

The Haptic Quality of Film: Walter Benjamin and Film Phenomenology



Daniel Mourenza

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Walter Benjamin characterizes film spectatorship as an embodied and sensuous experience. As such, his notion of embodied spectatorship aligns with contemporary theories in film phenomenology that emphasize the role of the body in film experience. Benjamin borrows the term “*taktisch*” from Alois Riegl to refer to a type of reception that emphasizes tactile qualities through optical means. The term has been controversial in Benjamin studies. The editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* considered the word baffling and used *taktil* instead, whereas Tobias Wilke defends the polysemy of *taktisch* as both tactile and tactical. Nonetheless, as early as 1902, Riegl discarded the word *taktisch* as ambiguous and suggested that from then onwards he would use *haptisch*. This article claims that Benjamin should have used the term *haptisch*, for it better renders the bodily oriented reception that he detected in cinemas. Haptics has become a widely used concept in film phenomenology, especially since Laura Marks published *The Skin of Film* to refer to moving images that cannot be apprehended only by sight. Benjamin not only comes close to a similar conception of haptic cinema but also to the proprioceptive qualities of film spectatorship that have been more recently addressed by Scott Richmond. The aim of this article is to introduce Benjamin as a precursor of film phenomenology. First, the article examines how film phenomenology scholars have interpreted and used Benjamin’s work. The central part of the article defends that Benjamin considered that cinema has a “haptic quality” and that, in his conception of film spectatorship, the whole body is involved. Finally, the article contends that Benjamin’s film writings can be considered part of film phenomenology and contribute to current debates about the relationship between the spectator’s body and the film onscreen.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; Film Phenomenology; Haptics; Embodied Spectatorship; Cinema

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (1935-1939), Walter Benjamin develops a film theory in which spectatorship is characterized as sensuous, embodied, and collective.¹ The word that Benjamin uses to address this type of sensuous reception is *taktisch*, a term used by art historian Alois Riegl that could be translated as “tactile”, although, as I argue, it encompasses senses other than touch. This notion of embodied spectatorship aligns with contemporary theories in film phenomenology that emphasize the role of the body in film experience. In fact, central authors of film phenomenology such as Vivian Sobchack, Laura U. Marks and Steven Shaviro have praised the work of Benjamin—together with other authors of classical film theory such as Bela Bálázs, Siegfried Kracauer, Dziga Vertov and Sergei M. Eisenstein—as a first attempt to theorize the relationship between cinema and the sensate bodies

¹ Hereafter, this text will be referred to as the “Work of Art” essay.

of the spectators.² For them, Benjamin stands in contrast to the dominant film theories that followed and focused instead on linguistic and ideological signification. Sobchack even refers to Benjamin's philosophy as a "phenomenologically inflected materialist work" and recognizes that he spoke about the "tactile appropriation" of cinema by spectators.³ Although Benjamin is often quoted by these authors, his role as a precursor to film phenomenology has not been sufficiently emphasized. In this article, I argue that Benjamin developed—or came close to—key concepts in film phenomenology, such as embodied spectatorship, haptic visuality, and proprioceptive cinema. The aim of the article is twofold. On the one hand, I aim to contribute to the scholarship on Walter Benjamin by emphasizing the multisensorial character of his writings on film and, more broadly, art reception. And, on the other hand, I aim to place Benjamin as a relevant author and influence for contemporary writing in film phenomenology.

Film phenomenology emerged in the 1990s as a critique of earlier film theories—rooted in psychoanalysis, semiotics, and ideology critique—that approached film as a text to be deciphered by critics to uncover its correct signification. This rational approach was criticized for promoting an ahistorical, disembodied perspective, suggesting that film critics could somehow detach themselves from any sensation and subjective feeling. In *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Vivian Sobchack employs Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to describe cinema as a lived-body experience that is both sense-making and sensible.⁴ While still influenced by semiotics, Sobchack asserts that perception and expression are embodied activities and that, in cinema, signification is "directly felt, sensuously available to the viewer".⁵ In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Sobchack places greater emphasis on the body as the primary locus of film experience, addressing the sensuous and affective articulation of lived experience in the cinema theatre. She argues that we never experience a film solely through our eyes, we always involve the intellect and all our bodily senses. As Sobchack states, "the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*".⁶

Although Walter Benjamin is not traditionally associated with phenomenology, he was exposed to this philosophical movement during his student years: first in Freiburg, where he read Edmund Husserl; then in Munich, where he attended a course taught by phenomenologist Moritz Geiger; and, finally, in Bern, where he took part in Paul Häberlin's seminar "The Problem of Body and Soul".⁷ Influenced by these ideas, Benjamin authored a series of texts in the late 1910s and early 1920s—"Perception and Body" (1918), "On Love and Related Matters" (1920), "On Horror" (1920–1922) and "Outline of the Psychophysical Problem" (1922–1923)—in which he explored bodily awareness and developed a peculiar phenomenology of embodiment. In these texts, Benjamin formulates a conception of the body that reappears in his more materialist writings from the late 1920s and 1930s. While many scholars perceive a discontinuity between his early writings

² Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 54; Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 171; Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 31–33.

³ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 55.

⁴ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 7.

⁵ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 8–9.

⁶ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 60.

⁷ For a more detailed account of Benjamin's engagement with phenomenology, see Uwe Steiner, "Phänomenologie der Moderne: Benjamin und Husserl," *Benjamin-Studien* 1 (2008): 107–23; Uwe Steiner, "Zu den Sachen selbst...: Phänomenologie und Anthropologie bei Walter Benjamin," in *Walter Benjamins anthropologisches Denken*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan, and Anthony Phelan (Baden-Baden: Rombach Wissenschaft, 2012), 59–94; and Léa Barbisan, "Eccentric Bodies: From Phenomenology to Marxism: Walter Benjamin's Reflections on Embodiment," *Anthropology & Materialism* 1 (2017): 1–15.

and his later materialist works, Uwe Steiner contends that Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay should be seen as a continuation of the theory of perception that he developed in his earlier phenomenological and anthropological texts.⁸ Following Steiner, I argue that the type of embodiment that Benjamin characterizes in the cinema experience departs from these texts on perception.

In this article, I aim to explore the understudied connection between Walter Benjamin and film phenomenology. In the first section, I examine how film phenomenology scholars have interpreted and used Benjamin's work. In the central part of the article, I argue that Benjamin considered that cinema has a "haptic quality" and that its reception involves the entire body and, as such, the proprioceptive system. Finally, I contend that Benjamin's writings on film can be considered part of film phenomenology and that his ideas contribute significantly to current debates in the field, particularly regarding the relationship between the spectator's body and the film onscreen.

Walter Benjamin in Film Phenomenology

Benjamin has been ambivalently used among the main authors of film phenomenology. In *Carnal Thoughts*, Sobchack hails Benjamin as one of the first film theorist to address the corporeal, sensuous relationship between spectators and cinema. However, she seldom engages with him later in the book. Steven Shaviro and Laura U. Marks engage with him more consistently. Interestingly, the concept that seems to interest most of these authors is not to be found in the "Work of Art" essay, but in "On the Mimetic Faculty" (1933).

In *The Cinematic Body*, Shaviro asserts that, for Benjamin, there is no separation between body and image in cinema. He argues that our perception of film is fundamentally corporeal, rather than conscious or rational, and refers to this type of reception as "tactile". For him, the tactile appropriation that Benjamin associates with the new mode of perception in cinema contrasts with the semiotic and psychoanalytic film theories that speak about identification with the protagonist's gaze or with the "omnivoyeuristic" look of the camera. Thus, Shaviro argues that Benjamin's film theory does not presuppose a relationship of mastery between viewer and objects onscreen, whether we refer to it as scopophilia or, simply, film-viewing. Shaviro addresses this non-hierarchical approach through the mimetic faculty. According to him, the spectator is "brought into intimate contact with the images on the screen by a process of *mimesis* or *contagion*".⁹ Since the mimetic faculty is opposed to processes of signification, for Shaviro, mimesis "involves a participatory and tactile contact between [...] the object and the subject".¹⁰ In this mimetic relationship, fixed identities are effaced because "the subject is captivated and 'distracted,' made more fluid and indeterminate," and the boundaries between inside and outside are blurred.¹¹

A few years later, in *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Marks also stresses Benjamin's mimetic faculty as a sensuous approach to the image and an alternative to mastery. She does not negate the controlling tenor of scopophilia. In fact, she opposes haptic visuality, as a form of spectatorship in which the viewer gives up visual control, to scopophilia and argues that the relationship established between spectator and image in haptic visuality is mimetic. In this sense, Marks speaks about "sensuous similarities" as "communicative correspondences between nature and perception" and "between one's body and the world that precede representation".¹² The examples she cites from Benjamin are the rituals and dances by which people in ancient times came into contact with the cosmos, and the child who stretches the arms to touch the moon as if it were a ball.

⁸ Steiner, "Phänomenologie der Moderne: Benjamin und Husserl," 122.

⁹ Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 52.

¹⁰ Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 52.

¹¹ Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 53.

¹² Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 140.

The reality is that Marks is distorting Benjamin to construct her own argument. The term that Benjamin uses in “On the Mimetic Faculty” is *unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*, which has been translated into English in *Reflections* and the *Selected Writings* as “nonsensuous similarity”, although it could also have been translated as “nonsensical similarity”. With this term, Benjamin refers to a type of relationship with something which is distant, does not have a direct correspondence and cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, even if out of reach, the object in the distance is ultimately embodied, which makes this type of approach particularly attractive for film phenomenology. Although manifestly misreading Benjamin, Marks is particularly interested in the oscillation between distance and closeness that she discerns in haptic visuality.

