

Surface Contact: Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

Lucy Fife Donaldson, University of St Andrews
(lfd2@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Abstract:

Surface has become an important consideration of sensory film theory, conceived of in various forms: the screen itself as less a barrier than a permeable skin, the site of a meaningful interaction between film and audience; the image as a surface to be experienced haptically, the eye functioning as a hand that brushes across and engages with the field of vision; surfaces within the film, be they organic or fabricated, presenting a tactile appeal. Surface evokes contact and touch, the look or sound it produces (or produced on it) inviting consideration of its materiality, and perhaps even a tactile interchange. If the surface of film, across its varied associations, presents the possibility of an intersubjective contact between film and audience, this article seeks to include another body: that of the filmmaker. There are many people who contribute to the material constitution of a film and I would suggest that we might seek to appreciate its textures just as we might that of a painting. Focus on the fine detail of textures within the film becomes a way to foreground the contributions of filmmakers who have been less central to discussions of meaning, but whose work in the making of décor, costume and sound effects, has a significant impact on filmic affect. Through detailed discussion of film moments, archival design materials and interviews with film designers, this article will attend to the exchanges of meaning situated on the audio-visual surfaces of film.

Keywords: Surface; texture; design; affect; production design; costume design

Film-Philosophy 22.2 (2018): 203–221

DOI: 10.3366/film.2018.0073

© Lucy Fife Donaldson. This article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Licence (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited. For commercial re-use, please refer to our website at: www.eupublishing.com/customer-services/authors/permissions.
www.eupublishing.com/film

Surface is an important consideration for sensory film theory, conceived of in various forms. The screen itself is conceptualised as less a barrier than a permeable skin operating as the site of a meaningful interaction between film and audience.¹ The image becomes a surface to be experienced haptically, the eye functioning as a hand that brushes across and engages with the field of vision. Within the film, be they organic or fabricated, surfaces present a tactile appeal. Surfaces in the world evoke contact and touch, the look or sound they produce (or produced on them) inviting contemplation of materiality, and perhaps even a tactile interchange:

As I touch objects in the world, they seem to rise to their own surfaces, to meet me in the shape that I present to them: a brick wall offers me a patch of roughness exactly coincident with the back of my hand. (Connor, 2004, p. 35)

As Steven Connor suggests here, surfaces make themselves known to our bodies whether we are in contact or not; we understand (or apprehend) the texture of a surface because of our ability to predict feel through its aesthetic presentation.

If the surfaces of film present the possibility for contact, a tactile exchange of looks and touch between film and audience, this article seeks to introduce another body into this meaningful interface of materiality: that of the filmmaker. In visual art, the surface of a painting or sculpture holds the mark of its maker, the authorial touch embedded (or effaced) in textures of paint and stone. While the nature of its production requires that a great many people contribute to a film's material constitution, we should seek to appreciate its textures as similarly crafted and precisely chosen. In response to these bodies that are missing or absent from sensory theory, this article will work through the material contribution of film designers (my focus here will be on production designers and costume designers, though sound personnel have just as an important role to play) in a detailed discussion of film moments, archival design materials and interviews. Perspectives on surface work and contact taken from the visual arts will operate as guide to excavating the exchanges of affect and meaning situated on the audio-visual surfaces of film. In taking this

1. I would like to thank the editors of this issue – Catherine Constable, Matthew Denny and Tim Vermeulen – for their detailed comments and constructive encouragement, and to Film Studies at King's College London for the opportunity to present this research and for the insightful questions/discussion it generated. The archival research in this article was made possible by a Research Incentive Grant from the Carnegie Trust, awarded in 2015.

Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

approach, this article aims to more fully account for the meaningfulness of surface, especially the surfaces found within a film's diegesis, and to furthermore connect this to an appreciation of the work of the designer, whose work is intimately involved with the shaping of these surfaces, and who has been overlooked in discussions of film's sensory appeal and aesthetic value.

Surface Meaning

Shifting to a perspective that values surface, it becomes the site of work and expressivity, where marks are made, shaped and sculpted, objects finished, weathered and protected. Our first and immediate interaction with an object or indeed, our surroundings, is located at its surface, this being central to our understanding and appreciation of objects and their meanings: "The surface is not so much a barrier to content as a condition for its apprehension" (Adamson and Kelley, 2013, p. 1). Adamson and Kelley's use of the word "apprehension" further situates this engagement as part of an embodied encounter, a material negotiation between our bodies and the world. Through touch, or the reflection of light and sound, surfaces reveal their texture to us, engaging a combination of our sensory perceptions. Some surfaces may have more tactile appeal than others, inviting us in through softness and comfort, or pushing us away with hard coldness. In placing attention to this, we make a claim for surface as substantive, as material, as expressive, and as meaningful.

