

A TREAT TO TOUCH: THE MATERIAL SURFACE IN THREE SHORT FILMS BY CARL THEODOR DREYER

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A theory of the lived body provides the basis for understanding the manner in which we experience, or perceive, the world in an embodied, rather than abstracted, understanding of the process. The world that exists is a world that exists for the subject and is continually defined and redefined in relation to the subject (Tilley 2004, 10).

This phenomenological understanding of the embodied subject perceiving its material environment initiates my study into how the films of Denmark's greatest auteur, Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968), touch the beholder.

Much has been written on Dreyer's cinematic visual order and how his meticulously constructed sequences form from various elements an ordered whole. Edvin Kau, for instance, notes that 'his films are a treasure house to explore for those who wish to learn about how meaning is articulated through the materials of the film medium' and asserts how Dreyer's 'visual style' comprises 'cinematic spaces [...] consciously formed' to demonstrate the 'psychological struggle' taking place in characters such as Joan of Arc, in the 1928 *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Kau 2010, 1).

These statements are never explained substantially enough for me. What meaning is this, within the context of a filmic medium? How precisely does this become psychological? Why should any of this matter enough to be termed a Dreyerian 'visual style'? More needs to be said on what sort of compositional significance Dreyer masters, and what this can mean for the audience encountering his films. In light of these questions, Kau's analysis of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* limits further analysis:

The architecture of the *film's* space consists of light, air and directions of gaze, and is created by camera locations and angles which become the entry point of the audience into the narrative that Dreyer portrays on the screen' (Kau 2010, 4).

Though determining the film's spatial function as 'architectural' by way of what he later describes as an 'untamed camera' (Kau 2010, 5), this alone is not evidence enough to assert the reality of a cinematic strategy whereby the audience can, through any means, 'enter' the film.

I am not attempting to belie this strategy, so intrinsic to Dreyer's cinema, but to evaluate it in more concrete terms. I wish to move beyond the assumption that Dreyer gives agency to an 'untamed camera' – this wording reduces his filmic technique to something arbitrary and unsophisticated – and will instead focus on what Thomson calls 'the relation of the embodied viewer to the material object captured on film' (Thomson 2010, 2). I will strip Dreyer's filmic technique to its most organic form by examining his cinematic preoccupation with the building materials that form *objects*. In doing so I will suggest that this preoccupation has, not merely vague, psychological, but great phenomenological significance for the viewer encountering a Dreyer film. Thus my focus in this essay is not the 'material object' (Thomson 2010, 2) as a finite entity: I want to explore how the viewer as an embodied subject experiences the very material of the object on film, how this gestalt perception is never terminal but can only be temporal, and why this matters to the viewer. I will outline my approach and reasons for drawing examples from three of Dreyer's short films, *Landsbykirken* (1947), *Storstromsbroen* (1950) and *Et Slot i et Slot* (1954), to examine this set of questions.¹

¹ I will henceforth refer to these films by their English titles.

It is useful to begin with Laura Marks's definition of 'haptic perception' (Marks 2002, 2). She indicates, firstly, its 'lineage in phenomenology' (Marks 2000, xiii), a term Christopher Tilley explains as the way 'we see with the whole body just as we think with our body rather than part of it' (Tilley 2004, p16). From this, Marks explains haptic perception as how 'we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies' with 'the eyes themselves [functioning] like organs of touch' (Marks 2002, 2). I will examine how material surfaces in *The Danish Village Church*, *The Storstrøm Bridge* and *A Castle Within a Castle* function effectively as haptic surfaces. These films demonstrate effectively Dreyer's cinematic strategy in what might be termed its rawest form; they expose a sort of Dreyerian cinematic scaffolding on which the material surface assembles not only a sense of visual order but also haptic meaning through and interior to bodily redefinitions. In other words, the films want to be touched.

