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MARKS, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000, 298 p.

Any serious thinking about the relationships between audio-visual media, cultural memory and global modernity must confront the phenomenological problems of homelessness, the politics of place and displacement, and the experience of exile and diaspora. The recent publication of Laura U. Marks' *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* marks an important moment of such interdisciplinary and intercultural thinking and will force students and scholars alike to think in the words of other worlds. Marks situates her book next to the work of many contemporary artists and writers, including Black Audio Film Collective, Julio Garcia Espinosa, Coco Fusco, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Teshome Gabriel, Kobena Mercer, Hamid Naficy, and Trinh T. Minh-ha; theorists who, for the past two decades, have explored the politics and the poetics of the representation of diasporic and minority peoples in cinema, a cultural practice bound in the double movement of "tearing away old, oppressive representations and making room for new ones to emerge" (p.11).

Marks' work engages with the movement of intercultural cinema and video emerging, most powerfully between the years 1985 and 1995, from the new cultural formations and global flows of Western metropolitan centers. On one level, to speak of the skin of the film is to discuss the intercultural skin of its production and distribution: from the fragile infrastructure of its financing, as directors "cobble" something together between the worlds of their part-time jobs, homeland resources, and the grants received from various public and private foundations for

the arts; to the network of sites of production, whether they be garage and bedroom studios, universities, media access centers, or public television stations; to the host of non-commercial forms of exhibition such as artist-run galleries, museums, community centers, festivals, colleges, satellite television and activist organizations. On another level, Marks explains, the skin of the film may be located in the intercultural skin of its reception, in the traces it leaves and carries as it circulates among various audiences, not as a simulacrum of the hyperreal but as an indexical witness and artifact of the disjunctures and intervals of experience and memory in an increasingly globalized world.

Arguing that the embodied response to cinema is itself informed and organized by culture, Marks defends intercultural spectatorship as “[...] the meeting of two different sensoria, which may or may not intersect [...] an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge [...]” (p.153). The federating agency of this “sensory translation” is visible on a socio-political level; transforming nameless identities, building social alliances, and organizing cultural coalitions in sites as various as internet chat-rooms, university classes, or funding agencies. If part of the essential work of intercultural cinema lies in the multiplication of its contexts, then Marks’ book outlines some of the features of its intercontinental dispersion by providing excellent sources of reference: the filmography/videography section alone comprises over 180 works of contemporary intercultural cinema; and while a great number of these works are largely unknown because unavailable to the public at large, she supplies a list of 37 distributors all over North America.

Finally, to speak of *the skin of the film* is a metaphorical way of emphasizing the way film signifies in terms of the dynamic materiality of the audio-visual medium. “For intercultural artists it is most valuable to think of the skin of the film not as a screen, but as a membrane that brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory” (p. 243). Marks returns often to the example of Shauna Beharry’s short videotape, *Seeing Is Believing* (Canada, 1991), to describe the skin of the film in terms of *haptic visuality* (the sense of touch evoked visually—at the limits of vision), encountered when the camera caresses over

and over again the surface of a photograph—in search of memory. This memory persists, even though it is blocked by the experience of cultural dislocation; embedded and embodied by the senses, it is mediated by the very fabric and feel of film.

The photograph is of Beharry, wearing the sari. Her voice on the sound track is describing the anger and bafflement she felt when, after her mother died, she could not recognize her in photographs. Only when she put on her mother's sari, Beharry says, did she feel that she had "climbed into her skin." The feel of fabric awakens for Beharry a flood of memories that were lost in the family's movement from India to Europe to Canada. *Seeing Is Believing* calls upon the sort of knowledge that can only be had in the physical presence of an object—in the indexical witness of cinema. Touch is a sense whose knowledge requires the physical presence of the object: Beharry makes this clear in her effort to "squeeze the touchability out of the photo" (Beharry, 1996). To touch something one's mother, one's grandparents, or an unknown person touched is to be in physical contact with them. (p.112)

In her introductory remarks, Marks defends the use of the term *intercultural cinema*¹ since it is strategically useful, militating against the categories "ethnic," "avant-garde" or "multicultural," supporting something closer to "independent transnational genre," and indicating a context unconfined by a single culture, moving between cultures, implying diachrony, hybridity and the possibility of transformation. Inter-cultural, Marks' explains, bypasses the discourse of cultural "property" and has the power to designate the mediation between at least two cultures, accounting for the encounter between different cultural organizations of knowledge; this is also a political encounter that implies a dynamic relationship between a dominant "host" culture and a minority culture, between nondominant cultures, or simply between a variety of "hosts," destinations, and sites of power. Marks admits that this "movement" is now becoming something of a genre, some of which has graduated to the "quasi-commercial" status of feature film production, and even hopes that the term intercultural cinema may cease to be a

conceptually useful category since the “transnational status of film making and viewing is becoming every day harder to ignore” (p. 3).

