

Keeping in Touch with the Aged Body: The Haptic Turn in Contemporary German Cinema

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This paper takes as its starting point the observation that a shift in the representation of ageing women (and men) has taken place in recent German cinema. I attribute this change to what Laura Marks has termed “haptic visuality,” which presumes a bodily exchange between spectators and screen and thus entails the possibility of changing our perception of the ageing body on screen. Three recent German films, namely Vadim Jendreyko’s *The Woman with the Five Elephants* (2009), Chris Kraus’s *Four Minutes* (2006) and Andreas Dresen’s *Cloud Nine* (2008) display the strategies and potential of a haptic representation of “healthily” ageing (female) bodies in the cinema. With regard to the severity of recent demographic changes in Germany, my paper suggests that this “new” way of representing aged bodies might serve as an important tool for the dissolution of ageist sentiments and generational tensions.

Cet article porte sur le cinéma allemand récent et prend pour point de départ le déplacement qui s’y est produit dans la représentation des femmes et des hommes vieillissants. J’attribue ce changement à ce que Laura Marks appelle « la visualité haptique ». Le terme désigne un échange corporel entre les spectateurs et l’écran et, dans ce contexte, rend possible le changement de perception que nous avons du corps vieillissant, à l’écran. Trois films allemands récents témoignent des stratégies et du potentiel d’une représentation haptique, au cinéma, de corps (féminins) vieillissants « en bonne santé » : *La femme aux cinq éléphants* (2009) de Vadim Jendreyko, *Quatre minutes* (2006) de Chris Kraus, et *Septième ciel* (2008) d’Andreas Dresen. Mon article prend en compte les importants

changements démographiques survenus récemment en Allemagne. Dans cette optique, ce « nouveau » mode de représentation des corps vieillissants pourrait aider à dissiper le sentiment âgiste et les tensions générationnelles.

THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

Over the last few years contemporary German cinema has sparked a remarkable emphasis on the topic of old age. This, in part, has allowed for a growing cinematic visibility of aged women (and men) due to a significant change in their cultural representation. When considering mainstream film history (and, to some extent, society at large) it is safe to say that old women and their bodies were often visually silenced or overlooked, as well as ridiculed, pathologized or infantilized. Therefore, this striking recurrence of films revolving around elderly female protagonists might very well be read as a sign of the demographic changes taking place in Germany.¹ It forces a change in the way the aged, especially aged women—who biologically speaking still live longer than men—are being perceived socially.

In addition to numerous negative economic or health related issues, a longer life expectancy creates a new period of time which does not necessarily already hold a socially conformist picture as to how it should be lived. Consequently this “gained” life-span can be used in ways that give rise to new narratives and produce new social and media images. The potential for the rehabilitation of the social perception of the (fe)male aged body in visual culture lies precisely within the images these new narratives create. Hence they occur mainly in films about protagonists experiencing so-called *healthy old age*. However, in order for this mechanism to function, it is not only the content but also the mode of representation that needs to be altered.

This paper argues that the latter can be and has already been achieved through the use of filmic images displaying different visual strategies and

¹ The overall population of Germany is more than 81 million people. The number of individuals aged over 65 is estimated to grow from 16,7 million in 2008 to 22,3 million in 2030 indicating an increase of 33% (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, *Demografischer Wandel in Deutschland* [Heft 1, 2011]: 8). These numbers show that the potential dissolution of ageist sentiments or generational tensions is indeed a social and economic necessity. The filmic strategies described in this essay will potentially contribute to this process.

thus triggering a shift in audience perception made visible in films such as Vadim Jendreyko's documentary *The Woman with the Five Elephants* (*Die Frau mit den fünf Elefanten*, 2009), Chris Kraus' *Four Minutes* (*Vier Minuten*, 2006), and Andreas Dresen's *Cloud Nine* (*Wolke 9*, 2008). Within these films, "optic visuality," which establishes a distance between spectators and the image that can give way to the visual degradation of old women, is replaced by what film philosopher Laura Marks terms "haptic visuality." In what follows, the strategies behind this "haptic turn" will be explained in more detail.