Cinematically then, haptic visuality '[appeals] to [...] the missing sense of touch that film cannot provide' (Thomson 2007, 10-11). Marks goes on: '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' (Marks 2000, 243). Thus two important points (both integral to this study) are raised: first, not only is the 'skin of the film' a haptic surface, but, it is through and within this 'membrane' that the embodied viewer or subject may experience the material touch, both as active participant and crucially operative recipient. Maurice Merleau-Ponty captures the significance of this perceptual instant when he suggests that 'to look at an object is to inhabit it' (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 81). By positing this within a Dreyerian context I suggest that in these shorts the embodied subject actively inhabits the material of the object both on and within the filmic membrane. Thus boundaries of *self* and *other* dissolve into the haptic instant (Tilley 2004, 17).

The second point to consider from Marks's thesis is that this membrane 'brings its audience into contact with the material forms of memory' (Marks 2000, 243). She expands: 'pools of local sensuous experience are continually created anew [...]. Every sensuous artefact, even the most banal, is uniquely embodied, worked upon, and transformed into a new sensory experience' (Marks 2000, 245). This twofold process of reciprocity and renewal through the filmic membrane is brought into play, I suggest, by a continuous *material memory*: as subjects we engage in moulding the different material surfaces we encounter on film, exposing ourselves to new sensations and associations. I argue that this continuum captures, yet concurrently dissolves both spatially and temporally, the parameters of objective *selfhood* in a single instant.

I turn first to *The Storstrøm Bridge*, as this film sets my argument in motion. Dreyer's object, the bridge, literally extends its material body towards what Thomson calls the 'camera as a prosthetic finger' (Thomson 2010, 5), and thus to the embodied viewer. The bridge embeds itself seamlessly into a landscape framed by earth, sea and sky, reaching itself across this world of motion as what I will now call a *subject*, in harmony with tall grass swaying in the breeze and clouds drifting overhead. At other moments, the bridge as a solid material structure curves seductively into the distance as it adopts the form of a wave or current, and in doing so opens itself to the beholder. The surface layers of water, concrete, and metal are inviting, almost reassuring in their solidarity as they work in collaboration with one another. If I cast myself as the embodied viewer, I enjoy partaking in this comforting, secure encounter, with the concurrent thrill of not knowing in full where the line of the bridge can take me as we meet one another. 'Landscapes provide or furnish possibilities' (Tilley 2004, 24), Tilley observes, and in relating this symbiotic relationship to phenomenology, writes: 'Bodily dimensions are not internal to the body but link the body to the world, and are always changing and relational' (Tilley 2004, 4). It might be suggested then, that the bridge cannot be distinguished from external points of contact, whether land, sea, or crucially the embodied viewer: it is as much a bodily subject *as* the viewer.

I suggest that the bridge is itself an embodied material surface, or subject, involved in a 'dynamic subjectivity' (Marks 2002, 3). Vivian Sobchack describes such processes of embodiment as 'metamorphic' (Sobchack 2004, 1) and concludes that body and world are 'reversibly enfolded in

each other' (Sobchack 2004, 287), negating distinctions between what is 'subjective' and what is 'objective' (Sobchack 2004, 2). In examining this dissolution further it is crucial to acknowledge a material tension during the film, between the bridge as a vertically constructed material surface and its essential horizontal function in reaching out to physically join two landmasses. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the bridge as a filmic material surface is its purpose in providing bodily subjects passage across the water, thus connecting flesh and forging relationships; not only does it reach to connect either bank of the Storstrom, but in doing so it becomes a *part* of the conjoined islands and those human subjects it contacts. Cinematically, of course, Dreyer intends that this reciprocity *touches* the embodied viewer who actively partakes in building these connections.