The usefulness of such terminology, however, goes beyond the power to define or to designate a “genre” or stable identity of being in cinematic production and reception. The term “intercultural” has the power to move alongside what is always only an emergent relationship, “an agency of becoming” in a cinema very critical of the problems of representation. For example, Marks explores the dynamic relationship of this encounter in Deleuzian terms: intercultural cinema inscribes the memory and the history of diasporic and minority peoples with the “powers of the false.” In the absence of authentic narratives, univocal voices or transmittable traditions, these “powers of the false” do not appeal to pre-existing truths of community and culture.

The powers of the false only undermine the hegemonic character of official images, clichés, and other totalizing regimes of knowledge [...] rather than furnish anthems to solidarity or cheering fictions, they are fundamentally falsifiers [...] they appeal not to an identity but to the conditions of political transformation. (p. 66-67)

Such falsifying powers in intercultural cinema provide the conditions for political transformation when they appeal to the invention of a place in a deterritorialized world where these peoples might come into being.

This definition of intercultural cinema as a “political micro-potentiality” is situated itself in the predicament of globalization, in the midst of the economic “virtualization” of the homeland. For example, while defending intercultural cinema as a product of the global flows of cultural capital and the migration of peoples, Marks defends the notion that the global flow of intercultural cinema does not ride high commercial tides but eddies in the idiosyncratic undercurrents; this gives it the power to flow “[...] against the wave of economic neo-colonialism, by making explicit the cultural and economic links between peoples that capital erases” (p. 9). Marks is particularly interested in

those films that “re-materialize and re-embody” the global flows of objects between cultures, from carnation flowers to pineapple cans to popular magazines, objects the historic materiality of which transnational capital seeks to erase or to render virtual.

Objects that travel along paths of human diaspora and international trade encode cultural displacement. Even commodities, though they are subject to the deracinating flow of transnational economy and the censoring process of official history, retain the power to tell the stories of where they have been. Intercultural cinema moves through space, gathering up histories and memories that are lost or covered over in the movement of displacement, and producing new knowledges about the condition of being between cultures. (p. 78)

Methodologically, Marks restricts herself to an exploration of only a select number of exemplary works that reveal the shifting and emergent identity of intercultural cinema rather than comprehending or explaining the totality of works listed in the filmography/videography. Even when dwelling on the examples of particular works, Marks does not analyze or critique; rather, she attempts to draw them into her thinking, speaking alongside films as she might written resources, “[...] to catch up verbally with arguments these works have made in audiovisual (as well as verbal) form [...]” (xv), since they are arguments only on the threshold of language, slipping past and pointing beyond words, and which “[...] make room for something to emerge” (xvii). The promise of such thinking cannot be underestimated, because it is written from the perspective of a film theorist who is critically sensitive to the problem of mediation: how knowledge about film is itself necessarily mediated or brought across by the *skin* of language and the given of culture. This reflexivity is then itself capable of opening a free relationship to (or of making a porous contact with) those powers of the audio-visual media of film and video that exceed narrative discourse and semiotic analysis in the modern institution of film studies. In short, it is a reflexivity that opens a median region of thought in the study of cinema generally; by moving dynamically between different cultural organizations of knowledge it indicates not

only what may be the limits of institutional discourse, but also how it opens possibilities for other ways of knowing.

The critical and theoretical framework of Marks' language suggestively explores what might constitute an embodied response to sensory elements such as touch, smell and rhythm. Without attempting to develop a comprehensive theory of embodiment and sensory representation in intercultural cinema, Marks does trace a constellation of concepts in each chapter, problematizing intercultural memory as memory embodied and felt. Indeed, one of the strengths of *The Skin of the Film* is its ability to inherit forgotten, under-valued or over-used concepts (such as recollection, fetish/fossil, mimesis, aura, viscosity, and the sensorium), to demystify or deflate much of the academic jargon accumulated in their circulation, to critique them within the scope of intercultural cinema, and finally to reinvest them with new meanings and possibilities.

In chapter one, "The Memory of Images," Marks discusses how intercultural cinema may be described in terms of archaeological models since it expresses the discursive disjunctions in different orders of knowledge and excavates the sites where dominant histories have created madness and buried private memory. While citing countless films and videos, the section describing the powers of the *recollection-image* persuasively argues for such an archaeology, tracing concepts from the work of Bergson, Deleuze, Foucault, Proust, and Benjamin. The recollection-image, Marks explains, crosses the site of such disjunctions and excavations, breaking itself loose from mere voluntary and involuntary memory. Like a dialectical image floating loose from the drift of official records, the recollection-image materially embodies the paralysis, the scars and the traumas of past events that have no match in present image-repertoires. As a drifting artifact brushing against the skin of the film, the recollection image retains the power to activate the emergent forms of social and collective memory.

In chapter two, "The Memory of Things," Marks continues to investigate how the audio-visual techniques of intercultural cinema excavate what she calls *recollection-objects*, irreducibly material objects or artifacts that often embed unresolved trau-

mas of collective memory and encode social processes of migration and displacement. In addition to tracing the histories of transnational objects, Marks places particular emphasis on the concepts of the fetish (Pietz), the radioactive fossil (Deleuze), and the concept of aura (Benjamin; Buck-Morss) as they relate to different orders of contact, contingency and contamination² in cinema.