Positioning the surface as the site through which we apprehend the world speaks to a phenomenological understanding, as laid out in the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2007), for whom the touch involved in surface contacts becomes further intertwined or meshed as an intersubjective connection. Crucial to phenomenology is the concept of reversibility – the notion that interaction with the world is based on a reciprocal sensory engagement which involves a simultaneity of touching and being touched. When two surfaces come together (as with Connor's hand and the brick wall) this involves a reversible contact that makes it difficult to distinguish between the two (the chief metaphor for the phenomenologist is two hands rubbing together).² This reversible position, between bodies and between the body and the world, informs our general comprehension – what we might call "being-in-the-world" – and therefore positions surface as a key site of interaction, crucial to the

2. As referenced by Vivian Sobchack (2004, p. 77) and Jennifer M. Barker (2009, p. 19), originating from Merleau-Ponty.

flow between self and world, or object and subject. For Merleau-Ponty tactile experience “adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object. It is not I who touch, it is my body” (1945/2007, p. 316). The body is therefore itself a surface and instrument of both touch and perception: “My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my comprehension” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2007, p. 273). Meaning is built through these exchanges and fluidities, so surfaces are invested with significance as they form the conduit for contact and shape our understanding of and movement through the world.

If the world is understood through such an embodied perspective, art too gains meaning through an interrelation of surface and touch. The “sensory turn” in film theory has invested no small amount of thought into our responsiveness to cinema as a tactile surface, while positioning of the audience as active embodied participant in film meaning has sought to address the corporeal interchange of surfaces – skin, light and celluloid – that this involves. These ideas are certainly not entirely new to film; we can look to earlier theorists such as Kracauer whose proposition that “film images affect primarily the spectator’s senses, engaging him physiologically before he is in a position to respond intellectually” (1960, p. 158) resonates with the ways in which Vivian Sobchack (1992, 2004) and Jennifer M. Barker (2009) have sought to express the immediacy of the corporeal in film experience and meaning.³ Their writing makes clear that, despite its immateriality in projection, film has the power to engage our senses (beyond just sight and hearing) in a powerfully material fashion. As Barker puts it “the film’s tactility is not merely a matter of subject matter, but also a matter of *matter*, of the film’s own material form” (2009, p. 45). From such a perspective, cinema as an art form becomes a surface that provokes a tangible interaction, albeit one without a literal touch. Laura U. Marks most forcefully brings together surface and touch through her explanation of “haptic visuality” whereby “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (2000, p. 162), travelling across the surface of the image (rather than into its depth). Haptic experience is thus concerned almost entirely with surface, an engagement that seeks or is provoked “not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture” (Marks, 2000 p. 162). For Marks, this is about

3. In her efforts to historicise Kracauer’s book, Miriam Hansen (1993) draws out his emphasis on the materiality of film and corporeality of spectatorship.

Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

thinking through the appeal of the cinema to the body, it is an invitation of tactility:

Touch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways cinema appeals to the body as a whole. (Marks, 2000, p. 163)

Touch thus positions the body as a surface, engaging in a communication with or exploration of other surfaces, and perhaps most significantly, one that encompasses the entirety of the body. From the sensory position then, while contact might involve only one small portion of surface, it engages with and is informed by the whole.

Pushing the notion of film as a surface to be explored through a tactile cross-modality of looking and touching, the film screen itself has been positioned as more a permeable entity than a barrier. In her book, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, Giuliana Bruno describes the screen variously as a membrane, as “connective tissue” (2004, p. 5), and as a site of mediatic transformation, thus placing a stress on the encounters between and through surfaces (body, screen, world). Bruno’s use of the word “tissue” is instructive in its relation to fabric and texture, but also to a physiological surface: skin. Here the reversibility between body and world conceptualised by Merleau-Ponty works as an informing influence in describing the active and reciprocal relationship of audience to film, so that the substance of this connective tissue is conceptualised in the meeting of film and bodily surface.⁴ In Sobchack’s formative account of watching *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) she describes the connection between the two as fundamental to her embodied responsiveness to the film:

my skin’s desire to touch streams toward the screen to rebound back on itself and then forward to the screen again and again. In the process my skin becomes literally and intensely sensitized to the texture and tactility I see figured on the screen, but it is neither the particularity of Ada’s taffetas and woollens nor the particularity of the silk blouse I’m actually wearing that I feel on its surface. [...]. The unthought carnal movement of an ongoing streaming toward and turning back of tactile desire, my sense of touch – “rebounding” from its only partial fulfillment on and by the screen to its only partial fulfillment in and by my own body – is intensified. (Sobchack, 2004, p. 78)

4. It is worth noting here that Bruno’s approach is most directly aligned with the work of Gilles Deleuze, another important philosophical influence on sensory film theorists.