Marks proposes that haptic cinema '[calls] on the viewer to engage in [...] imaginative construction' (Marks 2002, 16). In this film there are several isolated sequences, offering no sense of scale or of belonging-to-a-whole. The embodied viewer is involved in an act of organic spectatorship with what *is* on screen rather than what it is a component of or *could* be part of. In examining such shots, I cannot know where these lines and angles interact with others to construct the whole as the material lines exist for themselves, connecting and colliding. I suggest that in moments such as these, the viewer vividly experiences the material surface, 'brushing into its pores and touching its varied textures' through haptic criticism (Marks 2002, xiv). In being unable to place or logistically determine this experience, the viewer is alienated and is thus forced to engage with the visible material surface in a more profound way. He or she partakes in an intimate relationship with the surface, experiencing its texture, variations, qualities and even its limitations.

Marks argues: 'The image is connective tissue [...]. No need to interpret, only to unfold, to increase the surface area of experience' (Marks 2002, xiv). This is a very intimate act, intimate with the viewer doing the deed, who is, moreover, partaking in a new and fresh experience of embodiment. In his seminal work *The Films of Carl-Theodore Dreyer* (1981), David Bordwell, although using it to relate 'the revelation of the spiritual' in Dreyer's later films, cites a phrase from Amédée Ayfre that I suggest sits particularly well in examining how haptic encounters are *opened* in *The Storstrom Bridge*. 'It seems that space has undergone an enlargement, in order to finally reveal, like a molecule under an electron microscope, the strange struggles situated within it', Ayfre writes. 'It is a time of the soul, which also seems to have undergone a great enlargement' (Ayfre: Bordwell 1981, 1-2). I use Tilley's term 'lived body' in lieu of Ayfre's 'soul' for my purposes (Tilley 2004, 3): the haptic exchange is not static or finite, but continually transforms in a bodily process of renewal and enrichment. Marks writes of this temporal force as vitally '[making] room for something to emerge' (Marks 2000, xvii).

The spirit and vigour of these interrelationships as facilitated by the filmic membrane is striking. I turn again to Tilley as it valuable to examine the transformative powers of the haptic experience from phenomenological beginnings. He remarks:

The existence of nature and time, like place, depend upon the existence and nature of a perceiving subject, and there is no perception of place and landscape without memory. Past experiences become selectively conjoined with present perceptions and serve to colour them (Tilley 2004, 26).

I return to the cinematic techniques of Dreyer within this framework, and argue that the phenomenological relationships between filmic viewer and material surface in his films consist of many layers, which in the haptic moment are crucially *enfolded* within one another as memories of material sensation.

With this in mind I move on to *A Castle Within a Castle*. The film is steeped in 'sense memory' (Thomson 2010, 4) as Dreyer engages strongly with the concept of restoration and the

significance of material surfaces, how they relate to and within each other over time. The filmic membrane engages and reengages continually in this film with the material layers of all it enfolds, and through this force itself 'makes room for something to emerge' (Marks 2000, xvii). I suggest that this 'something' refers to the importance of material form in bodily memory, thus identifying what I have termed already as *material memory*. The film is concerned with how the 1950s restoration of Kronborg Slot revealed an older intact structure, Krogen, inside the castle walls. The very nature of this restoration project and its implications for the embodied subject in experiencing the film are enlightening: the viewer partakes in an act of restoration but, pivotally, in doing so questions what it is that is being restored. In the process of unmasking Kronborg's material interactions to reveal the surfaces of Krogen, the film finds its expression in the now multiple layers of material surface with which the embodied viewer can engage haptically. Such implications are twofold for the viewer, as these material memories are not only drawn into the present, but concurrently layer themselves with and incorporate new sensual experiences that emerge and merge within the filmic membrane.

