolate* is near the movie's finale: Denis shows her deliberate use of tactile epistemology and haptic aesthetics in her films since she believes in skin as a medium of cultural memory and traumatic encounters. During the night France comes to visit Protée who is now assigned to backyard workshop. They are staring at each other silently while he grabbes a pipe and suggests her to do so too, ignoring the fact that it was hot and could burn their palms. After that he leaves and disappears in the dark. It is another example of cancelling borders between races, but also of leaving a trace; the memory makes Protée France's eternal companion but associates it with pain. This connotation reappears in Denis' cinema. She came back to West Africa with *White Material* (2009) in which the interference of bodily boundaries is shown as a ferocious, but essential attempt to break the power relations. Rape is inflicted on viewers affectively: “[w]hen vision is like touch, the object's touch back may be like a caress, though it may also be violent, as Steven Shaviro argues – a violence not

toward the image but toward the viewer.”¹⁴ Viewers are touched and forced to ethically driven reception, in spite of a pleasurable identification.

Milena Marinkova: micropolitical filming

Marks’ theses are very influential and not only among film studies scholars. Amongst her followers, Milena Marinkova, who is known rather for her research on the ground of Canadian literature, uses the term „haptic visuality” to describe postcolonial entanglement and transnational issues in her book *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing* she used "haptic visuality" to describe postcolonial entanglement and transnational issues. She argues – after Marks and Merleau-Ponty – that touch cannot be reduced to skin, but it is rather connected with embodiment. We should not locate it in one organ; it is dispersed, permeable and not isolated from the rest of sensorium. So "embodied haptic acts of proximity" transverse "the personal by social and political structures,"¹⁵ and blur boundaries between art and reality, representation and body. Furthermore the body, being under the influence of dominant regimes, can provide a ground for redefinition of these regimes with their discourses. Marinkova notices that the embodiment of Western gaze dislocates the main direction of perception process – viewers get their attention directed to their viewing practices. For Canadian scholar, it is a matter of style: multisensory, fluid and open to non-normative connections. "Such an aesthetic forges an intimately embodied and ethically responsible relationship among audience, author, and text"¹⁶ and it has an empowering micropolitical potential. Haptic aesthetics and embodiment are individual and collective issues, subjective and social simultaneously. Personal is political. Bodies are political. Haptic cinema can rejoice "in the exploration of the intimate space of the bodily and the microsocial space of the interpersonal."¹⁷

Marinkova reconsiders an identification referring to Dominick LaCapra’s concept:

He has argued that art should invite „empathic unsettlement” by relying on the reader’s/viewer’s affective response to another but also recognizing the differences between them. This formulation is premised on the intersubjective power of affect to move and be moved, and thus transcend the boundaries of the self and encounter difference. The encounter, however, is not followed by a return to sameness through crude identification — recognizing oneself in the

¹⁴ Marks Laura U. (2004), p. 184.

¹⁵ Marinkova Milena, p. 4.

¹⁶ Marinkova Milena, p. 4.

¹⁷ Marinkova Milena, p. 4.

other and thus sympathize with them — but by the ethical recognition of the opacity and unassimilability of alterity.¹⁸

Canadian scholar puts an emphasis on rejecting identification as a psychological relationship with characters. Being founded on gaze, it is not neutral, and the impression of being natural is strictly ideological. Eye, contemplation, perception — those are tools of knowledge which can be a form of aggression and wielding power. Gaze colonizes others and produces subalterns; its mechanisms and intents are obscured by film grammar. Therefore, cinema requires a new language. Marinkova thinks that there is a solution from cultural usurpation of the other — the ocularcentrism and its mastering inclinations can be relinquished. "Instead of supplementing the already available knowledge, however, the tangible (in reality and in representation) becomes an uneasy witness to the impossibility of narrating incommensurable languages and experiences, and an unsettling trace of proximity that disrupts dominant discourses."¹⁹

The power–knowledge dynamics can be exposed by a subversive alternation from gaze to skin, from center to margin and from imperial discourse to "Philomela's tapestry" — new ways of expressing stories of misery and experienced cruelty. *Nude Area* (2014, Urszula Antoniak) can be a cinematic example of these thesis. The film starts with a quotation from Roland Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, yet the main topic is not love but rather seduction understood as a war. The main tool in this battle is the eye — it tracks, peeps, scans, leers, ogles, scrutinizes; it imposes conditions and demands mutuality. Moreover, gaze can be accepted or rejected by the body. Seducing is violent — people try to enforce their will upon each other. In Antoniak's film the impression of fighting for dominant position is emphasized by different cultural and ethnic background of two lovers: European, rich, liberal Naomi and Arabic, working class, conservative Fama. Naomi provokes other girl, seduces her and gets control over her using both her gaze and language. Fama is more humble, submissive — she surrenders and protects only one intimate part: her hair.