Sobchack grasps at the immediacy of the sensory communication involved, describing the surfaces – her own, the screen and those in the film – rising to meet in a complex series of reverberations. Response is therefore both provoked by and occurring at the surface. Barker further unpacks Sobchack's description of this sensorial rebounding between film and body to offer the experience of watching film as one that involves the surfaces of medium and audience commingling in a meaningful way:

Watching a film, we are certainly not *in* the film, but we are not entirely *outside* it, either: We exist and move and feel in that space of contact where our surfaces mingle and our musculatures entangle. (Barker, 2009, p. 12)

Here Barker details the blurring or blending of surfaces, their contact working to permeate one another. Such commingling, as she terms it, is fundamentally focused on the imagined encounters of surfaces, a space of contact where meaning is made. Following this idea, Barker suggests a transference of skin and surface:

If we take “skin” to mean the literal fleshy covering of a human or animal body, then a film couldn't possibly have a skin. But if, as Merleau-Ponty said of touch, “skin” also denotes a general style of being in the world, and if skin is not merely a biological or material entity but also a mode of perception and expression that forms the surface of a body, then film can indeed be said to have a skin. (Barker, 2009, p. 26)

The “being in the world” Barker describes again links a part to the whole, the skin / surface (or fabric, as Merleau-Ponty puts it) instructive of how the body / film / world are connected, and how they are situated, or how they negotiate their relationships with one another, their embodied experiences.

Surface Work

Taking a step back from the comminglings and interconnectedness of the sensory approach, we might reflect further on the materiality that film worlds present us with, and that invite the kind of responsiveness described by Sobchack in her account of *The Piano*. Film worlds, like our own, are constituted of a variety of objects and environment. Film surfaces are therefore functional, and whether like or unlike our own world, the surfaces that make up the space and places onscreen (furniture, décor, flooring and so on), give us something with which to measure the consistency of the filmic world. They are also affective, providing the tangible parameters of an intangible object, the textures we perceive in the film giving materiality to the diegesis. These textures are intimately

Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

related to the nature of the film world, both informing our responses to it and sitting within the contexts that make up the world – narrative, genre and mood. For production designer Richard Sylbert, surfaces are chosen and used to integrate the design with plot, character, drama:

[On *The Prince of Tides* (Barbra Streisand, 1991)] The Lowenstein apartment in New York has black marble floors, because everything has to reflect and fragment. The scene is about a marriage breaking up. [...]. Everything reflects: the marble, the glass, the mirrored room. The idea behind it was maximum drama, fragmented lives, maximum contrast, glamour, and illusion – is this real or only a reflection? Is this marriage real or a trick of perception? (Sylbert quoted in LoBrutto, 1992, p. 77)

In this example, the materials used connect to the narrative context of the scene in which they are placed, the quality of their surfaces working in coherence with dramatic meaning. Textures in the space are matched with the narrative and emotional dynamics of the moment, developing and perhaps even thickening that plot development through the materiality of space.

Films are full of surfaces we see and hear, and they are made, designed and selected to inform our comprehension of space and the bodies that move through it. Surfaces are crafted, shaped, created, selected by people: production designers, costume designers, sound designers and editors, Foley artists and others. This human interaction has an important impact on the feel of a film, its being-in-the-world, as Sylbert expresses:

I design for space and how you feel it – making things so you can actually feel the space. You use it to shape things. [...]. You can flatten walls and increase the size of a room. It's a tactile sense. You can actually feel fabrics, you feel rooms, you feel space. It is that sense of relationship which makes the quality of things. (Sylbert quoted in LoBrutto, 1992, pp. 69–70)

Significantly, the way of working that Sylbert outlines is closely aligned to the kinds of corporeal engagement central to the work of writers like Sobchack and Barker, defined by tactile engagement and comprehension, by embodied gesture (the designer flattening and increasing in response to the feel of a space) as well as creative agency (an emphasis on making and feeling, alongside attention to “the quality of things”). In order to address the difficulty of attending to surface work and unravelling the ways in which surfaces can be meaningful, expressive and material in film, the argument will first draw on some approaches to surface work in visual art.

In a discussion of touch in Italian Renaissance art, Jodi Cranston broaches the tactility of applying paint, describing Leonardo da Vinci's

unorthodox use of his hands to create a differently textured surface in his paintings. Cranston notes Leonardo da Vinci's use of particular materials and how their application diverges from the typical:

Practiced in his early works, finger-painting serves as a transition from a pictorial sensibility rooted in the contour line and a saturation and contrast of colors to create relief (more often practiced in tempura paint) and to one in which shadow and highlight suggest forms through a gradual building up of the surface with an application of glazes (practiced in oil paint). (Cranston, 2003, p. 234)