It is here essential that we return to one of Marks's key observations on haptics to underline my argument: 'Every sensuous artefact, even the most banal, is uniquely embodied, worked upon, and transformed into a new sensory experience' (Marks 2000, 245). This regenerative process of perception is captured in perhaps the most expressive scene of *A Castle Within a Castle*. The shot in question closely examines the corner of a room where two walls meet at a right angle, and maps a transformation of the relationship between the touching walls by peeling away the masonry of one of them, exposing the older stonework of Krogen, with the other touching wall still protected. Prior to this transformation, the masonry of both surfaces *feels* smooth, and is appealing with which to engage. The fall of the light in this shot intensely illuminates the right-hand wall nearest to the point, at which it encounters the brooding, stormier other. This presents a clean, decisive line differentiating yet conjoining the two, enhancing both the clarity of and unity between these meeting surfaces: they are subjects determined by each other and in this way reach haptically to the viewing participant. We then reach a turning point in this sequence as the lens exposes coarser, darker stonework beneath the skin of the right-hand wall, brilliantly illuminating it as *the* surface to engage with. Thus in what is now a self-reflexive gesture, two very different material surfaces stand together and touch one another as the embodied viewer works upon uniting present experience with memories past.

On one hand, the stonework is exposed and is witnessed on film as something newly enfolded within the layers of material memory. On the other, this very act of exposure has its implications for why and how haptic perception comes into play: the stonework has lived for centuries prior to being unveiled from beneath an exterior material surface, and I suggest that the function of the newer skin was never to replace the surface experience entirely. However, it has temporary connotations. The inner walls of Krogen have stood firm and are now ready to be illuminated in a sort of rebirthing ceremony: their material memory pours into every contour and crevice of this single surface as the embodied viewer can encounter its touch for the first time. The cinematic interrelationship between these layers is thus a dual construct. First, I use Merleau-Ponty's words on time and bodily perception, 'Past time is wholly collected up and grasped in the present' (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 82), to indicate the temporality and layering of this material engagement as it functions upon past sense experience through and within a further layer, the filmic membrane. Second, these layers in conjunction with one another facilitate haptic interaction, which for the present and future is 'continually defined and redefined in relation to the subject' (Tilley 2004, 10). The viewer experiences the touch of a material surface through the bodily experience of a world it unceasingly absorbs, and within which it is absorbed. In doing so he or she can redefine and dissolve the boundaries of self, experience and memory into forms 'that are not', as Thomson argues, 'completely encoded in the dominant narratives and images of Western culture' (Thomson 2010, 4).

Dreyer's films, then, do not simply *bore* into the viewer' (Skoller 1973, 123) but draw us inside the lens and thus within the cinematic layering of material surfaces. Our eyes never rest; instead they partake in the synthesis of haptic engagement. Marks poignantly defines such moments: 'I

come to the surface of myself [...] in a look that is so intensely involved with the presence of the other that it cannot take the step back to discern difference, say, to distinguish figure and ground' (Marks 2002, 19). This reciprocity between the individual or collective and haptic surfaces resonates strongly in *The Danish Village Church*. In using the church as a motif to evoke the ways in which material layers interact over centuries, defining our embodied sense experiences in the continual present, certain associations are made with *A Castle Within a Castle*. Nevertheless, I will focus here on one sequence, mapping the trajectory of the boulder from its natural state to something transformed by what Tilley terms 'human endeavour' (Tilley 2004, 86). The camera pans across a landscape of unshaped, naturally formed boulders, it is interesting how the embodied subject redefines his or her parameters of self during the haptic encounter with these boulders. As the subject meets each surface, a primordial sense of intrinsic belonging to and within this ancestral landscape is evoked. It is thus crucial to engage both discursively and haptically with the 'human endeavour' to form things from materials in *The Danish Village Church*; we partake in the transformation of boulders from material forms into nameable, functionally determined structures intended to stand eternally as places of worship.

It is this transformation in the phenomenal world that Tilley finds striking: 'Material forms may thus act as key sensuous metaphors of identity and instruments with which to think through and create connections around which people actively construct their identities and their worlds' (Tilley 2004, 217). He refers then to the 'worship space' as an 'essential element in constructing individual and group identity' (Tilley 2004, 144). This expression of development in film is of fundamental concern for Dreyer, who continually interrogates the discursive definitions and positions of object and subject, viewer and self, as existent bodily contingents in cinematic unity. I suggest that haptic relationships collapse these distinctions as we seek to become part of the different material surfaces we 'feel' with our 'eyes' (Thomson 2010, 5), just as these material surfaces or forms reach to touch and envelop us inside them. I argue that the embodied subject finds security and familiarity in this exchange: the surface is protective by definition; its function is to express the outer limits of something, to encase or conceal. To reach inside this definition, inside what is within the material surface, has strong connotations of fertility and pregnancy, for we are at this haptic moment reborn as 'flesh of the world' (Sobchack 2004, 290). We experience what it is to be material as subjects.