Marks’ and Shaviro’s conception of mimesis is not significantly different from that of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. There, Adorno and Horkheimer understand mimesis as an “organic adaptation to otherness” and argue that civilization has repressed mimetic behaviour through rationality and technological progress, for it was uncontrollable and, therefore, difficult to master.¹³ Marks and Shaviro, however, propose that certain uses of technology—particularly film and video—can facilitate a mimetic relationship.

In a footnote to the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin discusses the role of mimesis in film. According to him, mimesis underpins the earliest artistic phenomena, originating in the body of the mime. He identifies a polarity within mimesis: on the one hand, semblance (*Schein*), which he associates with aura, cult value, and what he calls “first technology”; on the other hand, play (*Spiel*), which is associated with the decline of aura in technologically reproducible art, exhibition value, and “second technology”.¹⁴ For Benjamin, the first technology refers to a mode of technological practice aimed at mastering nature and other human beings, still imbued with magical elements. Second technology, by contrast, provides a space in which human beings can engage with nature non-hierarchically, allowing for experimentation rather than domination. In film, Benjamin asserts, “the element of semblance has been entirely displaced by the element of play”, which aligns with second technology. As a result, the decline of semblance and aura expands film’s *Spiel-Raum*, or “room-for-play”.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, aura and semblance are linked to distance, while play is more closely associated with the body, experimentation and proximity. In cinema, mimesis thus loses much of its distant character, opening up a space for the audience to embody and experiment with the artwork. Since film technology belongs to the second technology, the relationship between the audience and the cinematic world is not one of mastery or control, but one of play and embodied engagement, blurring the borders between subject and object. For Benjamin, therefore, film’s room-for-play allows an embodied spectatorship in which the audience draws to their bodies the people, spaces, and objects that appear onscreen. Significantly, for Benjamin, mimesis can be present in auratic art, manifesting in beautiful semblance. However, aura is practically absent in technologically reproducible art, where play and proximity have replaced semblance and distance. This stands in contrast with Marks’ insistence on finding aura in certain works of video art. She defines aura as “the material trace of a prior contact” and contends that “to be in the presence of an auratic object is more like being in physical contact than like facing a representation”.¹⁶ While such a definition makes sense if aura is primarily understood as an experiential phenomenon, it diverges from Benjamin’s understanding of aura as an aesthetic category—one that, in the context

¹³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 148.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version),” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 127n.

¹⁵ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version),” 127n.

¹⁶ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 140.

of technological reproduction, is fundamentally eroded as the artwork's uniqueness and authenticity are diminished.

The author within film phenomenology who has best understood Benjamin's film aesthetics is perhaps Scott Richmond. He only engages with Benjamin briefly at the end of his *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating, and Hallucinating*, but he recognizes that in his film writings, Benjamin is revolutionizing the conception of aesthetics. For Benjamin, Richmond observes, aesthetics should no longer be concerned with the study of art or beauty, but with "the very distribution of the sensible".¹⁷ For that reason, Benjamin's film aesthetics are particularly interested in addressing how film technology has changed the way that people engage sensuously with art. Richmond argues that, in cinemas, modern technology has shattered "the canons of 'beautiful semblance' championed by nineteenth-century bourgeois aesthetics" and, with it, the reception in contemplation by an individual in front of the work of art. By contrast, Benjamin defends a reception in distraction which is "embodied and sensuous, collective rather than individuating".¹⁸

Richmond also understands that Benjamin's film writings are first and foremost concerned with a non-destructive reception—and ultimately embodiment—of technology. In this sense, writes Richmond, Benjamin hails the figure of Mickey Mouse because he does not address technology as an alien apparatus but incorporates it into his own body as technics. Through this figure, audiences could learn how to adopt technology into their bodies in a therapeutic way. The point that Richmond criticizes here is that, in Benjamin, "the cinema's negotiation of the relations between bodies and technology must pass through a *figure*, a point of identification, a mimetic anchor", whether this is Chaplin's or Mickey Mouse's.¹⁹ Richmond shows, by contrast, that proprioceptive cinema does not need representation or figuration to address this relation between the human body and technology.

It is interesting that authors of film phenomenology have paid that much attention to the concept of the mimetic faculty to characterize a type of spectatorship that is not hierarchical or instrumental. There are, indeed, similarities between this relationship and the ideal spectatorship that Benjamin develops in the "Work of Art" essay. In fact, Benjamin scholar Miriam Hansen similarly describes the mimetic faculty as "a mode of access to the world involving sensuous, somatic, and tactile, that is, embodied, form of perception and cognition; a noncoercive engagement with the other that resists dualistic conceptions of subject and object".²⁰ In "On the Mimetic Faculty", the communal, corporeal relationship with the cosmos is opposed to the individual contemplation of starry nights of the modern man in a similar dichotomy to the individual contemplation of a painting versus the collective, embodied spectatorship of cinemas in the "Work of Art" essay. Thus, Benjamin seems to accept that a similar faculty has been recovered, even when the distance between the body of the audience and the perceived object has been abolished.