Here surface is a plane to receive texture, created through a process of layering. Crucial to this process then is a literal touch, with marks and layers made through the interactions of paint, finger and surface. The result is a painted surface which contains the mark of its maker, an expressive touch that can be appreciated or apprehended by the viewer to a greater or lesser extent. Surface texture therefore requires gesture, an input from the artist which at its most basic or literal might be through the hand, but there are lots of different ways in which a surface can be imprinted and layered through creative agency. In her account of this practice, Cranston illuminates the physicality involved in the production of the art object, echoed here by Richard Schiff who maintains that "a painting is always subject to the painter's grasp, at least while being crafted" (1991, p. 152). The creation of art is, therefore, fundamentally a corporeal and tactile process: surface formed out of touch and gesture, which is then perceptible to a greater or lesser extent in the finished work. Schiff goes on to describe painting as formed through physicality in relation to surface: "contained within the movements of a hand in response to the material substance and the scale of brush, paint, and receptive but also resistant surface" (1991, p. 154). The artist is thus embedded in the surface of the work through the particularities of their interactions with it: "Cézanne was in each and every mark and the mark could only be his" (Schiff, 1991, p. 136). Furthermore, it is a tactile process that seeks a tactile response, the artist operating as the mediating touch between receptive surfaces of canvas and viewer. A surface can be more or less obviously tactile, choosing to prompt us to recognise (or encourage us to forget) the artist's work according to its design and materials. Whether prominently textured or not, as both Cranston and Schiff indicate, the production of a surface involves the gesture or touch of the artist: "each gestural mark simply refers a viewer back to the originating artist as an independent actor with an identifiable character" (Schiff, 1991, p. 134). This kind of attention to surface brings with it a relayed series of contacts, both literal or imagined, and

Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

always felt: between artist and artwork, between artwork and viewer, and then perhaps even between artist and viewer. The artist's work is embedded within the surface of the work – whether the viewer is aware of their ways of working or not – their creative labour layered into it, and apprehended through touch or haptic engagement, or a more distant but no less sensitive responsiveness to texture and materiality. Touch is therefore the indication of a tactile experience (literally for the painter, or imaginatively for viewer) – “each mark could be regarded as the representation of a moment of sensation and experience, of a continuing encounter with the world” (Schiff, 1991, p. 136). Through each aspect, touch is inherently engaged with surface, whether it is actual or not, and as such surface can be understood as an interface of multiple and layered forms of contact.

If the expressive touch of the artist can be appreciated in a painting's surface, and resonates with moments of sensation and experience, so that the work therefore becomes a tactile encounter that bounces between artist / surface / viewer, we might then think about the way a film's surface textures contain the marks of the people who contribute to its material constitution. After all, the surfaces within a film are likewise crafted, precisely chosen and layered through their production by multiple personnel concerned with sound and image. While they might produce a less literal mark the choices and gestures made by designers still produce an interface of contact, inviting tactile response and interpretation. Focus on the fine detail of decisions made about surface and texture within the film thus becomes a way to foreground the contributions of filmmakers who have been less central to discussions of meaning, but whose work in the making of décor, costume and sound effects, has a significant impact on filmic affect.

Despite the emphasis of sensory film theory on surface as a site of tactility, encouraging a trans-sensory interaction of look and touch, and permeability, reversibility and commingling contact between two bodies (film and audience), this other body (or bodies) crucial to the surfaces of film is forgotten or absented. This erasure is in part a function of the desire to close the distance between the bodies of film and audience, rejecting the mastery and voyeurism of a distant look in which the spectator is considered separate from the film world. As Ian Garwood (2013) observes, the result is “a decreased attention to elements of films that are commonly regarded when they are discussed as objects viewed from afar: identification, authorial point of view, narrative”; if the film is “a world in its own right” (p. 22) then it is an object that is made, the production process and labours it involves pre-exist the mutual and intersubjective experience of film and audience, as outlined by Sobchack and others.

The alternative is a “film-being” presented as inhabiting a separate and individual existence (Sobchack, 1992), both “the *instrumental mediation* necessary to *cinematic communication* between filmmaker and spectator” and “a *direct means* of having and expressing a world” (p. 168). While Sobchack does reference the filmmaker in her discussion of the film’s body, her emphasis is on their experience of the world, rather than their role in making or shaping the film itself: “For the filmmaker, the world (whether ‘real,’ drawn, or constructed in any other fashion) is experienced *through* the camera. It is seen and *felt at the end of the lens.*” (Sobchack, 1992, p. 175). The film and its technologies (camera and projector) act as mediator to reduce and amplify perceptions of the world for both filmmaker and spectator. These capacities of the film’s body are seen to occupy gestures and orientation that although mapped onto/compared to a human corporeality are divorced from that of its makers (Sobchack, 1992; Barker, 2009). As Daniel Frampton (2006) outlines in his own engagement with Sobchack’s conceptualisation of the film-being, “The filmgoer does not see the film’s creators (human or technological), so we must accept film’s unique existence: we transcend our physiology and film transcends its machinery” (p. 44). So, closing the distance between film and spectator in order to build “a model of a viewer who participates in the production of the cinematic experience” (Marks, 2000, pp. 149–50) works to obscure the labour of specific bodies involved and the inscription of their production labour as touch/gesture within the text. In response, this article seeks to not accept this unique existence and to make an intervention in how we might account for the materiality of cinema and its affect by including the body of the filmmakers most immediately involved in the production of surface.