Fetishes and fossils, then, are two kinds of objects that condense cryptic histories within themselves and that gather their particular power by virtue of a prior contact with an originary object. Fetishes and fossils are nodes, or knots, in which historical, cultural, and spiritual forces gather with a particular intensity. (p.89)

Marks argues that this view of the fetish as the production of encounters between cultures strongly underscores Homi Bhabha's notion of the instability of the colonial power of stereotypes, organized in order to fix difference. Marked with power struggles, fossils and fetishes—in their *re-collection*—charge postcolonial history with the intensity of “a revolution waiting to happen”: a carcinogenic and contaminating influence that makes the present untenable; a volatile power that arouses other memories and activates “inert presences” in even the most recent layers of history; and a radioactive de-composition of the authority of ethnocentric histories in the wake of their unsettling contradictions and shocking debris.

In chapter three, “The Memory of Touch,” Marks reflects on the way intercultural cinema might express the inexpressible and evoke the hard-to-represent, by appealing to senses (particularly the sense of touch) that it cannot technically bring across in the medium except by pushing sound and vision to new thresholds of perception. Yet before discussing the central concepts of *haptic visibility* and *haptic cinema*, Marks suggests that it is necessary to critique and to reassess and to reevaluate the possibilities of *visuality* and *mimesis* as sensuous and embodied ways of knowing. For example, Marks takes a middle-ground position by opening up *visuality* “[...] along the continua of the distant and the embodied, the ocular and the haptic [...]” (p.132), rather than debunk the ocularcentrism of *visuality* or rehearse the

critique of visual anthropology. Often, in the categorical critique of the modern technical rationalism of representational knowledge, the question of mimesis and mimetic learning is repressed, obscured or lost; yet Marks is able to sustain the critique of instrumental “subject-centered” knowledge while defending mimesis as a tactile epistemology by invoking the work of cultural critics like Benjamin, Auerbach, and Adorno; anthropologists like Michael Taussig; and phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty. Marks nuances the concept of mimesis as a responsive and metamorphic relationship between maker and made; a sensuous knowledge made possible by the co-presence of body and world; a productive embrace or contact between beings; a compassionate and immanent way of being in the world; a yielding and mirroring form of the knower in the unknown (p. 138-145). This kind of theoretical groundwork allows her to show how cinema has the power to reconfigure rather than to shatter subjectivity.

Tactile visibility draws upon the mimetic knowledge that does not posit a gulf between subject and object, or the spectator and the screen. The theory of haptic visibility I advance should allow us to reconsider how the relationship between self and other may be yielding-knowing, more than (but as well as) shattering. (p.151)

Finally, in chapter four, “The Memory of the Senses,” Marks builds upon these notions, recalling that we may be witnessing, in the uneven but decisive shift from the culture of literacy to audio-visual cultures, “[...] a return to more mimetic technologies: technologies that call upon, or attempt to create, our pre-existing relationship to the world” (p. 215). More particularly, Marks deepens her argument concerning the emergence of new subjectivities and the production of new cultural organizations of sense perception and knowledge. Historically, she traces how the initial focus on the discourses of loss and unknowability has changed to a subsequent emphasis on new conditions of knowledge, “[...] a shift that reflects the move in intercultural cinema in the last ten years or so from works of protest to works of syn-

thesis, from excavation to transformation” (p. 195). Marks argues that this transformation is not made possible by the mere recreation of sensory and cultural experience in the medium of film, but rather by the power of cinema to bear witness “[...] to the reorganization of the senses that take place when people move between cultures” (p. 195). In this, she suggestively explores the sensorium of particular films and videos as emergent forms of social knowledge which opens up new ways of preserving cultural memory in the absence or the inadequacy of words and images and sounds. In this section, Marks draws upon the work of philosophers like Bergson; communications theorists like Ong and McLuhan; anthropologists like David Howes and Marcel Mauss; and many other historians and scientists dealing with perception.

The promise of Laura Marks’ *The Skin of the Film* is the promise of thinking and living between critical discourses, experiences and cultures: the willingness to explore an embodied response capable of meeting the “hybrid microcultures” of global modernity; the power to transform the memory of images, things, and the senses into “sensuous geographies” of touch, smell and rhythm that inhabit and drift into a world increasingly divided between the policed frontier and the “placeless” metropolis; and finally, the capacity to dwell in the critical interstice that allows thought to articulate itself on the edge of the unthought.

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NOTES

1. Marks defends the use of the word « cinema » even when referring to artists who may begin in video and move on to 35mm film production, even bypass 16mm film, to move on to feature film market. She emphasizes the importance of establishing « a continuity between the media even while noting their formal, institutional, and perhaps ontological differences » (p. 6).

2. These words, Marks relates in the Preface, all stem from the Latin root *contingere*, « to have contact with; pollute; befall. » (xii).