The Skin of the Film

Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment,
and the Senses  LAURA U. MARKS

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The memory of the senses

Any hint of flavor, just a hint, leads through a tunnel back to a light: the memory of my favorite stew. I never had words for it in the first place, although, when I am inebriated with memory, emotions about the ghostly meal rattle around.
—Jeff Weinstein, “Thyme and Word Enough”

Seeing is not eating.—Hausa proverb

There has been increasing interest in the past several years among film- and videomakers and “visual” artists to supplement vision with the experiences of hearing, touch, smell, taste, and kinesthesis. Especially in documentary, this turn to the nonvisual senses has been in part a response to the perceived imperialism of vision, the alignment of visual information with knowledge and control (although, as I argued in the last chapter, vision need not be synonymous with mastery). In some cases, documentary appeals to what escapes the visual altogether but can be known, for example, through the sense of touch, or of smell. The knowledge of the other senses is sought, not necessarily to create a sort of multisensory gesamtkunstwerk, but to show the limits of any of these knowledges.

Throughout these chapters I have been suggesting that unrepresentable memories find their expression in the characteristic gaps of experimental cinema, or what Deleuze calls time-image cinema. The “shattering of the sensory-motor schema” (Deleuze 1989, 55) that characterizes time-image cinema describes a suspension of the usual relations among the senses and their automatic extension into movement. I suggest that the very perceptual forms that encode
memory may be revealed, by this shattering effect, to be culturally specific. Film’s “physical shock effect” (Benjamin 1968c, 238) is its potential to disrupt the commonsense patterns of sense experience, making room for new cultural organizations of perception. Cinema can be the site of new configurations of sense knowledge, produced in (or in spite of) the encounter between different cultures.

The cinema of cultural displacement often focuses on loss: of language, of custom, of one’s place in a community. However, a discourse of loss alone cannot explain the transformations and new productions of culture and consciousness that occur in diaspora. These chapters have moved from discourses of loss and unknowability to 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 synthesis, from excavation to transformation. When language cannot record memories, we often look to images. When images fail to revive memory, we may look to the well-kept secrets of objects. Unpacking the secrets encoded in images and objects, we find the memory of the senses. This final chapter explores the representation of sense knowledge in intercultural contexts. Yet the films and videos I examine here must still deal with loss, for when the memory of the senses fails—when there are no people who can awaken the knowledge of an object in their own bodies—the loss itself becomes an element of public culture (Seremetakis 1994, 8). Intercultural artists cannot simply recreate the sensory experience of their individual or cultural past. Instead, intercultural cinema bears witness to the reorganization of the senses that takes place, and the new kinds of sense knowledges that become possible, when people move between cultures.

In this final chapter, then, I will argue that the senses are a source of social knowledge. This will require an excursion into the psychology and neurophysiology of sense memory, in which I focus on the sense of smell. I will point out that the organization of the senses, that is, the sensorium, varies culturally as well as individually; thus we would expect cinema to represent the sensorial organization of a given culture. Often the sensorium is the only place where cultural memories are preserved. For intercultural cinema, therefore, sense experience is at the heart of cultural memory. All this evidence of the rich cultivation of sense experience is only useful for understanding cinema if we can understand the cinematic experi-
ence to be multisensory: I will argue that it is, even beyond devices like Odorama, given a viewer’s mimetic and synesthetic inclinations. One would expect that artists would be somewhat suspicious of the cinematic apparatus’s ability to represent their precious, and often nonaudiovisual, sensory knowledges: I will look at a number of works, particularly by aboriginal artists, to see how they stretch the apparatus to express these knowledges. A look at Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* and related works explores how intercultural artists use the medium to represent the importance of sensuous and bodily memories.

Of course, with intercultural cinema, there is not only one sensorum at work. Diasporan people inhabit at least two: that of their culture of origin, and the new sensory organization in which they find themselves. Consequently, I will suggest that many intercultural works are ambivalent about their ability to represent the traditional sensory experience; this distinguishes them from the exoticizing films that serve their eager audience the sensuous life of another culture on a platter.