The difficulty is in how to tackle the contribution of the designer to the materiality of film, and moreover, how to incorporate another meaningful body into the embodied dynamics of film and audience. While designers might be thinking about tactility and feel in their production of surfaces in the film, where can this interaction be found/felt in the finished product? A phenomenological approach does still offer ways to recapture creative agency through emphasis on detail and materiality, and especially through the articulation of the surface as a site of embodied contact. The examples drawn from the writing of Cranston and Schiff elucidate touch as mode of embodied exchange between artist/artwork/viewer: the surface of an artwork carries the inscription of the creative labours made in shaping and constructing it, a gestural and embodied production that is felt when viewing that artwork. Likewise, highlighting the film designer’s “touch” – in this sense alluding to their physical labours of design and creative decision-making in cohesion with the whole – as embedded in the surface

Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

textures in and of the film adds a further corporeal dimension to our responsiveness to the film world as material. In what follows, this article will respond to the challenge of bringing filmmakers back into discussion of materiality and embodied experience through their engagement with details of surface, as indicated through archival materials and in the finished product.

It is clear from interviews and other materials, that the work of “below the line” film personnel, such as production and costume designers, involves painstaking attention to detail that makes up their design work at all levels. As for the phenomenologist, for whom the sensory impression of the colour red is shaped by the entirety of experiencing that colour (determined by concrete parameters of space and constitution: light, size, fabric),⁵ the relation of the detail to the whole is crucial: “Even the smallest detail, like the surface of a wall texture, is part of everything.” (Sylbert quoted in LoBrutto, 1992, p. 52). To take an instructive example as a starting point, the intensity Sylbert refers to in design work is evident in the kind of preparatory work undertaken by production designers. Archival holdings of George Jenkins’ work on *All The President’s Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976) include a huge volume of labour concerning the constitution and composition of the fictional world as a material reality; everything from set plans and drawings, lists of locations and possible locations, photos and plans of exteriors, to office furniture catalogues, samples of metal desks, of wallpaper and curtain fabric, to name just a few.⁶ Looking at these records illuminates not just the attention to detail required to design a film, but the degree to which every space, place and object, every kind of surface is deliberated and evaluated. Engaging with these materials is both illuminating on the specifics of work itself, and the extraordinary level of detail and planning it involves.

Such small scale details have tremendous purpose and potential for meaning, or as production designer Steve Wurtzel (in LoBrutto, 1994) puts it “The detail is incredibly important; it all gels together” (p. 202), and yet many of the decisions and plans made by designers remain unseen and out of shot. In viewing the detailed work of Jenkins, it is clear that a significant portion of the labour invested by the designer will never be

5. As expressed by Merleau-Ponty (1945/2007): “This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration. Moreover the colour can be said to there only if it occupies an area of a certain size, too small an area not being describable in these terms. Finally this red would literally not be the same if it were not the ‘woolly red’ of a carpet.” (p. 5)

6. Found in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California, USA.

seen or included in the finished film. For example, Jenkins planned the design of Bernstein and Woodward's apartments as complete spaces, only fragments of which are featured in the film. Jenkins' work includes the samples of colours the set was painted, which parts were aged, and the full layout – a huge amount of work that went into making spaces that we do not see a great deal of in the finished film. One memorandum (Jenkins, undated [a]) lists questions for Woodward and Bernstein, asking for details relating to their home and work, from the type of notebooks used to the brand and flavours of yoghurt Woodward bought, from the type of erasers used when typing to the specifics of items kept in the glove compartment of his car.

Although it is commonplace for a set to be designed in full only to be seen in part(s), this example offers a different perspective on the labour of design and degree of effort put into shaping the diegesis. We might conclude that rather than directing particular facets of character or narrative, that such attention to detail has a purpose for helping the production of atmosphere and mood, to creating a total and specifically material environment. The total art object here is not for the audience so much as the filmmakers themselves. Instead of building up the surfaces of the small corner that will be shown, the designers fabricate the entire space – down to what objects are stored in cupboards, what food should be in the fridge – all of which embeds the design into the entire production and adds to the accumulating layers of its materiality. One way to come at the question of affect then, is that this kind of surface work and attention provides the material dynamics of a narrative world for the actors and other members of the crew, both during production and even post-production.

While this might be something common to discussions of costume when actors recount the importance of corsets, wigs or shoes for getting them into character, the potential for all aspects of the design to situate actors, as well as other members of the crew, is clear. This idea has particular relevance to *All the President's Men* through the production's emphasis on depicting real events – the authenticity of recreating the Watergate scandal through the replication of the Washington Post offices and other such spaces was crucial to the film. Indeed, production notes report that Ben Bradlee and Harry Rosenfeld (both key figures in the Watergate coverage at the Washington Post) visited the set and “felt right at home” (Jenkins, undated [b], p. 7). The statement is clearly concerned with bolstering claims for successful accuracy, at the same time it is telling that this is expressed through evidence of feeling. Although attention to affect tends to be spectator-driven, looking at these records can invite us to consider the importance of: 1) the material engagement of the designer

and their own immersion into the world they are creating, and; 2) for the actors and other film personnel, the importance of having a substantive environment built, which helps their work, their feeling of the (narrative) world, which in turn translates to a material engagement with things in space. Therefore, in looking at the work of the designer we should engage with a “concern for the ways in which surface and finish, however complex their definition, contribute significantly to the characteristics of things” (Kelley, 2013, p. 23).