How, then, can films make our bodies feel and understand old age? Established gaze structures influenced by psychoanalytic strategies have helped to maintain old women's cinematic and social invisibility or their occurrence as, by way of example, the grotesque or the horrible body. By dissolving these power structures haptic theory is able to free these bodies. This is illustrated by the fact that Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject is a frequent occurrence within discourse on the aged (female) body. According to literary theorist Sally Chivers, this is due to the fact that sexuality in old age loses its implied "purpose" and turns into "sexual pleasure for its own sake."² The image of the old female body as abject thus combines the seemingly contradictory notions of femininity, sexuality and death. The primary potential of haptic visuality is therefore the elimination of the distance needed in order to create an (abject) Other.

This mechanism is brought to light through closer examination of the definition of haptic visuality. In their respective works, both Marks and Vivian Sobchack emphasize the reversibility of the film viewing process which they describe as an exchange between two bodies (film and spectator) that connect on the level of their respective "skin." Films are therefore comprehended haptically before they are grasped cognitively.

² Sally Chivers, *From Old Woman to Older Woman, Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), xxiii.

THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

Both of these approaches are influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). In opposition to Cartesian dualism, for Merleau-Ponty body, mind and world are constantly interacting. When translated into film theory, this means that the idea of visual mastery over the object on screen is erased by the assumption that films and worlds are perceived on the level of the intelligent body which is able to create meaning on its own.³ Haptic theory thus initiates an overall rehabilitation of the body and its senses both on- and off-screen and is therefore capable of purging the aged female body from its abject stigma. If the gaze system no longer applies, the appearance of the aged body on screen will not be met with immediate repulsion. The shock-effect is reversed. Sobchack argues that, due to the fact that the screen cannot literally be touched, spectators are returned to their own bodies where the tactile experience is doubled up.⁴ Following Simone de Beauvoir, this recalls the fact that old age lives in all of us and is eventually going to reveal itself.⁵ It can thus be argued that the spectator is returned to her or himself as Other. This Other is, however, their future Self. It follows that haptic images of aged bodies allow spectators to get in touch with the idea of their own body as ageing or aged.

Interestingly, in her analysis of identity construction in old age, empirical gerontologist Susanne Blum-Lehmann makes use of phenomenological body concepts. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that the body is inter-subjectively linked with its existence in the world and with other people. The "I" thus becomes aware of the body only if it ceases to function, which leads the individual to develop a gradually growing bodily

³ Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Semiotic Phenomenology of Cinematic Embodiment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

awareness of the ageing process.⁶ Due to physical deterioration, the aged body potentially turns into a barrier between the world and the “I,” and between the individual and other people. In film theory, Sobchack uses Merleau-Ponty’s exact arguments; the “body” of the film is thereby described as a continuity of the body of the spectator. The three German films analyzed below speak to the ways in which aged bodies are granted visibility in order to interact with the bodies of the spectators in spite of their own physical limitations.

The Woman with the Five Elephants is a documentary about the 80-year old Ukrainian-German translator Swetlana Geier who came to Germany during WWII where, amongst other achievements, she retranslated Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s five major works. Very tellingly, one of the German comments under the You Tube trailer for the film reads “What a beautiful woman this is!” Given that the protagonist is an octogenarian who looks her age and even has a hunchback, this statement already serves as an indicator for a visual strategy that provokes a different perception. There are two main elements to this strategy. The first is a deliberate sensitizing of the viewer through the use of extreme close-ups such as, for instance, in the film’s opening sequence: over the blurry, dark image of a train crossing a bridge, a woman’s voice recites a poem . The voice is soon identified as Geier’s own through a close-up shot of her face. The viewer, who has already engaged with the haptic image of the nocturnal bridge, is very likely to continue this with Geier’s wrinkled skin. The second element amounts to a constant alternation between mental and manual work in both content and aesthetics. This is partially achieved by a clear emphasis on texture throughout the entire film, be it as a palpable structure or as an intellectual concept. It becomes clear that, to Geier the translator, language is just another texture, like her skin, or the rugs and clothes in

⁶ See also Susanne Blum-Lehmann, “*Leib-körperliches Altern und Identität*” (PhD diss., Universität Vechta, 2008), 61.

THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

her house, or the dough she kneads and the fruit filling she prepares. The texts she has translated have somehow turned into extensions of herself and, to echo Donna Haraway, her body does not end at her skin but, in fact, *is* literature.⁷ This facilitates the process of haptic immersion since the viewer now engages not only with an aged female body but with all the texts, knowledge and memories it encompasses and exudes. The hapticity of texture furthermore combines the grandmotherly image with that of a still productive female intellectual in her 80s, one image legitimizing the other. The haptic image plays into this dynamic but adds an additional dimension, namely that of diaspora. This corresponds with the fact that Marks's primary sources were the video works of intercultural cinema. She investigates how the traumatic experiences of a diasporic population were stored as sensual memories within the bodies of the filmmakers and subsequently translated into film. The resulting grainy or blurry haptic images encourage the viewer's body to engage in their completion.⁸ They withhold a knowledge and memory that is both acquired and made revocable via physical contact.⁹ Thus, Marks's theory renders it possible to look at the aged body as a body inscribed with meaning exceeding the spectrum of loss and death precisely because it carries a history of memories. *The Woman with the Five Elephants* not only shows the translator at work, but it also follows her on her first and last journey back to Kiev after 50 years of living in Germany. As such, this is also a film about a transnational life and the experience of exile and, Marks's explanation of the ways in which diasporic peoples' intense emotions turn into haptic images within intercultural cinema can equally be applied to an analysis of the representation of Geier's body. The fact of reminiscing

⁷ See Donna Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto," www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html (accessed 14 January, 2011).

⁸ Laura Marks, *Touch, Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

about the past allows it to become incorporated into the present and, as a result, to actualize Geier's aged body. The resulting image combines the sense of touch attributed to the aged female body and the specific (cultural) memory of the past attached to this body. In addition, it evokes the certain loss of this touch once this particular aged woman will be gone. The romantic image of the nurturing Russian *babushka* (and the German *Großmutter*) is gradually fading and will soon belong to the past as is explicitly shown in one particular haptic image (fig.1). This image shows Geier at a traditional Ukrainian-Russian meal: from a distance, the camera captures the table around which the family is seated in a blurry candle-lit chiaroscuro. Geier, in her role as matriarch, serves every family member soup. The interplay between the palpability of the image and the nostalgia its content evokes creates a longing for a generic grandmotherly body and its smells, and for the touches and tastes evoked by that body. Furthermore, it implies a longing for the old homeland to which, after the disappearance of Geier's body, the family will no longer have the same traditional connection and haptic access.

While *The Woman with the Five Elephants* gently lures the spectator into a haptic interaction with an aged female body, *Four Minutes* functions in a much more aggressive and forceful mode. The film is about Jenny (Hannah Herzprung), a 20-year old former piano prodigy imprisoned for murder, and her 80-year old piano teacher, Traude Krüger (Monica Bleibtreu), who works in the prison where she has been incarcerated and tries to revive the young woman's talent. Setting and narrative already indicate a different representation of this ageing protagonist. Sally Chivers writes that "[p]art of how to find new ways of perceiving ourselves as ageing bodies and faces is to construct a narrative in which these images can be read otherwise."¹⁰ *Four Minutes* achieves this by placing an octogenarian piano teacher in the unusual and tense context of a juvenile

¹⁰ Chivers, *From Old Woman to Older Woman*, xxxiv.

THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

prison. This has a remarkable effect on her body: removed from the visual outskirts of society and placed amongst equally abject bodies, she is rendered both visible and touchable.

In addition to the confined space of the prison there is another aggressive factor inscribing itself onto the bodies within it: sound. Even though she does not directly address it, Marks argues that sound, too, can be haptic: “so too hearing can perceive the environment in a more or less instrumental way.”¹¹ The sound in *Four Minutes* is violent, as is the disrespectful way the young angry pianist treats the old lady. The effect, however, is entirely contrary to a degradation of the aged woman: to respect this body would be equal to mummifying it, to accepting an “abject” inscription on it and giving in to its expected representation. Moreover, the same violent rapport also affects the viewer-screen relationship. When Marks introduces the notion of identification with an old, sick or handicapped body,¹² she still seems to suggest that the skin or surface of the image displaying said body remains intact.