The work of Black Audio Film Collective was what first drew my attention to the way cinema calls upon the senses when other sources of history/memory are inaccessible. I have mentioned Black Audio’s interest in using rituals and evocative tableaux in their stylized documentaries. Reece Auguiste’s *Mysteries of July* (1991), in particular, evokes the knowledge of the senses in order to intensify a social protest. The short film begins with the fact that an inordinate number of young Black men in England die in police custody. As do many Black Audio films, it begins where the known facts end, for, not surprisingly, there are no official records of the circumstances of these deaths. The film reconstructs one of the deaths, making it clear that it was the result of the British police’s institutionalized racism. But it does not stop here. Auguiste recognizes that the decisive laying of blame, when there is no legal recourse to convict the killers, cannot heal the pain in the Black community. Instead, *Mysteries of July* enacts an elaborate ritual of mourning. Candles and incense burn at a memorial altar decorated with flowers and rich satin, which reflects their light in pools of intense color. Mourners walk slowly, in silence, carrying candles. In a scene of grief and rage, these colors, textures, and imagined smells take on an intensity that cannot be expressed verbally or visually.
Four years after I saw *Mysteries of July*, I watched a short videotape that seemed to reduce all my ideas about cinema and sense experience to a one-liner. Toronto videomaker Steve Reinke’s project “The Hundred Videos” (1992–95) is a collection of very short pieces, many of which are exquisite, condensed theses, almost haikus, about the impossibility of representing truth in documentary cinema. One of these tapes consists of a close-up of the lower half of a man’s (pale, stubbly) face. He extrudes his tongue and uses it to insert small pieces of canned fruit cocktail into his nostrils, first one, then the other. Then he does the same with canned peas and carrots. That’s all. The tape is called *Instructions for Recovering Forgotten Childhood Memories* (1993).

Part of Reinke’s joke is that the banal and slightly disgusting act of putting canned fruit up your nose is supposed to have the power to reach deep levels of the psyche. Part of it is a joke on psychoanalysis: one wishes it could be so easy to recover forgotten memories. But also Reinke raises the issue of how memories are embodied in the senses. Using your tongue to put pieces of canned fruit in your nose calls upon many kinds of sensory awareness: taste; smell; the inimitable feeling of a slimy canned pear sliding up your face from one sensitive membrane to another; the physical dexterity required to
do this. It is a rich multisensory experience that many children and surely a few adults have had. But Reinke is also calling upon a particular cultural memory, common to those of us who regularly ate canned fruits and vegetables as children. Not everybody can identify with this act.

This short tape raises some of the questions I will approach in this chapter: What experiences are so beyond cinematic representation that they require extra-audiovisual means? How does one represent sense memory? Is it a process of narrative identification, of bodily identification? Can the mere audiovisual representation of a gustatorial act successfully arouse lost memories; or, as Reinke’s title (“Instructions”) suggests, must one physically carry out the act oneself? And what are the intercultural limits of such memory: can one identify with sense memories one has never had?

In this chapter I continue to explore works that push the visual limits of cinema, and to appeal to the authority of nonvisual perception. I argue that in many cultures the sense of sight, while important, is not as paramount as it is in postindustrial metropoli. Thus the antivisual turn often entails an appeal to cultures that cultivate the proximal senses. However, let me caution at the outset that, much as one might like, one cannot put on a sensorium like a suit of clothes and instantly be washed with new sensory perceptions. Sense knowledge is embedded in culture. It is more productive to
look for the latent sensory abilities that already exist within a culture, the tactile, smelly, and gustatory knowledges and pleasures that exist alongside the more "elevated" distance knowledges. Also, the seeker of sensation should know that sense knowledge, like any cultural knowledge, is always migrating and transforming.

Once more, let me point to some of the limits of this extravisual exploration. Vision is the primary sense in most cultures for good reason. Everybody needs senses that operate over distance, which vision and hearing do best. There are interesting exceptions: for example, the Umeda people of the New Guinea rainforest use smell as a distance sense, for they hunt in dense forests where it is not easy to see or hear one's predators or prey (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994, 98). My project is not to attempt to overthrow the visual altogether, but to relativize the uses of the senses according to different cultural organizations of the sensorium.

