



Received: 11 May 2016
Accepted: 27 May 2016
Published: 17 June 2016

*Corresponding author: Evan M.S.
Woods, Wolfson College, University of
Oxford, 404 Dundas Street East, Toronto
M5A 2A5, ON, Canada
E-mail: evanmswoods@gmail.com

Reviewing editor:
Lincoln Geraghty, University of
Portsmouth, UK

Additional information is available at
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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

To touch a ghost: Derrida's work of mourning and haptic visuality in three films

Evan M. S. Woods^{1*}

Abstract: This article represents an effort to outline the existence of a fundamental and unremarked-upon relationship between Jacques Derrida's reconfiguration of the Freudian work of mourning and theorizations of haptic visuality. While Derrida is under-represented in film-theoretical discussions generally, and in discussions of haptic visuality specifically, the author argues that the ethical goal of his work aligns with that of the film-makers in question, and that it should be of key importance for the discourse. Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* are examined through these twin prisms in order to illustrate how the engagement with this work of mourning and the employment haptic techniques are used in conjunction in order to hasten a new relationship to alterity.

Subjects: Continental Philosophy; Ethics Philosophy; Film Studies; Film Theory

Keywords: Jacques Derrida; haptic visuality; hauntology; death; cinema; memory; ethics; loss

1. Introduction

In recent years, the discourse surrounding haptics has seen increasing interest within the discipline of film studies, sparked perhaps by a turn towards the re-evaluation of phenomenology and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work in particular. Above any other figure, Laura U. Marks, with her monographs *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* and *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, has spurred an increasing number of scholars to devote attention to what she

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Within the discipline of film studies, there have been debates about a proper method of inquiry, which tend to argue for either a natural scientific method or its repudiation to varying degrees. Despite a relatively minor amount of explicit engagement with this debate, film studies, and specifically the meta-theoretical branch, is a field where these questions arise with some sense of urgency. Even when not overtly discussed, the assumptions involved tend to underlie much of the work, and demarcate the field broadly. The author's larger project is to better understand what assumptions govern these positions, and whether or not they are meaningful or productive. The author has previously published an examination of both overt and implied debates concerning the natural scientific method, and the influence this has had on film criticism and theory (see *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 12.2, April 2014).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article looks at how specific and diverse film-makers (Oliver Stone, Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker) have used cinema to explore different ways of relating to the death and loss of others. Though often radically different in both style and content, their attempts to redefine the separation between the self and others are grounded in an examination of the past. This examination often purposely reduces the importance of the sense of sight in our daily lives. In connection with this, this article also examines what various figures, primarily Jacques Derrida, have said about how senses other than sight can promote these different ways of relating to others.

terms “haptic visuality.” In the former, earlier work, she specifically cites the work of Deleuze and Guattari as a “unifying element,” (Marks, 2000, p. xiii) adding that her “basic debt to Deleuze, and to Guattari, is for their model of thinking as an open system, always ready to make connections where they are most productive, rather than most expected..” (Ibid., p. xiv). Writing in 2000, Marks’ invocation of Deleuze was in keeping with much of the Anglophone film academic work being done at the time, as D.N. Rodowick has noted that “since 2000, there was an explosion of English-language scholarship on Deleuze’s philosophy, as well as his writing on cinema.” (Rodowick, 2010, p. xv). This is true also of the work on haptics and cinema, specifically that most of it is thoroughly grounded in a Deleuzian approach, and with good reason. While there is much to be said concerning the relationship between hapticity and Deleuze, and much has been said, here I would like to investigate how formulations of the haptic seem to engage with Jacques Derrida’s reconfiguration of the classical “work of mourning,” in an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between the self and the other in a more ethical manner. By examining Oliver Stone’s *JFK*, Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, I will attempt to tease out important aspects of the role of the mourning in hapticity. This may appear to be a strange corpus of films to discuss: a high grossing mainstream narrative film; a historically significant work of modernist cinema; and a highly experimental television series. The argument for this corpus however is that though they span different periods and styles of film-making, they share a concern for mourning brought about by various types of loss and displacement, and the suffering which result.