However, what if this skin itself is not only *not intact* but subject to erosion? The film displays a series of haptic or what I would like to call “numbed” images that illustrate this. One of these images appears right after the two main characters’ first meeting. The piano teacher will not let Jenny play with her bruised hands and asks the superintendent to lead her out. Jenny’s self-destructiveness is directed against the latter and, as soon as he touches her, she starts to beat him up. The camera does not show the violent act itself but focuses, instead, on the teacher in close-up leaving the

¹¹ Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film, Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 183.

¹² This is suggested in her concept of the “tactile mirror stage.” Here, identification functions by means of touch (Marks, *Touch, Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, 16). Thus, the image in haptic theory need not be intact. Instead, spectators are allowed to identify with an image or a self which is “ageing and disappearing” yet “contains the *memory* of a more complete self” (*Ibid.*, 105-106).

room (fig.2). Apart from a tinnitus-like sound the background noises suddenly seem very distant. The teacher's aural perception of the scene appears to be numbed and, throughout her partially "numbed" walk, the visual background is blurred and thus visually silenced. The detachment of her body from the rest of the images and noises transports the elderly woman into a space somewhere in front of the screen. Against the blurry background her body seems almost overly visible and appears to protrude from it. Her body comes across as closer to the audience and seems to be more intimately linked with the bodies of the spectators who share the teacher's perception. The fact that her perception is violently interrupted has a direct impact on the viewer. Her body is not intentionally violated yet her perception causes it to react in a way that might have been similar had it actually been assaulted. This observation is equally valuable with regard to the viewer-film relation: the temporal interruption of two senses (hearing and seeing) emphasizes the materiality of the aged body, the texture of the teacher's cardigan, hair and skin, and even that of the filmic image itself. It thus stimulates the relation that exists between viewer and film, inviting us to haptically interact with this "numbed image." When sound finally returns (and thus the hearing sense), the rhythmic beats of the *Handcuff Rock* Jenny manages to play before the security officers stop her sound like acoustic punches. Significantly, the device of the "numbed image" recurs later on after the young woman has lost her temper and beaten the older woman. The image fades to black to the sound of Krüger's body collapsing to the ground. The spectator, who is knocked out along with the teacher and again shares her perception, sees (or indeed senses) a recurrent image of a tender moment between the two women, when they danced together earlier in the film. Thus, after the taboo of beating an old woman has been shockingly violated and the social assumptions of her fragility and untouchability finally destroyed, the subsequent tender haptic image provides a level of relief.

THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

While deep emotions are relatively subdued in *Four Minutes, Cloud Nine* renders their pragmatic corporeal reality much more explicit. It “hapticizes” extraordinary images of a relationship drama—a woman (Inge [Ursula Werner], in her mid-60s) is caught between two men, her husband (Werner [Horst Rehberg], in his 70s), and her lover (Karl [Horst Westphal], almost 80)—that would be considered common and potentially boring had it occurred at an earlier stage in the protagonists’ lives. When the film was first released it caused a minor scandal due to its explicit sex scenes. However, here too, the spectator is gently lured into a haptic viewing of the bodies. This takes place in several steps.

The opening shots of the film show a needle hopping up and down and Inge touching her face; these then give way to sweaty close-ups of her face and of the tactility of the craft of sewing. In subsequent shots she is shown taking the tram. The reflection of the sunshine in the glass and the movement of the tram render her face visible at times and invisible at others, blurring inside and outside on the reflective surface. Thus, the ageing woman’s face and body are protected while the viewer gently grows accustomed to them. This introduction of the aged body shows how haptic visibility is “in itself erotic.”¹³ The skin-on-skin experience of haptic film viewing is “primarily mimetic” and blurs the boundaries between subject and object.¹⁴ Consequently, desire here is not linked to any object but located somewhere between the filmic image and the spectatorial body; the intimacy inherent in haptic viewing challenges common preconceptions about which bodies can be called beautiful and desirable.