**Sense Memory as Social Memory**

As I suggested in chapter 1, attempts to reconstruct experience by digging in archives of public and private memory are full of pitfalls, since often these experiences are normalized upon interpretation into film language, rather than remaining destabilizing and "radioactive." How to allow experience to retain its strangeness and untranslatability? Even the oral history, which is held to be one of the least invasive ways to represent social memory, tends to determine the shape of its responses by fitting the interviewee into the framework of dominant history (Connerton 1989). Paul Connerton suggests that these stories may be discovered not in narrative form but in the evidence of ritual, gesture, and other embodied forms of memory. These memories are especially crucial as repositories of knowledge for people whose experience is not represented in the dominant society. The memory of the senses, a nontransparent and differentially available body of information, is important to everybody as a source of individual knowledge. For cultural minorities, it is an especially important source of cultural knowledge. The histories recorded in the body reveal other patterns than those signaled by elections, the passage of laws, national credit ratings, and other big-ticket signs of shifts in the global sociopolitical sphere. I suggested in chapter 2 that the intercultural travels of seemingly idio-
syncratic and "private" objects are often signs of political events that do not register on public scales. Embodied memories and experiences may well be some of the most important registers of global shifts in power and the emergence of new subjectivities. And as Elaine Scarry points out, the body remains a political witness despite efforts to "reeducate" it. She retells Bruno Bettelheim's story from the concentration camps in which a German soldier recognizes a woman who used to be a dancer and orders her to dance for him. "She did so, and as she moved into the habitual bodily rhythms and movements from which she had been cut off, she became reacquainted with the person (herself) from whom she had lost contact; recalling herself in her own mimesis of herself, she remembered who she was, danced up to the officer, moved her hand with grace for his gun, took it, and shot him" (1985, 347; referring to Bettelheim 1960).

Arthur Jafa (aka A. J. Fielder), cinematographer for Who Needs a Heart? and Daughters of the Dust (among other films), accepts the term "materialist retentionist" to describe his aesthetics:

What that means is that I have a belief in certain levels of cultural retention. Nam June Paik, the godfather of video art, has this great quote: "The culture that's going to survive in the future is the culture you can carry in your head." The middle passage is such a clear example of this, because you see black American culture particularly developed around those areas we could carry around in our heads—oral. Oratorical prowess, dance, music, those kinds of things. (1992, 69)

Of course, Jafa's examples of "culture you can carry in your head" include knowledges that, like dance and music, are also carried in the body.

C. Nadia Seremetakis devotes a chapter of The Senses Still (1994) to a peach that was once cultivated in the region of Greece where she grew up. The rodhákino did not travel well and was not known outside of the places it grew. The rise of mass agricultural marketing in Greece, capped by that country's entry into the European Union, made the peach practically disappear from the market. Now, Seremetakis writes, it exists only in the memory of those who used to eat it—"Ah, that peach, what an aroma! and taste! The breast of Aphrodite we called it. These (peaches and other food) today have no taste
(ά-nosta)” (2). These memories remain embodied in the senses even when their stimulus has disappeared.

Seremetakis argues that the memory of the senses is itself a cultural artifact. Sense memories and material artifacts work in the same way; both are emissaries of cultural experience. She describes a cultural communion with the sense memories inscribed in objects. These artifacts are often traveling fetishes, of the sort I described in chapter 2: they might include the Zinacanteca women’s tight sash that Leslie Devereaux (1995) describes, Shauna Beharry’s mother’s sari in Seeing Is Believing, the distinct smell of carnations for the Colombian women who grow them in Love, Women, and Flowers, or canned fruit cocktail up the nose for a North American child in Instructions for Recovering Forgotten Childhood Memories. Fetish objects are used to extend bodily experience into memory: Seremetakis’s peach, like these other objects, is a prosthesis for memory.

Clearly the sense memories Seremetakis describes are not only individual, but shared. Her example underscores the argument that social memory is carried in individual bodies. Many artists and theorists claim sense experience as a site of “freedom” from cultural constraints—Stan Brakhage’s desire to “free the eye” (1963) from cultural constraints, Susan Buck-Morss’s (1992) suggestion that the body has a “wild,” unalienable core of sense experience. But in fact the senses are also sites of cultural expression. Sense organs are the sites where culture crosses the body.

I have emphasized throughout this book that cinema can activate inert presences, such as historical archives and fetish objects, and make them volatile so that they intervene in the present. Now I would like to add sense memory to those presences. Seremetakis writes that the Greek etymology of nostalgia is nostó, I return, plus alghó, I feel pain (1994, 4). Nostalgia, then, need not mean an immobilizing longing for a lost past: it can also mean the ability of past experiences to transform the present.

Perceptual Plasticity and Intersensory Perception

To understand how the senses encode culture, it is necessary to examine how this process takes place in the body. First we must acknowledge that all the senses may be vehicles of memory, and
that bodies encode memory in the senses in quite varied ways. As I have noted, Henri Bergson ([1911] 1988) anticipated later research on perception when he emphasized that the use of the senses is not given but learned. Perception in Bergson’s model is plastic; implicitly it is variable according to culture and local need. Thus it provides a way to understand the wide range of possible organizations of sense memory. Some perceptions are more immediate: smell, taste, and touch usually fall into this category. Other perceptions provide more room to maneuver, a “zone of indetermination” (32) in which memory may intervene. However, these distinctions are merely quantitative. All sense perceptions allow for, and indeed require, the mediation of memory.