2. The Work of mourning and anti-ocularcentrism

Since the original publication of Freud’s paper “Mourning and Melancholia,” the two terms have been subject to a long history of redefinition. However, for my purposes, I would like to focus on Derrida’s decidedly ethical reconfiguration of the work of mourning. Though first developed as a psychological concept, Alessia Ricciardi has noted that Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida have insisted even more strongly on the need for a political and ethical reinterpretation of the task of mourning. To these two thinkers, it has become increasingly urgent to recuperate mourning and melancholia as means of ethical and political critique. (Ricciardi, 2003, p. 67). It is this ethical reinterpretation which will be useful here.

Ricciardi has described Freud’s (as well as Proust’s) treatment of mourning as something to be solved, noting that “both have sought to transform mourning from a drastically enigmatic constellation into a riddle or puzzle that, like all such distractions, implies a determinate resolution.” (Ibid., 4). In his initial work on the subject, Freud has said of the work of mourning that “the ego is left free and uninhibited once again after the mourning-work is completed,” (Freud, 2006, p. 312) and this has set in as the traditional historical understanding of the emotional state.

Ricciardi continues on to make a claim that will be central to my argument:

Our anguish at the shock of loss, I would contend, should not be viewed in such mechanical terms, but rather in terms of an ongoing, interpretive challenge without a prescribed end, without knowingness. Now, it is exactly this enigmatic and open-ended quality of mourning that is increasingly denied by contemporary culture’s refusal of a genuinely critical relation to the past. The implication of such a refusal is that instead of being understood as an ethical question, mourning comes to be rephrased as an aesthetic device or posture. (Ricciardi, 2003, p. 4)

Colin Davis, it seems, would agree with her. According to him, a survey of contemporary culture will show the aesthetic treatment of mourning aligns quite neatly with the historical definition. This aesthetic device or posture is everywhere in contemporary culture, witnessed by the abundance of vampire and ghost stories which inevitably resolve with the return of the dead to their proper realm, much to the relief of the living (Davis, 2007, p. 1). Here, however, Ricciardi is taking up Derrida’s recasting of the original Freudian understanding of mourning and melancholia.

Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* is one of a number of his works where he elaborates his thought on mourning, including *Béliers* and a collection of his memorial essays *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*. *Specters* takes as its starting point a critique of Francis Fukuyama's right-wing claim that the end of history has been fulfilled by liberal democracy, and that communism is, in fact, dead. This claim represents for Derrida an attempt to conjure away the specter of Marx, which he describes as similar to Freud's work of mourning:

As in the work of mourning, after a trauma, the conjuration has to make sure that the dead will not come back: quick, do whatever is needed to keep the cadaver localized, in a safe place, decomposing right where it was inhumed, or even embalmed as they liked to do in Moscow. Quick, a vault to which one keeps the keys! These keys would be nothing other than those of the power that the conjuration would like thus to reconstitute upon the death of Marx. (Derrida, 1994, pp. 120–121)

He speaks further of “a politico-logic of trauma and a topology of mourning,” (Ibid., p. 121) and gives his clearest enunciation of the ethical work of mourning: “A mourning in fact and by right interminable, without possible normality, without reliable limit, in its reality or in its concept, between introjection and incorporation.” (Ibid., p. 120). This interminable mourning between introjection and incorporation is what Freud refers to as melancholia, and has historically been viewed as an ego fault. Derrida, however, believes that this is the proper work of mourning, which “responds to the injunction of a justice which, beyond right or law, rises up in the very respect owed to whoever is not, no longer or not yet, living, presently living.” (Ibid., p. 120)

Davis has offered an excellent summary of how Derrida's reconfiguring of mourning and melancholia is ethical. When discussing Derrida's *Béliers*—a moving example of how Derrida applies his understanding of the work of mourning not only to ideologies, but to individuals as well—he characterizes Derrida's distinction between mourning and melancholia thusly:

Melancholia, here, is ripped away from pathology and transferred to ethics, and in the process an abnormal state or character flaw is re-designated as the only proper relation to the dead other. In mourning, the other is taken into the self, idealized and therefore effectively forgotten in order to assure the easy conscience of the survivor. ‘Normality’ consists in expunging the otherness of the dead other, consigning the other to a second death so that life can continue undisturbed. The ‘abnormal’ melancholic position, on the other hand, entails a refusal to terminate the process of grieving; the dead other-in-the-self cannot be subsumed into the survivor's re-found autonomy. The only way of not killing the dead again is, then, to protest against the amnesia of mourning and to accept melancholia as an ethical obligation to the deceased other. (Davis, 2007, p. 148)

This recasting of melancholia as the ideal ethical state, which Derrida refers to as the “work of mourning,” as opposed to the selfish mourning of Freud which enables the individual to move on with life, is a fundamental yet unremarked-upon aspect of much of the work on haptic visuality, and is also a key to the films I discuss below.