In *The Danish Village Church*, Dreyer explores the role of the church building as a nucleus for community. This notion is made clear from the opening sequence during which the camera pans from church to village, interrelating the two. Most pertinent to my argument is the sequence in which the church building becomes a place of refuge in and for its community. The twin bell towers stand firm, as they have done for centuries, seeking to protect and reassure the village collective that is physically encased within its walls and layers. The sequence ends with the stone towers looming heavy and high as shot vertically from the ground; this gesture of eternal solidarity within which the layers of various materials and material memories are encased and continually interact becomes at once a bodily and thus a 'sensuous metaphor' (Tilley 2004, 217) for what is, ultimately, human survival. I argue that this association between material surface and physical protection is material memory redefined, as existing haptic associations from past connections now 'metamorphose' (Sobchack 2004, 1) into new material sensations. This stonework, moulded by human hands from unshaped boulders, is now and will continually be associated in the viewer's material memory as something ancestral, robust, a surface to rely on: immortal, that is, until this memory encounters other material layers and is redefined again.

My intent in this study has been to articulate precisely how Carl Dreyer redefines the viewing experience of film by facilitating, and thus expressing, the significance of a haptic engagement between cinematic audience and material surface in his short compositions. I used Edvin Kau in my introduction as an example of the various film critics who acknowledge but do not sufficiently examine the filmic material layers which constitute what Donald Skoller, another such critic, terms a Dreyerian 'penetrative dynamic' and preoccupation with filmic 'immersion' in 'the total compositional materialization of what is envisioned, as it occurs on screen' (Skoller 1973, 123). Dale Drum, in what is still one of the very few articles dedicated to Dreyer's

filmography of shorts, pre-empting a fascinating study of these works through his 1969 *Films in Review* piece. He dismisses *The Storstrom Bridge* as 'lacking overall plan and point', *A Castle Within a Castle* as filmically having 'little to commend it', and *The Danish Village Church* as suffering because 'too many of the churches look alike' (Drum 1969, 37-9). I prefer to handle these particular films as layers with and within one another, exploring the many material surfaces and folds with which the embodied viewer may engage.

Despite using the terms *viewing* and *viewer* throughout my argument for sake of continuity, I am conscious that they reduce the experiential encounter with Dreyer's filmic technique through their connotation of inertia. Evidence demonstrates quite the contrary, and I have approached this strategy from the phenomenological standpoint in which Laura Marks's theories on haptic perception are largely rooted. I have posited the relationship between lived body, filmic membrane, and material surface on film as a tactile engagement, reaching across and sinking into a continuing spectrum of sensual and thus material memory. I propose, therefore, the viewer of Dreyer's short films not only as embodied subject but indeed cinematic figure, actively partaking in these exchanges of touch with material surfaces that in turn inspire and seduce. At this juncture, the words of Dreyer as he reflects on his own work are worth noting: 'I don't believe in revolutions', he says. 'They have, as a rule, the tedious quality of pulling the development back. I believe more in evolution, in the small advances' (Dreyer: Bordwell 1981, 191). Dreyer concentrates not upon the filming of what is changed but rather the subjective possibilities in developing, redefining, remembering. In *The Storstrom Bridge*, *A Castle Within a Castle* and *The Danish Village Church*, the reflexive potential of the embodied subject's material touch is infinite; material memory is never terminal; we are continually relating to it and drawing from it. In this sense, quite literally, we are never finite selves but rather subjects in flux and in relation to the surfaces we touch and become.

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