Surface Appreciation

In order to draw out the affective impact of detailed surface decisions, I will turn now to a specific example which engages with surfaces in a film, but also perhaps touches on the notion of surface in terms of attention to a detail that might be considered inconsequential or somehow trivial. While interviews and archive materials concerning the visual design of film give a sense of the intensity of the designers’ labour, they are not often that explicit on the background concerning decisions made to use particular textures, fabrics and surfaces. Perhaps the most explicit reference to the particulars of a design choice I encountered in the archive were two memoranda from the production materials of *The Day of the Jackal* (Fred Zinnemann, 1973). The film concerns a fictionalised attempted assassination of Charles de Gaulle by a professional hitman, The Jackal (Edward Fox), and the materials I will focus on relate to the costuming of this central character. Unlike production design, costume is a small but perhaps especially prominent part of the whole, given that it most directly engages response to texture and the bodies it shapes, or as C.S. Tashiro (1998) puts it, “costuming is the first circle of cinema’s affective space. [...] so intimately close to the skin to be part of it, moving difference [between us and the film] from the visual to the tactile” (p. 18).

The first memo is from the costume designers, Elizabeth Haffenden and Joan Bridge (dated 27th April 1972), to the director, Fred Zinneman, in which they answer various questions concerning costuming for the film, including the need for silk shirts and a cashmere jacket, and the numbers of each item needed. The choice of materials is justified as important to “show the luxury-loving quality of the Jackal’s personality” (p. 1). The second memo follows up Haffenden and Bridge’s request with a letter from Zinnemann (dated 27th April 1972) to one of the film’s producers David Deutsch, in which Zinnemann writes:

According to the book and the script, the JACKAL is a luxury-loving young man who likes good clothes, nice luggage, good hotels, etc. It is important to show him as a man of style and a quiet kind of panache. With this in

mind, certain materials suggested by the Misses Haffenden & Bridge were submitted to me for selection and approval, as is customary. I selected the materials which I thought most suitable, including a few yards of cashmere which looks very elegant on the screen. It falls in a way which cannot be imitated by inferior materials. (1972, p. 1)

These two memos detail a decision about which fabrics should be used – silk, cashmere – in order to best contribute to the development of the character, anchoring his personality as well as fundamentals of class, situation, aspiration and movement through the world, all of which feed into what we might term his being-in-the-world. The materials chosen will present his body in a particular way (the reference to how the material falls being significant to that point), as a surface to be read by us (and of course the characters in the film), and in so doing certainly work to shape his material presence and responsiveness to him. Zinnemann also highlights how the film itself will respond to this surface, indicating that the desired properties of this specific fabric, its texture and weight, cannot be reproduced by others. So while this is the kind of detail that might seem trivial at first – especially in the context of what is essentially an economic justification of a costuming decision – it has significant consequences for the film's construction of *The Jackal* as a surface, in the sense of his character's possible tactile and erotic appeal (which is of course partly bound up in Edward Fox, the film's star), and in the sense of *The Jackal* being a surface or cipher, a chameleon figure devoid of background or origin.

The impulse to display *The Jackal* and ultimately maintain him as a surface begins with his first appearance in the film, in which he walks down the steps of a plane to arrive in Austria and meet the Organisation armée secrete, or OAS. He is an appealing figure, dressed elegantly in hues of beige that complement his peachy skin tone and sandy hair. His suit is tailored expertly to his body, calling attention to Fox's slim yet masculine frame, the sweep of his shoulders emphasised through the precise cut of the jacket. The eroticism bound up in this figure of modish wealth is revealed in the course of the film to be one of his strategies, a careful surface he exploits to persuade or entrap those he can use during the course of his work, from the shop girl he buys hair dye and solvent from to the woman and man he seduces (and kills) in order to evade the police. What is more, the costume choices render him visible and distinctive, the colour and quality of his clothes marking him as separate from the other men – both those exiting the aircraft with him and the members of the OAS that he is about to meet, a distinctiveness confirmed here and across the film by the camera's attentiveness to Fox's movements and the careful

placement of lighting to further flatter and centralise his frame. The Jackal's professional distinctiveness – his proficiency at killing, which makes him the best candidate for the job of assassinating de Gaulle – is matched by his visual specialness, yet the choice of costuming materials avoids an equation between ruthlessness and coldness, rather presenting his body as appealing, luxurious, tactile.