The process of haptic sensitization which occurred during the first few scenes pays off when Inge is shown having sex with Karl, the customer to whom she has come to deliver a pair of altered trousers. The camera is close enough to show the wrinkled skin, grey hair, fat deposits

¹³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 185.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

and age spots yet respectful enough to not reveal everything. Furthermore, either one or both of the characters' heads remain within the frame at all times so as to limit the fragmentation of their bodies. Precisely here lies the difference between voyeurism and eroticism (fig 3). Whereas voyeurism relies on distance in order to master the object, eroticism is akin to haptic visuality.¹⁵ It sets up a "tension between viewer and image," by rendering them "vulnerable" and reversing the power relation.¹⁶ This first sex scene clearly illustrates the unsettling character of the haptic strategy. What it reveals might still disturb spectators yet it speaks to them on the level of the intelligent body: these very bodies which society has termed abject are clearly visible and engaged in a life-affirming act. Indeed, this might be the most perception-altering fact about these images: that these old bodies are touched and desired in images that involve the spectators themselves on a haptic level.

The frequency with which sex is shown in the film reinforces this mechanism. The film's actual "scandal," however, arises less from these explicit sex scenes than from their implication of a potential shift in gender roles occurring in old age. *Cloud Nine* shows in filmic terms what happens when the social gaze ceases to apply: the use of haptic images allows for the female body to be shown as desirable and purged of the limitations of the dominant ideal of beauty; the biological male predefinition, however, remains. In very old age the body turns into destiny and does so, first and foremost, for men who are no longer able to adhere to the image of a potent body.¹⁷ Werner and Karl embody very different types of ageing men. The differences in their representation (apart from its oversimplification) are highly unfair: whereas Werner represents the figure of the benevolently dependent grandfather whose bodily strength is

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁷ Blum-Lehmann, "*Leib-körperliches Altern und Identität*," 46.

THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

weakening, Karl embodies the “young old” subject defined by Blum-Lehmann as a postmodern figure pursuing agelessness and eternal youthfulness.¹⁸ Nevertheless, both are constantly trying to maintain their virility whereas Inge rediscovers the power of her body’s sensuality and finds herself quite unexpectedly in a position of sexual empowerment. As a result, the boundaries erode between her role as a grandmother, as a lover and an adulteress. The moral questioning of her character ceases only when, in another haptic image, she mourns Werner’s suicide while Karl is holding her, and the consequences, but also the courage of her decision, are tragically revealed.

Through these three case studies, I have shown how a series of current films are aiming to lure the spectator into a haptic interaction with female (and male) aged bodies on screen. They reveal the strategies behind the haptic turn and willfully destroy the visual regime that formerly used to render aged (especially female) bodies abject. In so doing, they re-inscribe these bodies with different meanings and challenge the stereotypes commonly associated with ageing women, such as that of the figure of the grandmother.

In *La Vieillesse* (1970), de Beauvoir writes that love and jealousy as felt and expressed by ageing individuals are considered disgusting or ridiculous, while their sexuality is seen as repulsive and their expressions of violence are viewed as preposterous.¹⁹ Strangely, the bodies in the films in question are motivated by precisely these emotions. Hence they reverse commonly held assumptions about an emotional pacification thought to occur in old age. Not only do these films render the occurrence of extreme

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Vieillesse* Volume 1. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1970), 9-10.

emotions in old age credible, but they also facilitate spectatorial bodily engagement with them since they trigger embodied memories linked to these emotions. The contact with the aged body that viewers have found in the cinema auditorium might come to be reactivated in their everyday lives, be it within encounters with ageing people or in relation with spectators' own bodily ageing. It remains to be seen whether this visual strategy of representing aged bodies will reappear in other national or international productions.

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THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

Appendix

Fig. 1

Geier amidst her family



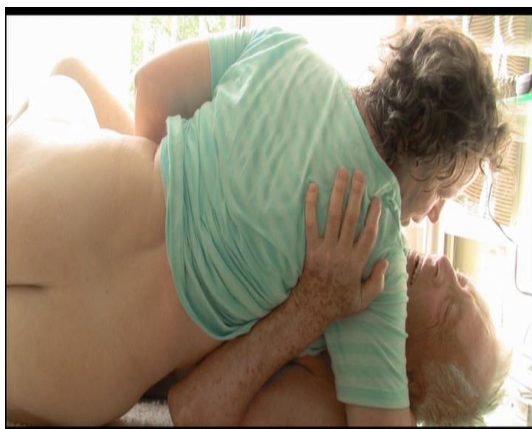
Fig. 2

Numbered Image



Fig. 3

Haptic Erotics



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THE HAPTIC TURN IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN CINEMA

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