In fact, the concept of innervation that is central to understanding his film writings draws from a similar dialectics between distance and nearness. Innervation, in the figure of the child who stretches out the hand to touch the moon as if it were a ball, can be understood as the product of a motor-perceptual miscognition within the field of the imaginary that sparks creative and transformative energies. In the medium of cinema, innervation refers to technology's capacity to provide a source of energy and, at the same time, generate the nerves through which that energy is innervated collectively through the bodies of the audience. Through this innervation, Benjamin thought that cinema allowed the audience not only to incorporate technology in a therapeutic way

¹⁷ Scott C. Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating and Hallucinating* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 156.

¹⁸ Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*, 155.

¹⁹ Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*, 155.

²⁰ Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 147.

but also to embody the promises of technology.²¹ This is a point that Richmond understands well in Benjamin and that he characterizes through Mickey Mouse, an exemplary figure that is able to incorporate a non-instrumental technology into his own body. Richmond's critique shows that Benjamin still thought that there was some type of identification between spectators and film, even if a similar interpenetration of technology and body can be found in his writings on Surrealism and Dadaism, art movements which are not necessarily figurative. I regret, however, that Richmond does not engage further with Benjamin's writings to stress the proprioceptive character of cinema. I argue that, rather than a "tactile appropriation", Benjamin thought of a "haptic appropriation" of cinema that is inherently proprioceptive.

The *taktische* Quality of Film

Laura Marks has famously (re-)introduced the concept of haptics to characterize images that invite a tactile approach, in a form of spectatorship that "encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image".²² Marks borrows the term from art historian Alois Riegl and recognizes that other authors have used the concept in relation to cinema. She cites two articles by art historians Noël Burch and Antonia Lant on early cinema, an article on Atom Egoyan by Jacinto Lageira, and the book *Cinema II*, in which Gilles Deleuze stresses the haptic quality of Robert Bresson's shots of hands in his film *Pickpocket* (1959)—although she criticizes Deleuze's suggestion that the film invites an identification with the hands to evoke the sense of touch.²³ I argue that Benjamin should have been included in this genealogy.

Admittedly, Benjamin never used the word "haptic", but "*taktisch*", a term that in German means both "tactile" and "tactical" and that Riegl used until 1903 to refer to artistic objects that convey a tactile quality through optical means. My point, as I claim in this section, is that Benjamin did not use the term haptics only by mistake. Riegl was an important influence on Benjamin throughout his oeuvre. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1925–1928), Benjamin used the concept of *Kunstwollen* to methodologically address the German Baroque drama as a decadent style. In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin introduces Riegl in the fourth section as an example of how art can be used to study the change of perception in different periods and in the XVII and XVIII theses, he uses Riegl's concept of *taktisch* to define film perception.

In the XVII thesis, Benjamin compares Dadaist artworks with a missile and argues that they have a *taktische* quality, in opposition to the "optical quality" of traditional art, which elsewhere he says that it begins "at a distance of two meters from the body".²⁴ Benjamin then argues that, because of the percussive nature of montage, film also has this *taktische* quality: "From an alluring visual composition or an enchanting fabric of sound, the Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile. It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [*taktisch*] quality. It thereby fostered the demand for film, since the distracting element in film is also primarily tactile, being based on successive changes of scene and focus which have a percussive effect on the spectator."²⁵

Benjamin considers Dadaist art as *taktisch* because, instead of demanding a distance to the viewer to contemplate the artwork, it enters and shocks the very body of the subject, who cannot apprehend the artwork only with the sense of sight. For Benjamin, something similar happens in cinema. The way that films appeal to spectators is primarily *taktisch*, based on shocks, for film

²¹ For Benjamin's concept of innervation, see Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 306–343; Matthew Charles, "Secret Signals from Another World: Walter Benjamin's Concept of Innervation," *New German Critique* 45, no. 3 (2018): 39–72; and Daniel Mourenza, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

²² Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 164.

²³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 171.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

²⁵ Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," 119.

montage has a percussive effect on spectators that is primarily sensed on their own bodies. The difference is that film provokes a “physical shock effect”, whereas the shocking character of Dadaism was only moral.²⁶ The tactile, “distracting element” in film to which Benjamin refers introduces the concept of “reception in distraction” that he develops in the following thesis.

In the XVIII thesis, Benjamin opposes the “reception in distraction” to the “reception in contemplation” typical of traditional art. Benjamin develops the point in a very instructive footnote.²⁷ He compares the cinema screen with a painting’s canvas (in German, both are called *Leinwand*). The difference is that “the image on the film screen changes, whereas the image on the canvas does not”.²⁸ Thus, the painting invites the viewer to contemplation, whereas in film, spectators cannot give themselves up to contemplation, since their train of associations is continuously interrupted by new images. For Benjamin, this flow of images that interrupts any possibility of absorbing oneself into private thinking characterizes the shock effect of film. This type of experience is typical of big cities, where passers-by encounter similar effects while navigating the streets. Benjamin believes that such experiences, characteristic of big cities and new media, are significantly altering the apparatus of apperception. Physiologically, this implies that people’s sensorium is changing, with cinema playing a crucial role in training the senses to the shocks of modern life and eventually transforming them.