The first sequence, in which we can see body parts washed over under the shower, is a key to the aesthetics of the film. The skin is shown in close-ups, revealed in its very tactility, and the entire scene is suggestive, erotic and sensual. Next ones are, on the contrary, very static. First we see Fama's face in a portrait-like close-up. It appears three times anticipating three movie parts. Next we can see Naomi in a tram or rather her reflection — she is an observer, maybe even a predator. She initiates their meeting and subordinates Fama initially. In the restaurant, where Muslim girl works as a waitress, Naomi humiliates her only to prepare a spectacle of apology later. After, she dresses up like her lover, putting a wig on her head even. Naomi is avid, voracious and simply fascinated by Fama's sensual beauty and ethnically-founded mysteriousness. During her first visit in her lover's room Naomi touches and smells everything. The scene resembles an act of appropriation in

¹⁸ Marinkova Milena, p. 16.

¹⁹ Marinkova Milena, p. 17.

which girl's gaze was only a prelude to total enthrallment. Fama surrenders and open up for Naomi's sensuous insatiability, letting her touch and smell also her hair, a tactile proof of being the other. At some point roles are changing – Fama distances herself from Naomi. She gives her a handful of hair she cut in the process of emancipation from a colonizer. The other learns how to gain empowerment – through the reversal of gaze and the exploitation of touch.

As *Nude Area* shows, touch and hapticity can be very ambivalent, and Marinkova evokes skeptical voices in her monography. Claude Gandelman "points at the (ab)use of hapticity in ideological discourse"²⁰ – marxist critics reproach haptic paradigm as an aesthetisation of political discourse. Ernst Gombrich alerts to embracing hapticity "for compromised historicist discourses"²¹ and Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard completely reject an emancipating potential of the affect. David Howes notices that affects, tactility and multisensory apparatus advocate the "sensual" logic of the late capitalism.²² But it is Sara Ahmed who actually presents more balanced but still very productive theses.

Sara Ahmed: (e)strange(d) encounters

One of scholars Marinkova mentions as example of having a skeptical attitude to haptic cinema is Sara Ahmed. The author of *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* focuses on a subaltern treated as a stranger by many techniques of differentiation. Her book introduces an interesting approach to the other – being a stranger is not an ontological issue, but epistemological one. It is a matter of recognizing others and oneself in an environmental network. Ahmed – not especially interested in art works – creates a critical standpoint for "sensual postcolonialism."

Ahmed writes that "there are some-bodies who simply are strangers, and who pose danger in their very co-presence in a given street,"²³ but she also points out at an opposing worldview, where we can find the illusion of an ultimate appropriation. Both stances develop "the fetishism of figures"²⁴ in which case a stranger becomes an abstraction deprived of political meaning and the particularity of an embodiment. He or she is needed only to finalize the process of an individuation. "The journey towards the stranger becomes a form of self-discovery, in which the stranger functions yet again to establish and define the 'I'."²⁵ This is not only the case of "eye-to-eye" meetings, but also, "skin-to-skin" encounters. This "meeting is not between two subjects who are equal and in harmony; the meeting is

²⁰ Marinkova Milena, p. 21.

²¹ Marinkova Milena, p. 21.

²² Marinkova Milena, p. 21.

²³ Ahmed Sara, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London and New York: Routledge) (2000), p. 3.

²⁴ Ahmed Sara, p. 4.

²⁵ Ahmed Sara, p. 6.

antagonistic."²⁶ Ahmed refers in the same way to colonialists' discourse: it is "not only the territorial domination of one culture by another, but also forms of discursive appropriation: other cultures become appropriated into the imaginary globality of the colonizing nation."²⁷ And thus the status of proximity – and tactility – appears ambivalent being entangled in "regimes of difference,"²⁸ and we should remember that "the strange encounter is played out on the body, and is played out with the emotions."²⁹ To sum up, affective and sensuous apparatus may not always be a perfect method(ology), but it is essential for giving back the other his or her voice and body.