This ethical position aligns with the strong ethical concerns of haptic visuality, which is characterized by a desire to move away from a highly unethical ocularcentric paradigm. Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener have written that “an ocularcentric paradigm prevailed in film theory that gave precedence to approaches focusing on vision.” (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2010, p. 109). This paradigm, they argue, has long been a part of the discourse on film, ranging from the early theories of Béla Balázs and Rudolph Arnheim to Eisenstein and Bazin. Oddly, however, Elsaesser and Hagener also argue that “the dominant theories of the 1960s and 1970s” were ocularcentric because of their employment of “key words and phrases such as voyeurism, fetishism, exhibitionism and the male gaze.” (Ibid., p. 109). However, the use of visual terms alone cannot make a theory ocularcentric, for if the theory being proposed is a critique of ocularcentrism, it may employ these terms. On this point, Martin Jay has noted the astonishing amount of visual metaphors in language (Jay, 1993; pp. 1–2),

and has also called the work of Metz “stunningly antiocularcentric,” (Ibid., p. 437) while contending that the concern for apparatus theory was the critique of ocularcentrism, and the ideology it supported (Ibid., pp. 469–476). Despite this inconsistency, Elsaesser and Hagener have correctly noted that “there has been a resurgence of theories, often filed under headings such as phenomenology, synesthesia and intermodality, which include forms of sense perception other than those concentrating on the visual and its internal contradictions.” (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2010, p. 110). Among these theories of sense perceptions is the theory of haptic visuality argued for by Laura Marks and Martine Beugnet—that through the qualities of various film and video mediums, and specific techniques, we are encouraged to perceive films haptically, touching them with our eyes (Beugnet, 2007, p. 66; Marks, 2000, p. 173). Though Marks is careful not to valorize touch over vision, and clearly distinguishes between objectifying and non-objectifying vision (Marks, 2000, pp. 131–132), her argument for haptic visuality is a rebuttal to the utter dominance of ocularcentrism within the discipline in that she is calling for a plurality of scopic regimes. There are however a number of reasons to critique the ocularcentric epistemology other than simply its dominance. One of the most powerful arguments against the ocular regime is ethical, in that the mastery and objectification it encourages are often considerable factors in many ethically bankrupt enterprises. Marks has written that the “critique of visuality . . . may apply to the visuality typical of capitalism, consumerism, surveillance, and ethnography: a sort of instrumental vision that uses the thing seen as an object for knowledge and control.” (Ibid., p. 131).

In Marks’ discussion of Shauna Beharry’s film *Seeing Is Believing*, she writes that “the tape has been using my vision as though it were a sense of touch; I have been brushing the (image of the) fabric with the skin of my eyes, rather than looking at it.” (Ibid., p. 127). The tactile quality of the picture is somehow felt with the eyes through haptic visuality. These film-makers are listening to the ghosts of their relatives, and Marks has recognized the often mournful quality of this form of listening, “for as much as they might attempt to touch the skin of the object, all they can achieve is to become skinlike themselves.” (Ibid., p. 192). Here, Marks is explicitly making a connection between haptic visuality and mourning.

In the introduction to *The Skin of the Film*, she writes:

What I wish to examine is the tentative process of creation that begins at the time of grieving: in effect, the scent that rises from the funeral garlands. This process describes the movement from excavation to fabulation, or from deconstructing dominant histories to creating new conditions for new stories. It is the holding on to artifacts of culture, including photographic and filmic images, in order to coax memories from them. It is the attempt to translate to an audiovisual medium the knowledges of the body, including the unrecordable memories of the senses. (Ibid., p. 5)

Here, the process of creation is explicitly linked to the mournful state, in its attempts to not only listen to ghosts, but to create a space where it is always possible for them to return. For Marks, this work of mourning is embodied in the films of these artists. She has written of three films, including Beharry’s *Seeing Is Believing*, that in each of them, the artist, a woman, attempts to recreate an image of her mother that has been erased or blocked through some movement of cultural dislocation. In each, she creates the new image from the memory of the sense of touch. (Ibid., p. xi). The film-makers are mourning a loss, and in an effort to regain a sense of presence with their mothers, they employ non-masterly sight. Paramount here is the point that haptic images encourage “the viewer to engage with the image through memory.” (Ibid., p. 177). Beharry, being diasporic, is mourning the loss of her mother and connection to her culture and native land. As Marks’ discussion of haptics focuses on these intercultural, diasporic artists, it also highlights the role of mourning because their films are haunted by the ghosts of their homelands, their native people and cultures, and their lost relatives. Homi K. Bhabha, when discussing forms of media which correspond to the experience of exile, has written in the Preface to *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, quoting Derrida from *Specters of Marx*:

What I have interpolated as the “exilic,” in the interstices of the argument, represents Derrida’s sense that a “new international” in the next century must be sought in the singular sites of violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, economic oppression; its memory must extend to the awareness that all national rootedness in the West “is rooted first of all in the memory and anxiety of a displaced—or displaceable— population. It is not only time that is out of joint, but space, space in time, spacing.” (Bhabha, 1999, p. x).

Marks’ discussion of haptic visuality and its unique ability to recreate memories while in exile are directly applicable to Oliver Stone’s *JFK*. It may seem strange to apply this discourse to a high-grossing Western narrative film made by a director, who, far from being an intercultural artist, consistently releases high-grossing narrative films. There are however certain important factors which highlight this film as relevant for this discussion: Stone’s overt political stance which has been elaborated in numerous narrative films, documentaries and television series; the very serious engagement of the film in scrutinizing an event of extreme physical, cultural and political violence; that this event is explicitly connected to mourning on a national scale; and lastly, Stone’s use of techniques similar to those that Marks has discussed in the work of intercultural artists, as found specifically in his use of the *Zapruder* film.¹

3. JFK

Discussing the renewed interest and power of the documentary form of the late 1980s, Linda Williams has written of *JFK* that despite certain flaws, it nonetheless “needs to be taken seriously for its renewal of interest in one of the major traumas of our country’s past.” (Williams, 1993, p. 11). Though the film was made under vastly different conditions than those of *La Jetée and Histoire(s)*, which I will discuss later, it shares certain aspects, such as a critical attitude towards the power of images, a focus on a particularly mournful event of national, if not global importance, and a formal decision to employ and highlight haptic qualities of the medium. Williams continues on to laud

Stone’s belief that it is possible to intervene in the process by which truth is constructed; his very real accomplishment in shaking up public perception of an official truth that closed down, rather than opened up, investigation; his acute awareness of how images enter into the production of knowledge. (Ibid.)

To be clear, Williams is not entirely positive in her evaluation of the film. She contrasts *JFK* with a number of 1980s postmodern documentaries, such as Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, Errol Morris’ *The Thin Blue Line* and Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me*. While Stone’s film is an example of one which opposes a “singular (fictionalized) truth to a singular official lie,” (Ibid., p. 16) the documentaries serve a “commitment to multiple contingent truths” (Ibid.) which ultimately lends these documentaries a greater “power of truth.” (Ibid., p. 15). For Williams, *JFK* represents an attempt at questioning official truths, but when compared with these postmodern documentaries, it yields underwhelming results because it lacks this commitment. However, if we examine it under the paradigm of Derrida’s mourning and the discourse of haptic visuality, its results certainly become more powerful.

In fact, Williams’ negative comments themselves offer a productive contrast with Marks’ statements regarding the hapticity of intercultural cinema. Williams’ main criticism seems to be that, in deconstructing the Warren Commission’s reading of the assassination, Stone has propagated an even more unlikely scenario, which serves to obfuscate the truth even more:

While laudably obsessed with exposing the manifest contradictions of the Warren Commission’s official version of the Kennedy assassination, Stone’s film has been severely criticized for constructing a ‘countermyth’ to the Warren Commission’s explanation of what happened . . . Integrating his own reconstruction of the assassination with the famous *Zapruder* film, whose ‘objective’ reflection of the event is offered as the narrative (if not the legal) clincher in Jim Garrison’s argument against the lone assassin theory, Stone mixes *Zapruder*’s real *vérité* with his own simulated *vérité* to construct a grandiose paranoid countermyth of a vast conspiracy by Lyndon Johnson, the C.I.A., and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to carry out a *coup d’état*. (Ibid., pp. 10–11)

Marks' writing of intercultural cinema would seem to cast this fabulation in an entirely different light. She argues:

Intercultural cinema moves backward and forward in time, inventing histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences, and lies of official histories. There are many examples of film/videomakers who have begun by confronting the lack of histories of their own communities that result from public and personal amnesia. These artists must first dismantle the official record of their communities, and then search for ways to reconstitute their history, often through fiction, myth or ritual. (Marks, 2000, pp. 24–5)

This is as apt a description of JFK as I have seen. As the film is largely recounting an investigation into the past, it is constantly shifting back and forth in time. Williams argues above that Stone has invented a myth as an alternative to a rather overwhelming erasure and lie of official history, and his attack on the Warren Commission report constitutes a dismantling the official record. Marks continues:

As in many intercultural films and videos, the acts of excavation performed by these works is primarily deconstructive, for it is necessary to dismantle the colonial histories that frame minority stories before those stories can be told in their own terms. Yet once this deconstruction has been accomplished, no simple truth is uncovered. There is a moment of suspension that occurs in these works after the official discourse has been (if only momentarily) dismantled and before the emerging discourse finds its voice. This is a moment of silence, and act of mourning for the terrible fact that the histories that are lost are lost for good. (Ibid., p. 25)

While Stone may present the *coup d'état* theory Williams has noted above, I believe it is clearer that no simple truth is uncovered, as Williams herself notes that the evidence offered is less than convincing. Stone more convincingly shows that the Warren Commission was a lie than he does prove his *coup d'état* theory. While he may not share the commitment to multiple contingent truths as Morris or Lanzmann, he does seemingly share the desire to 'intervene in the process by which truth is constructed.' Williams argues that "what animates Morris and Lanzmann . . . is not the opposition between absolute truth and absolute fiction but the awareness of the final inaccessibility of a moment of crime, violence, trauma, irretrievably located in the past." (Williams, 1993, p. 17). In this case, the moment of crime was caught on film, and yet despite this, *JFK* is at pains to show that this moment is entirely inaccessible. We can theorize, hypothesize and speculate, as Garrison asks X to do in the final scenes, but we will never achieve certainty. Where for Williams, these histories are lost to us, irretrievable, and therefore we must be open to the contingencies of multiple truths, for Marks' intercultural artists, and Oliver Stone, this loss is a starting point in their work of mourning. Beyond these resonances, let us examine how Stone's use of techniques which highlight the haptic qualities of film reverberate with Marks' statement concerning mourning and the loss of a history.

During District Attorney Jim Garrison's (Kevin Costner) extended monologue courtroom scene in which he explains his theory of the assassination of President Kennedy, he runs through the course of events, narrating the corresponding images that we see. By manipulating the Zapruder footage, and assimilating it into his own footage of the reconstructed event, Stone highlights its texture. He uses a combination of freeze-frames, slow-motion, extreme close-ups, blurring and changes in film stock and quality to achieve this. The age of the 8-mm Zapruder film is made apparent by its grain and the degradation of the film stock. The Zapruder footage has a much lower contrast ratio than the colour footage of the courtroom scene with Garrison. The grain and degradation are highlighted further by Stone's extreme close-up of Kennedy imposed on the original footage when he is shot in the throat and its immediate juxtaposition against a higher contrast image of a woman filming the scene. Marks has written of high granularity that "it produces a tactile quality, as the eye may choose between concentrating on figures and ignoring the points that make them up or bracketing the figures and dissolving among the points." (Marks, 2000, p. 175).

In this scene, Garrison is watching the Zapruder film in the courtroom, and thus he too is a spectator. He is also analysing the film, as established by his referencing specific frames (“Frame 161”) and Stone’s intercutting between the film and Garrison. When discussing the third gunshot and how then Governor of Texas John Connally, sitting in the front seat, was holding his Stetson revolver, Stone freezes the frame and zooms in on Connally’s hand. This scene corresponds to Marks’ notion of haptic visuality, where films that encourage it “invite a look that moves on the surface plane of the screen for some time before the viewer realizes what she or he is beholding.” (Ibid., pp. 162–163). A consequence of this zoom on such degraded 8-mm film stock with a low contrast ratio is that the grain of the film becomes more apparent. The closer the zoom, the worse the quality, and it becomes more difficult to distinguish figures. Marks has also said of grainy images that they “discourage the viewer from distinguishing objects and encourage a relationship to the screen as a whole” (Ibid., p. 172).