Benjamin develops his theory about the reception in distraction further in the first paragraph of the XVIII section. He wants to challenge the traditionally negative conception of the masses seeking distraction in the cinema versus the positive approach of the art lover who looks at the artwork in concentration. Benjamin presents the reception in distraction and contemplation as an antithesis. However, he turns their hierarchy upside down and conceives them physiologically: whereas the individual who concentrates on the contemplation of a painting is absorbed by it, the masses in the cinema absorb the film into themselves. Whereas in the first case, the artwork is perceived visually, in the second case, it is apprehended corporeally.

The reception in distraction does not only correspond to film; it has always been the case with architecture. In the second paragraph, Benjamin develops Riegl’s point in *Late Roman Art Industry* on the reception of architecture: “Buildings are received in a twofold manner: by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically. Such a reception cannot be understood in terms of the concentrated attention of a traveller before a famous building. On the tactile side, there is no counterpart to what contemplation is on the optical side. Tactile reception comes about not so much by way of attention as by way of habit. The latter largely determines even the optical reception of architecture, which spontaneously takes the form of casual noticing, rather than attentive observation.”²⁹

Here, Benjamin uses Riegl’s concept of *taktisch* to stress that cinema is not only approached through the eye, but also in a tactile manner. For Riegl, there is always a combination of optical and tactile stimuli in the reception of art. It is through the combination of different sense perceptions, both tactile and optical, along with the intervention of subjective thinking, that a passerby appreciates architecture.³⁰ According to Benjamin, film spectators approach film similarly, not only through the eye but with the whole body, in what he calls a *taktische* reception. For that reason, Benjamin claims that our perception cannot experience film—as architecture and city life—only by optical means; it uses a form of *taktische* reception which is developed through habit. In these two cases, there is a dichotomy between opticality and tactility. The former is connected to contemplation, distance, and semblance, whereas the latter is associated with distraction, proximity, and play. In these cases, Benjamin uses the word *taktisch* in a very similar way to Riegl

²⁶ Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” 119.

²⁷ In the third version, this passage is developed in the body of the essay.

²⁸ Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” 132n.

²⁹ Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” 120.

³⁰ Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985), 22.

in his chapter about architecture in *Late Roman Art Industry*, but he decontextualizes it completely from the historical shifts that Riegl defended, as I show in the next section.

The Haptic Quality of Film

The term *taktisch* has been a puzzle for the editors and translators of Benjamin. The only version of the essay published during Benjamin's lifetime was in French. The translator, Pierre Klossowski, used the word *tactile*, and Benjamin approved it. The editors of the *Gesammelte Schriften* used this as proof to deem the word *taktisch* ambiguous and replace it with *taktil*. In the English translations, the term is translated as "tactile" in *Illuminations* and the *Selected Writings*, but in the latter, the original is kept in brackets. A special issue of *Grey Room* from 2010 offered for the first time an English translation of the first version of the "Work of Art" essay, together with an article by Tobias Wilke, in which he defends the polysemy of the word *taktisch* as both tactile and tactical.³¹ Indeed, the word *taktisch* is mainly translated as "tactical" in the first version of the essay published in the issue. Wilke argues that, apart from Riegl, Benjamin borrowed the term from the vocabulary of the avant-garde, which in turn had adopted it from the field of military tactics. As the avant-garde artists claim Wilke and Michael Jennings in a footnote to Benjamin's essay, he wanted to express through this term the idea of a "'tactically' reoriented aesthetics".³² For all the strengths of the issue and of Wilke's essay, I disagree on this point. My explanation is simpler.

In an article from 1903, "Late Roman or Oriental?", Riegl discards the term *taktisch* because such a "designation could lead to misunderstandings" and argues that "physiology has long since introduced the more fitting designation 'haptic'". He claims that he would henceforth use that term.³³ However, Riegl died of cancer only two years later, in 1905, at the age of 47. Most of his works retained the word *taktisch*, including the *Late Roman Art Industry* that influenced Benjamin so much. My hypothesis is that Benjamin might not have been aware of this article and, for that reason, he kept using the old term. I argue that Benjamin should have used *haptisch* in the "Work of Art" essay, for it renders better the perceptive qualities that he detected in cinema, as the symptomatic mode of perception in modernity.