We are “wired” for great variation in the way we use our senses. Our sensorimotor cortex, or the outer layer of the brain where most sensory information is processed, is a map of our sensuous relationship to the world (Finkel 1992, 399). Everybody’s cortex is configured differently, since sense perception, like other mental capacities, is reinforced on the basis of use and must be reinforced by continuous practice. Cooks have stronger synaptic connections between the sensorimotor cortex and tongue and nasal receptors than the average person. Violinists are found to have a larger cortical representation of the fingers of the left hand than are (presumably right-handed) nonstring players (Elbert et al. 1995, 305). Other sense capacities tend to adjust accordingly: one would not expect a cook to have an extremely discriminating sense of hearing, for example. The cooperation among the senses is especially evident in the many studies of perception that show that one sense modality can learn to respond to information normally headed for another modality. Consider the acute hearing of blind people. When I used to rent movies with two blind friends (one congenitally, the other from later in life), their aural perceptiveness astonished me. In the movie a door would open and a new character step into the room; Chris would say, “That’s the bad guy,” and a couple of scenes later I would find that he was right. Blindness made my friends exquisite aural semioticians.

In cognitive science there is growing interest in the idea that the mind, not the environment, is the source of representation. This need not be a solipsistic argument if we understand the mind itself to be formed through experience. Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch (1991) argue that the meanings of sense ex-
perience are not given by the world but learned through embodied action, through the complex interaction of cultural and bodily processes. Our perception of color categories, for example, is not a reaction to wavelength and intensity of light, nor is it wholly subjective: they argue that it is both based on apparently physiological universals and culturally specific (168–71). This would suggest that while there may be physiological bases for everybody’s agreement that a certain red is the exemplary red, or that a certain smell is noxious, there is also great cultural variation in the cortical representation of this information. One culture may not have a word for that exemplary red; people in another culture may be oblivious to the noxious smell.

The implications of this research for intercultural experience are several. First, our sensorium is formed by culture: it produces a map of the “objective” world that reflects our cultural configuration of the senses. Second, our sensorium creates the world “subjectively” for us. Thus, one would expect that in an ocularcentric culture, people will experience and produce the world as a primarily visual world. And a person whose sensorium reflects the cultural importance of smell will produce a world in which smell matters. Third, given the plasticity of neural networks, it is possible to learn a new configuration of the senses—although learning the memories that accompany it is another matter.

**The Nose Knows**

I want to focus on the sense of smell to pursue my argument that the sensorium is malleable, that the sense modalities work in concert, and that all sense experience is informed by culture. Foreign cultures tend to be both vilified and exoticized in terms of smell. It appears to be universal, and is certainly understandable, that every culture prefers its own world of smells to any other (Classen 1993, 79–80): as Freud said, our own shit never stinks. But the association of smell with primitivism has served the ends of cultural imperialism, in the name of civilizing and controlling the perceived odorous excesses of other cultures. Hence my concern to “abase” vision and “elevate” smell, by showing that the one is embodied and intimate, the other cognitive and cultivated. By pulling at these two ends of the sensory hierarchy, I hope to realign all the sensory modalities
that lie "between" them in value, in order to reconfigure this hierarchy from a scale of values to a wiggle of intensities.

Everyone agrees that learning is verbal, and correspondingly that words are a medium of knowledge. Most will agree that vision can be educated as well; hence the term "visual literacy" (which reduces the visual to the symbolic). But the senses of hearing (exclusive of the verbal), taste, touch, and smell are less often accepted as senses that can be educated, that is, as sources of knowledge. Yet I would argue that olfaction, like the other senses, may be cultivated; therefore the sense of smell can be a source of cultural knowledge. If this case can be made for the lowly sense of smell, then it must be accepted that other senses are knowledgeable as well.

First we must ask, do human smell preferences have some genetic core or are they entirely learned? It is a common argument that we have an innate, that is, genetic, attraction to odors associated with sexuality, and an innate aversion to odors of danger and death (for example, Stoddart 1990). The latter might explain why, especially in dualistic cultures, smell has been considered a primitive and dangerously sensual sense. This primitivism might also be explained by Freud's hypothesis that the sense of smell is repressed both phylogenetically and ontogenetically: the first, when humans adopted upright carriage and distanced themselves from their smelly anogenital areas; the second, when a child yields to socialization and abandons its pleasure in its own feces (Freud 1985, 279).