At the same time, The Jackal's first appearance reinforces the emptiness of the character, his purely surface qualities. The film cuts from the OAS discussing candidates to The Jackal emerging from the plane while the leaders of the OAS continue their conversation about him – “One Englishman did all these jobs?” “I don't believe it!” “It's true.” “He did that fellow in the Congo?” “And Trujillo?” “Yes.” “That's our man then, isn't it.” Throughout this first shot The Jackal smiles benignly, giving no hint of behaviour that matches their description of him. The sequence continues cutting between the OAS and The Jackal making his way to them, during which he does not speak, we merely see him navigating his journey with a proficient ease. The moment thus maps onto the typical display of a star entrance (striking that walking down steps is frequently reserved for a female star, the archetypal example perhaps being the paralleled introduction and return of Bette Davis in *Now Voyager* [Irving Rapper, 1942]), the audio-visual design emphasises attention to image but not to the specifics of character or motivation; he is a blank to be projected onto. As such there is a textural contrast contained with The Jackal that juxtaposes the tactility of his exterior – bound up in the nature of the fabric mentioned by designers, the softness of cashmere and silk, matched by the fluffy tactility of his hair and the pale down visible on his cheek – with a reflective blankness. He is a surface that attracts and invites but that ultimately deflects, nothing sticks to him. This unknowability allows him to move through the film without attracting attention, casting aside one surface identity after the other. It is telling in this context that although his assassination attempt is ultimately foiled, the mystery of his true identity is never resolved.

A further immediate result of the costume choice is that it materially distinguishes him from the other characters in the film. On a purely practical level, it is fairly typical that the costume belonging to the central character of the film will receive the most attention, and that this might be preferable as a way to differentiate them from others. For *The Day of the Jackal* this is an especially pressing issue, as the film features a large cast, with the action spread over various cities and countries. The Jackal works for one organisation, meets with various contacts throughout the film and in varied locations (to create false identification and manufacture the specialist weaponry required for the job), while being hunted by several

others (the Deputy Police Commissioner of France and his assistant, The Interior Minister, French security forces, officers from Scotland Yard, and so on). The result is a narrative that makes it tricky to keep hold of what is happening or to keep track of the many bureaucrats involved in the hunt. Costume choices which favour pale colours, slim cuts, expensive fabrics and stylish embellishments emphasise the construction of the film following one body working against many bodies, the others a mass of establishment uniform and utilitarian suits.

So how does this small detail work within the film, how does it contribute to the feel of the whole? Once *The Jackal* has made all his preparations he makes his way towards France, planning to cross the Italian-French border by car. Meanwhile the investigation to identify and locate him has spread beyond Paris to involve Scotland Yard, who are trying to find the passport he is travelling under in order to catch him entering France. The film crosscuts between these different factions: The Jackal, who leaves his hotel, gets into his white sports car and drives swiftly along the fairly empty roads that will bring him to the border; Inspector Thomas (Tony Britton), who answers the phone to be advised on how many passport applications there are to check; and a number of police officers in the passport records office, headed by Hughes (uncredited) who rings Thomas to review the situation and then again to advise on the name they've identified as being used by *The Jackal*. Through this structure, the sequence captures some of the contrast being made between *The Jackal* and the officials, through the particularities of their material make-up: *The Jackal* in his tailored fawn shirt and modish patterned silk neck scarf, unruffled and unhurried, in comparison to the investigators who are uniformly crumpled in noticeably creased shirts and appear increasingly sweaty and exhausted as the sequence progresses. Thomas wears a plain white shirt without a tie, open to chest and with his sleeves rolled up, appearing as though woken from sleeping in his office. Hughes is clothed in a dark two-piece suit, while several others working behind him are in shirts with their sleeves rolled up. He is visibly uncomfortable and dishevelled, dabbing his neck with a handkerchief while on the phone to Thomas. When the film returns to Hughes he has discarded his jacket, the collar of his shirt is bent (presumably a result of the dabbing) and the sleeves gather in folds around his elbows and forearms. While *The Jackal's* clothes fit him well, rendering him a slender and neat figure – even when his shirt cuffs are rolled up they neatly fit his arms – the police officers' shirts are ill-fitting and baggy, thus emphasising their hunched and fatigued bodily states. The costuming decisions articulate instantaneous impressions of class and taste certainly, but go further to inform textural contrasts that highlight the quality of the men's

differences. The smooth, luxurious neatness of *The Jackal* presents a composed surface and attitude, highlighting his ability to glide along towards his goal. The creased and sweaty surfaces of the police articulate the effort of investigation, as well as their general unease. The quality of interruption to order mounted by *The Jackal* thus manifests itself through their very surfaces. Embedded within the costume design is a comparison between hidden and visible labour, effort concealed or revealed through cloth, that connects to the driving force of the action, as well as to the key dynamics of what this argument is addressing at large. Following the trace of the costume designer's choice into interpretive engagement with the film is a process of making visible the invisible, the wider question being how does this one detail – a decision concerning the texture of surfaces in the film – contribute to the total design, or texture, of the film as a whole.

Taking these details further, the material contrasts of the costuming can be seen to inform the fabric of the film itself. The editing pattern of crosscutting between *The Jackal* and his antagonists cements the surface contrast into the body of the film so that the smoothness of his trajectory remains undisturbed by their efforts to stop him. Even when Hughes delivers the name, the film cuts not to Thomas but to *The Jackal* approaching the border, his relentless forward motion seemingly unperturbed by this investigative breakthrough. In contrast, elsewhere multiple investigators scurry about trying to scramble up information on him, exhausting themselves and chasing leads as well as dead ends in the process.