This is even clearer in a fragment in the first version of the "Work of Art" essay in which Benjamin develops further the *taktische* quality of film in relation to the reception in distraction, and that the editors of the *Grey Room* special issue take as further proof of the polysemy of *taktisch* as both tactile and tactical. In this fragment, Benjamin claims that, in cinemas, there is a "tactically [*taktisch*] dominant element that rules over the regrouping of apperception" and that this *taktische* element "asserts itself in optics itself".³⁴ Here, Benjamin argues that the way that the audience relates to the screen cannot be only optical, but rather tactile (or, better, haptic), because the audience reacts bodily and collectively to the images onscreen. Furthermore, this tactile element is conveyed through optics, that is, visually. This is exactly what Laura Marks says when she argues that, in haptic images, "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch".³⁵

Benjamin is aware that, even if cinema is predominantly a visual medium, its reception involves other senses. In this fragment, it can seem that films translate tactility into visuality, and this is later decodified by the audience. Nonetheless, if understood in relation to the rest of the essay, it is clear that, for Benjamin, the reception of cinema is multisensorial; it cannot concern the eye alone or, by the same token, only the sense of touch. In a working note to "Experience and

³¹ Tobias Wilke, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses," *Grey Room* 39 (2010): 39–55.

³² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (First Version)," ed. Michael W. Jennings and Tobias Wilke, *Grey Room* 39 (2010): 11–37, 32n.

³³ Alois Riegl, "Late Roman or Oriental?," trans. Peter Wortsman, in *German Essays on Art History*, ed. Gert Schiff (New York: Continuum, 1988), 173–90, 190n.

³⁴ Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility (First Version)," 34.

³⁵ Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 162.

Poverty" (1933), Benjamin writes that Mickey Mouse films govern the whole public rhythmically.³⁶ Benjamin suggests here that the audience is moved by image and sound. In other words, spectators collectively embody the film's rhythm, which is both visual and acoustic.

Haptics can be understood as conveying touch through optical means, but more broadly, it refers to a type of perception with the whole body. Laura U. Marks defines haptic perception as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies".³⁷ Abbie Garrington also defines haptics as an umbrella term that includes experiences with touch, kinaesthesia and the vestibular sense—senses which are interrelated and cannot be isolated.³⁸ In these definitions, we can see that proprioception—the sense that regulates equilibrium, movement and the self-perception of our body in space—is highly involved in this type of perception. Precisely, Scott Richmond, in his book *Cinema's Body Illusions*, has placed the alteration and rearrangement of the spectators' proprioception at the centre of the experience of cinema. Based on the ecological approach of perceptual psychologist James Gibson, Richmond argues that proprioception is a "general function of the overall perceptual system" that spans across all senses and, hence, "all perception includes a component of proprioception".³⁹ He suggests that the aesthetic elaboration of cinema is to be found in the bodies and proprioceptive capacities of the spectators, not on the screen.⁴⁰ In this sense, Richmond argues that "the cinema's vocation of manifesting a world unfolding before us onscreen is fundamentally proprioceptive".⁴¹ If we return to Benjamin's use of *taktisch* in the XVII and XVIII theses, we can see that Benjamin was referring to a conception of haptics in which proprioception is highly important.

In the XVII section, the shocking, percussive effect of both Dadaist art and film is haptic because the artworks not only leave impressions on the surface of the body but shake the very body of spectators, unsettling their own proprioception. The same applies to the opposition between the reception in contemplation of painting and the reception in distraction of architecture and film. Whereas contemplation is associated with an optical reception, reception in distraction is haptic. For Benjamin, a person who contemplates a painting approaches it mainly through the sense of sight. However, when walking through the streets, the relationship of the passer-by with the buildings is through different sense impressions, which are optical but also proprioceptive. Indeed, the perception of one's body and its relationship to the environment is particularly relevant to understanding the impressions left by a building that one notices, rather than simply contemplates. Cinema takes a similar approach to the world that unfolds onscreen. Spectators cannot contemplate images that constantly change; they are rather bombarded with the bodies, objects and spaces that appear in front of them. In short, the idea of cinema as a proprioceptive experience was already in Benjamin's comparison of cinema with architecture.

As I introduced earlier, authors of film phenomenology have not considered Benjamin a precursor of the concept of haptics in cinema, but other scholars have. Art historian Margaret Iversen and, following her, film historian Antonia Lant and literary scholar Abbie Garrington, consider that the new mode of perception that Benjamin describes in the "Work of Art" essay as essentially haptic.⁴² They understand that Benjamin is turning Riegl's theory upside down. Riegl considered the mode of perception in Ancient Egypt as haptic, but recognized a shift to the optical

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Erfahrungsarmut," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 962.

³⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 162.

³⁸ Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 16.

³⁹ Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*, 108.

⁴⁰ Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*, 16.

⁴¹ Richmond, *Cinema's Bodily Illusions*, 6.