Humans' famous phylogenetic standing-up may well explain the repression of sensory awareness of sexual and other bodily odors. Now, when we use perfumes, we layer culture onto smell's biological substrate, sublimating sexual odors into these more symbolic scents, olfactory signs for sexuality. Nevertheless, despite this mimicking of biology by culture, I would argue that Freud collapsed the cultural aspects of smell onto the genetic. Sexual sublimation does not explain the complexity with which smell is deployed in different cultures, for example.

The proximal senses of touch, smell, and taste are more central to the experience of most nonhuman creatures, be they chimpanzees or paramecia, than they are to humans. These senses are also more important in the early years of human infancy and childhood: infants can identify their mothers and other important people through smell before they recognize them visually (Engen 1991, 63). The dis-
tance senses of vision and hearing are more developed in higher animals, and they also develop with human maturity. All this would seem to support the assumption that the “close” senses are primitive both in the life of the species and in the life of the individual, and that the distance senses are the most “evolved” in both implications of the word. Hence, I believe, the unwillingness of many cultural theorists to broach these topics, from fear of being accused of primitivism and essentialism. Yet it is worth venturing further to test these assumptions.

While most creatures have strong genetic codings for the smells of sex, food, danger, and death, for the most part it appears that humans do not (Hines 1997, 79). Instead we are genetically wired to learn strong but contextual responses to smells. Centers in the brain for processing different kinds of sensory information develop at different points in the growth of the fetus and infant. Cognition takes place in the cortex, the youngest and most evolved part of the brain (Stoddart 1990, 34). The hypothalamus, which is noncognitive, is the oldest part of the brain both phylogenetically and ontogenetically: it was once referred to as the rhinencephalon, or “smell brain.” This and other parts of the limbic system (notably the amygdala) deal with memory and emotion. Olfaction is the only sense perception whose neural pathway leads directly to the hypothalamus: this means that olfaction alone has a fundamentally noncognitive component. Yet simultaneously another neural pathway leads from the nose (strictly speaking, the olfactory bulb) to the cortex. This means that smell is processed cognitively at the same time that it awakens deep-seated, precognitive memories. Memories of smell endure much longer, even after a single exposure to an odor, than visual or auditory memories. Yet smell is difficult to verbalize and visualize (Schab 1991, 243). Smells are easier to identify through personal memory associations than by name (and Schab’s article invests these associations with nostalgia: “grandma’s kitchen” vs. “floor wax”; “the tobacco grandfather used to smoke” vs. “Prince Albert tobacco” [245, 246]). We respond emotionally to a smell first, and then we name it: asphalt, magnolia, grandma’s kitchen. Since we process smell both cognitively and precognitively, we learn emotional responses to smell. We learn to love our mothers’ smell, be it sweat or perfume (Engen 1991, 63–74), to identify the smell of home, be it fish sauce or mildew, and to build new associations
with the new smell environments we come across. Margaret Morse writes most evocatively of the associations of smell with home, even when sense memories are aroused by completely different stimuli, as when the sea near Athens—"fresh like watermelon, with funky undertones"—takes her back years to a duck pond in Ohio (1999, 66).

All this suggests that, despite the "deepness" of smell centers in the brain, smell preferences and abilities can be developed in an individual lifetime. The nose, then, is not merely a gonadal gondola. The sense of smell is cultivated far beyond its "animal" associations. Given the malleability of human sensory capacities, it seems necessary to recognize the cultural dimension of smell. Where more symbolic languages tend to strip private memory away, the proximal senses are where memory remains in the body.³

**The Cultural Sensorium**

Not only cooks, musicians, and blind people develop specialized configurations of their sensoria. More profoundly, studies of the sensorium suggest great cultural differences in the way the nervous system organizes the senses. As Walter Ong first pointed out, a given culture will teach us to specialize our sensorium in particular ways by paying more attention to some types of perception than others. "Given sufficient knowledge of the sensorium exploited within a specific culture, one could probably define the culture as a whole in virtually all its aspects" (Ong [1967] 1991, 28). Since Ong wrote this, a number of anthropologists have begun to devote themselves to describing different cultures according to their organization of the sensorium.⁴ This is a fascinating body of work that only begins to suggest the great variation in the uses of perception of which the body is capable, and the survival, customary, ritual, aesthetic, and other purposes that inform human sensoria. It also raises methodological questions: for example, is the sensorium best described by long-standing ritual practices, or by informal, everyday practices? I will draw on some of these anthropologists' findings below, as I did in the previous chapter, to show how cultures use the senses as sources of information and understanding in extremely different ways, and how these different sensoria can be translated into, and translate, cinematic languages.

This recent interest in cultural difference at the level of the sen-