Ahmed emphasizes that viewer or reader has a "close" bond with the body of text which "demands a more responsible reading, a reading which admits to its limits, its partiality and its fragility."³⁰ The impression of "being touched" reinforces not only aesthetic reactions, but also ethical ones. There is a shift of meanings and boundaries, bodily and subjective borders. As Elisabeth Grosz mentions, "It is in no sense a natural body, for it is as culturally, racially, sexually, possibly even as class distinctive, as it would be clothed"³¹ – and although Ahmed writes about it as an example of a theory avoiding analysis, she agrees with the necessity of approaching bodies in their culturally inflicted matter, not only representations. It is not the surface, but the very "effect of the surface"³² which interests her most. Skin can be a visual mark of difference and "a moment of undecidability"³³ – a gate or leakage, where the subject risks its interiority and its integrity. This thesis echoes Laura U. Marks' statement about hapticity as a form of dissolving oneself in a contact with image. The difference is placed between antagonism and eroticism which, according to Marks, drives haptical and optical visibility, whereas for Ahmed it is all about conflict. Adding affects to haptic theories, she treats skin as a canvas "where the intensity of emotions such as shame are registered (...) the skin registers how bodies are touched by others."³⁴ Touch, a "fleshy metonymym,"³⁵ expresses a tension between particular bodies and social space.

Although the main phenomenological reference for multisensory and haptic theories is Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed's book correlates with Bernhard Waldenfels' *Phenomenology of the Alien*.³⁶ German philosopher reconsiders alien-experience as a phenomenon that permeates our everyday experiences with immediate implications for the social, political, and ethical life. He draws boundaries between human beings in process of perception, bending xenological

²⁶ Ahmed Sara, p. 8.

²⁷ Ahmed Sara, p. 11.

²⁸ Ahmed Sara, p. 13.

²⁹ Ahmed Sara, p. 39.

³⁰ Ahmed Sara, p. 40.

³¹ Grosz Elisabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin) (1994), p. 142.

³² Ahmed Sara, pp. 42-43.

³³ Ahmed Sara, p. 45.

³⁴ Ahmed Sara, p. 45.

³⁵ Ahmed Sara, p. 49

³⁶ See: Waldenfels Bernhard, *Podstawowe motywy fenomenologii obcego*, (Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa) (2009).

phenomenology with material one. We tend to identify ourselves through a separation from milieu – other things, people, places, etc. Our own boundaries are tantamount to the boundaries of the alien, so our relations with the other are a relation of proximity, embodied and haptic. Sara Ahmed's writes that "to withdraw from a relation of physical proximity to bodies recognised as strange is precisely to be touched by those bodies, in such a way that the subject is moved from its place. In this sense, the stranger is always in proximity: a body that is out of place because it has come too close."³⁷ The mechanism is a foundation for such semi-sociological, semi-cinematic structures as exclusion through inclusion. The concept was coined by Giorgio Agamben but Thomas Elsaesser implemented it in film studies describing one scene in *Hidden* (2005, Michael Haneke).³⁸ During dinner in Laurents' house there is a black woman who is physically present but poignantly erased from the rest of company by her total silence. Her presence is emphasized by her skin colour as long as the film's main topic deals with racial and postcolonial issues, and that is why she is exposed and marginalized at the same time. Her alienation is embodied and sensed by the viewers.

For Ahmed and other above mentioned scholars, thinking of skin as always exposed and touchable is paradigmatic – as in the example of Protée, Fama or Saartje. Sensuous, tactile aesthetics emphasizes the oppression of the eye as an organ of domination. Their bodies are colonized but they can find their subjectivity in the embodiment. It can have a therapeutic meaning for the previous "other," shifts his or her cultural position, neutralizes stereotypes and creates a subversive language of transgression. It implicates a non-normative way of viewing engagement with an image – an identification is replaced by an interaction. This tactile epistemology forms a "sculpture" – an almost physical encounter. Haptic or multisensory cinema creates proximity that imposes new ways of contact with the other without usurping rights to his or her identity.

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³⁷ Ahmed Sara, p. 49.

³⁸ Elsaesser Thomas, „Performative Self-Contradictions. Michael Haneke's Mind Games”, in *A companion to Michael Haneke*, ed. Roy Grundmann, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing) (2010), p. 72.

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