⁴² Margaret Iversen, *Alois Riegl: Art History and Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 15.

in the move towards modernity. Benjamin, instead, associates modernity with a move towards the haptic, which is characterized by people's desire to overcome distance and bring things closer to their bodies. To illustrate this move, the three authors use Benjamin's comparison of the surgeon who penetrates the patient's body with the cameraman who penetrates into the web of reality. In this regard, Antonia Lant argues that "[c]inema is haptic both because of the cameraman's profilmic penetration of the world, like the surgeon's internal handling of the body, and because of film's physical impact on the viewer to stress the haptic quality of film".⁴³ In short, these authors understand Benjamin's indebtedness to Riegl, but also the way that Benjamin transforms Riegl's theory to understand the change of perception that cinema involves. They also take for granted that, even if Benjamin is not using the word haptics, he is referring to the same idea. Indeed, Garrington argues that Benjamin is "perhaps modernism's best-known interrogator of the haptic".⁴⁴

Encounter between Body and Screen

One of the most heated debates in film phenomenology concerns the relationship between the bodies in the cinema theatre and the world that appears onscreen. Film phenomenology rejects the individual, psychological identification of the spectator with the characters onscreen, instead favouring an embodied encounter between spectators and film. For example, Laura Marks disavows character identification in favour of a more physical relationship to the image, arguing that "[h]aptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure—a sensory-motor reaction—so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image".⁴⁵ Kate Ince suggests that a bodily relationship with cinema may involve some form of identification, but this identification emerges from the spectators' embodied, affective relation with the world and with other people.⁴⁶ Similarly, Jennifer Barker contends that meaning and emotions do not reside in either the film or the spectator, but in the "embodied encounter between film and viewer".⁴⁷ Katharina Lindner also characterizes cinema as an embodied engagement "between bodies on and off screen" and thus "between the 'affective worlds' on either side of the screen".⁴⁸

Benjamin does not thoroughly address the relationship between spectators and the onscreen world, but he envisions a form of spectatorship that is profoundly corporeal. He characterizes the audience as a collective body that confronts images and sounds onscreen haptically. In other words, film spectatorship is inherently collective and does not presuppose individual identification. However, as Richmond points out, Benjamin favours the confrontation of the audience with a figurative body. Benjamin describes the spectatorship of Chaplin and Disney films in physiological terms as "a therapeutic release of unconscious energies".⁴⁹ The audience reacts as a body to the images of Chaplin and Mickey Mouse, who incorporate the effects of modern technology into their own bodies. This creates an embodied encounter between the bodies of the spectators (or, rather, the collective body of the audience) and the actor or character onscreen, producing an empowering innervation. For Benjamin, this encounter allows the audience to collectively embody the utopian promises of a non-utilitarian technology and cathartically expel the effects of capitalist technology on their own bodies.

⁴³ Antonia Lant, "Haptical Cinema," *October* 75 (1995): 45-73, 69.

⁴⁴ Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, 20.

⁴⁵ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 164.

⁴⁶ Kate Ince, "Bringing Bodies Back In: For a Phenomenological and Psychoanalytic Film Criticism of Embodied Cultural Identity," *Film-Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2011): 1-12.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 15.

⁴⁸ Katharina Lindner, "Questions of Embodied Difference: Film and Queer Phenomenology," *NECSUS* 1, no. 2 (2012): 199-217, at 214.

⁴⁹ Benjamin, "Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," 118.

The conception of the body that Benjamin addresses in his film writings originates from the phenomenological texts he wrote in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem”, Benjamin talks about a collective body, indeed “the body of mankind”, which is formed in technology and can incorporate “nature, the nonliving, plant, and animal”.⁵⁰ In this text, technology is conceived of as a medium, not a means, in which a collective body can be formed and incorporate external factors. In the same text, Benjamin discusses the relationship between *Leib* (the physical, lived body) and *Körper* (the body perceived as a thing). Unlike phenomenologists such as Max Scheler and Edmund Husserl, who conclude that the physical and the lived body are ultimately the same entity manifesting in different appearances, Benjamin does not attempt to reconcile them. Instead, he enlarges the rift between the two, making the body a space in which, according to Léa Barbisan, otherness “penetrates the sphere of the self and deeply disturbs its structure”.⁵¹ In the body, according to Benjamin, the barrier between inside and outside, self and world, subject and object is dissolved, and the physical body (*Körper*) can never be fully appropriated by the ego. This conception of the body resonates with his ideas about the film being absorbed by the collective body formed in cinemas and with Shaviro’s characterization of film spectatorship through the mimetic faculty.

In another early text, “Perception and Body”, Benjamin writes that we are unable to see our own head, which should be the centre of our perception. Consequently, our body is presented to us as a headless, anamorphic figure.⁵² He associates this aspect of self-perception with the figure of the “eccentric”. Years later, when Benjamin writes about cinema, he considers the “eccentric” the forerunner of slapstick comedy and Disney films, describing this figure as the first inhabitant of the newly built house that cinema represents.⁵³ Benjamin argues that the anti-naturalistic gestures and physical expressions of both Chaplin and Mickey Mouse exemplify the experience of bodies in late capitalism, where the body is reified and dispossessed. In other words, capitalism enlarges the rift between *Leib* and *Körper*, an eccentricity that is conveyed physiologically and corporeally to the audience in cinemas.