The contrast of movement and action extends into the film at large as it works to present *The Jackal's* path towards his target as relentless and effortless. Even when he does encounter difficulties that threaten to derail progress these are overcome swiftly, the film presenting a series of near-misses in which his ruthless resolve is consistently proven. He is always moving, travelling through space, the film placing an emphasis on his position in a moving car or train, progressing through varied landscapes (mountains, seaside, cities, countryside) and interior spaces (from seedy apartments to stylish hotels). His first appearance establishes this seamless movement through the immediate cut from the OAS to *The Jackal* already on his way. The investigators, on the other hand, are consistently inside, frustrated and trapped. The mundanity of their surrounding surfaces is apparent across the agencies involved, as they interact repeatedly with shiny black telephones, cheap wooden desks and plain coffee cups inside dark, drab offices that share the same utilitarian furniture and cluttered investigation materials. The material quality of one surface is thus paralleled across others, corporeal and otherwise – the smooth refinement of *The Jackal's* costuming echoed in the specifics of his bodily surface,

his things (the car, but also the compact custom-built gun) and his movement through the world, while the creased and everydayness of the police officers extends to their sweating faces, dreary spaces and their impeded investigation.

From a small costuming detail, an observation very much on the surface of the film, comes the kind of textural opposition that embodies a central dramatic tension. From this decision we can trace character details which inform the Jackal's position and way of moving through the world – his embodied experience – and how this situates him differently to those trying to catch him. The choice thus establishes a fundamental contrast that can be felt in small moments and across the film. The details of texture and surface within film thus develop the texture of the film, the composition of the whole. From the example of *The Day of the Jackal* we can imbue design decisions with creative agency, despite them not being as direct as brush marks on a canvas.

In seeking to engage with the “body” of film, sensory film theory has effaced an important expressive agency that merges craft, technique and art. The material constitution of a surface's texture is the result of detailed effort on the behalf of a technician, craftsperson or artist. A focus on the fine detail of material decision-making and labour – through engagement with interviews, archives and the films themselves – thus becomes a way to reposition the contributions of filmmakers who have been less central to discussions of meaning, especially in writing on film's sensory qualities, but whose work in the making of décor and costume, has a significant impact on filmic affect. While the production designer is concerned with a larger totality, the look and feel of the fictional world, and the costume designer attends to one detail within this, they (and others) work together to build a collation or collection of touches, gestures and marks that make up a whole. Beyond making a claim for surfaces in and of themselves being worthy of attention and substantive in the aesthetic meaning of film, engagement with surface (both literally, and perhaps in terms of those most immediate, evident elements of the film that we take for granted and rarely look at in isolation) presents a way to recognise and make a claim for the work of designers in film, through the intensity of their own attention to surface.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adamson, G. & Kelley, V. (2013). Introduction. In G. Adamson & V. Kelley (Eds.), *Surface tensions: Writings on popular design and material culture* (pp. 1–12). Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Barker, J. M. (2009). *The tactile eye: Touch and the cinematic experience*. Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press.

Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning

- Bruno, G. (2014). *Surface: Matters of aesthetics, materiality, and media*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Connor, S. (2004). *The book of skin*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Cranston, J. (2003). The Touch of the Blind Man: The Phenomenology of Vividness in Italian Renaissance Art. In E. D. Harvey (Ed.), *Sensible flesh: On touch in early modern culture* (pp. 224–242). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Frampton, D. (2006). *Filmosophy*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Garwood, I. (2013). *The Sense of Film Narration*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Haffenden, E. & J. Bridge (1972, April 27). *Memorandum from Elizabeth Haffenden and Joan Bridge to Fred Zinnemann*. Fred Zinnemann papers (file 180). Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California, USA.
- Hansen, M. (1993). "With skin and hair": Kracauer's theory of film, Marseille 1940. *Critical Inquiry*, 19, pp. 437–469.
- Jenkins, G. (undated [a]). *Research document – information from Woodward and Bernstein*. George Jenkins papers (file 28). Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California, USA.
- Jenkins, G. (undated [b]). *Notes on the Production* (pp. 1–12). George Jenkins papers (file 23). Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California, USA.
- Kracauer, S. (1960). *Theory of film: The redemption of physical reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- LoBrutto, V. (1992). *By design: Interviews with production designers*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- LoBrutto, V. (1994). *Sound-on-film: Interviews with creators of film sound*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2007). *Phenomenology of perception*. (Colin Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge. (Original work published in 1945)
- Schiff, R. (1991). Cézanne's physicality: The politics of touch. In S. Kernal & I. Gaskell (Eds.), *The language of art history* (pp. 129–180). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sobchack, V. (1992). *The address of the eye: A phenomenology of film experience*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sobchack, V. (2004). *Carnal thoughts: Embodiment and moving image culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tashiro, C.S. (1998). *Pretty pictures: Production design and the history film*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Zinnemann, F. (1972, April 27). *Memoranda from Fred Zinnemann to David Deutsch*. Fred Zinnemann papers (file 180). Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California, USA.