In “Perception and Body”, Benjamin also argues that human perception has changed historically. The vertical coordinates that are now fundamental to human perception emerged only when humans began to walk upright. For example, the ability to measure distances visually was different thousands of years ago and is also different for a baby, who sees the world from the floor and whose perception may be more tactile than visual. Thus, Benjamin claims that the history of perception depends on the modification of nature, causing the coordinates of what is in front or behind, left or right, up or down to change.

A film phenomenology informed by Benjamin’s writings should begin with this conception of the body as elusive, where the subject and their perception as an upright human should not be taken for granted. Benjamin’s phenomenology of embodiment aligns more closely with Sara Ahmed’s “queer phenomenology” than with Merleau-Ponty’s intentional subject. According to Ahmed, Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy recognizes numerous moments of disorientation where the world appears oblique. However, the body eventually reorients itself, and the world resumes a

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Outline of the Psychophysical Problem,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 395. For a more detailed account of Benjamin’s conception of technology in relation to his film writings, see Mourenza, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film*.

⁵¹ Barbisan, “Eccentric Bodies: From Phenomenology to Marxism: Walter Benjamin’s Reflections on Embodiment,” 4.

⁵² Walter Benjamin, “Wahrnehmung und Leib,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 67.

⁵³ Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility,” 118. In an earlier text, he also refers to slapstick as “the eccentric comedies imported from America” (Benjamin, “On the Present Situation of Russian Film,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 15).

vertical alignment. In contrast, Ahmed advocates for a queer, disoriented body that remains oblique and does not conform to a straight orientation.⁵⁴ Benjamin's conception of the body does not presuppose an upright, straight position for perception; rather, it is an "eccentric" or queer body. The boundaries of the self are not clear, leading to the dilution of the spectator into the collectivity of the audience and the merging of bodies and images in the cinema theatre.

Conclusion: Benjamin as Film Phenomenology

As I have shown, Benjamin considered cinema, the symptomatic medium of perception in modernity, to be fundamentally haptic. In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin really meant that cinema had a "haptic quality", as Antonia Lant points out, rather than a "tactile quality". In other words, Benjamin understands that cinema is not only perceived optically, not even only through the eyes, ears and touch, but with the whole body. Similar to the buildings people pass by every day, film is experienced neither through attentive observation nor through direct touch. Thus, instead of Sobchack's and Shaviro's "tactile appropriation", we should emphasize a "haptic appropriation" of the film that involves the entire body, including the proprioceptive system.

As Steiner argues, the "Work of Art" essay should be considered a continuation of the theory of perception that Benjamin developed in his earlier phenomenological and anthropological texts. Benjamin understood that the advent of visual media such as cinema was leading to a haptic apperception rather than an optical one. For him, the audience's relationship with the film onscreen is not one of mastery or psychological identification, but a bodily relationship where the bodies of the spectators and the onscreen images are intertwined. In the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin presents film as political not because it prefigures or enables specific political tactics, as Wilke suggests, but because, with the decline of aura and cult value and the rise of play, it offers the collective an opportunity to engage with second technology in a non-hierarchical manner. This engagement allows for the possibility of embodying a form of technology that has shed its ritualistic residues.

Benjamin's conception of film spectatorship can be criticized for being ahistorical, universal and utopian, abstracted from lived experiences. As a reaction to the denial of lived experience in film theory, Sobchack based her theory on Merleau-Ponty's "existential phenomenology" because it derives from and relocates data in "the world of our lived experience" and emphasizes that cinema is an experience "lived through and embodied in an enworlded subject".⁵⁵ However, Lindner has lamented that film phenomenology often addresses lived experience abstractly and argues that these accounts would benefit from "a more explicit acknowledgement of the significance of embodied and 'lived' difference, of differences in affective experiences and memories, of ways of being-in-the-world and therefore perceiving the world".⁵⁶

Benjamin's account does not solve this problem. In fact, film phenomenology is better equipped to anchor film theory in lived experience. That said, Benjamin's conception of perception is particularly interesting for overcoming identity battles. The perceiving body Benjamin presents does not presuppose an identity and cannot be equated with a subject; it is rather an elusive and, we could add, queer body. It is a body that does not align with a fixed identity or straight position, but a fluid one that opens to the world. This body can dissolve into the collective and absorb and incorporate the film, indeed, the entire technological medium, into its own corporeality. In short, Benjamin not only advances many theories and concepts that have become central in film phenomenology, such as the idea of embodied spectatorship, haptic perception and proprioceptive cinema, but also proposes a type of spectatorship that is more fluid and collective than most contemporary accounts in film phenomenology.



⁵⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 159–62.

⁵⁵ Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 26–27.

⁵⁶ Lindner, "Questions of Embodied Difference," 200.