While the frame is still frozen, Garrison tells us that Connally “is visibly holding his Stetson, which is impossible if his wrist has been shattered.” (Costner, 2003). The spectator scans the frame in an attempt to distinguish the Stetson, but it is extremely difficult to do, and I am incapable of seeing it. This inability to distinguish figures illustrates Marks’ distinction between haptic and optic visuality. “While optical perception privileges the representational power of the image” she observes, “haptic perception privileges the material presence of the image. Drawing from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics, haptic visuality involves the body more than is the case with optical visuality.” (Marks, 2000, p. 163). The grain, decay and poor contrast ratio of the Zapruder film encourage haptic looking, while the analysis of the film by Garrison, as well as the strong desire to comprehend the event encourages the spectator to move towards an optic mode of visuality. In attempting to do so, however, the spectator becomes ever more aware of the materiality of the film.

This haptic moment also has a strong mournful quality, for the thesis of Stone’s film—that a certain idea of government was assassinated along with the President, and that it was replaced by a decidedly more nefarious one which persists to this day, that the assassination of JFK was in effect a *coup d’état*—is obsessed with the ghost of Kennedy. He may not be in the film, but the scene of his death plays out over and over throughout. The attempt by various institutions such as the Warren Commission and the media to explain away the assassination in less than convincing ways mirrors Derrida’s concern for Marx, which is that, as Stuart Sims points out, “He cannot be ‘edited out’ of our cultural heritage. Any attempt to do so will simply cause him to return in the form of a ghost.” (Sims, 1999, p. 41). Contemporary time is haunted by the assassination, and it cannot be expunged from cultural memory. Just as Derrida is not only mourning the loss of Marx, but also the “death” of communism, Stone here is mourning the loss of Kennedy, as well as the republic which he believed was his home. As Derrida has written about the attempt to conjure away the specter of Marx:

Specters of Marx: The title of this lecture would commit one to speak first of all about Marx. About Marx himself. About his testament or his inheritance. And about a specter, the shadow of Marx, the revenant whose return so many raised voices today are attempting to conjure away. For it does resemble a conjuration or conspiracy, because of the agreement or the contract signed by so many political subjects who subscribe to the more or less clear or more or less secret clauses (the point is always to conquer or to keep the keys to a power), but first of all because such a conjuration is meant to conjure away. One must, magically, chase away a specter, exorcise the possible return of a power held to be baleful in itself and whose demonic threat continues to haunt the century. (Derrida, 1994, p. 120)

This mourning is reflected by the aesthetic choice to use historical documents and footage, to implement older forms of media, such as older film stock—or digitally mimicking older film stock—which plays on our relation to the past. The various attempts to conceal the true nature of the President’s assassination have incurred a powerful hauntological effect. With JFK, through his treatment of the Zapruder film which encourages an oscillation between optical and haptic visuality, and in accordance with the ethical work of mourning, Stone has attempted to deconstruct an official history and create a space where the ghost of Kennedy is free to return, to prevent this conjuring

away. In his closing argument speech delivered to the jury, Garrison directly discusses Hamlet, a central figure in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and the ghost of Kennedy:

We've all become Hamlets in our country, children of a slain father-leader whose killers still possess the throne. The ghost of John F. Kennedy confronts us with the secret murder at the heart of the American Dream. He forces on us the appalling questions: Of what is our Constitution made? What is our citizenship, and more, our lives worth? What is the future of a democracy where a President can be assassinated under conspicuously suspicious circumstances while the machinery of legal action scarcely trembles? How many political murders disguised as heart attacks, suicides, cancers, drug overdoses? How many airplane and car crashes will occur before they are exposed for what they are? (Costner, 2003)

Garrison's attentiveness to the ghost of John F. Kennedy allows him to confront powerful ethical questions for the purpose of critiquing contemporary society. Like the ghost of King Hamlet who returned to tell Hamlet of his assassination, leading to his proclamation that "the time is out of joint," (Shakespeare, 2012; 1.5.189). Garrison has become aware that "something is rotten" (Shakespeare, 2012; 1.4.90.) in contemporary time. As Derrida has written, "time is either *le temps* itself, the temporality of time, or else what temporality makes possible (time as *histoire*, the way things are at a certain time, the time that we are living, nowadays, the period." (Derrida, 1994, p. 18). Garrison has heard from the ghost of Kennedy that things are not right in his time, and he is consistently shocked at the lack of desire to confront this, as if contemporary culture itself has mourned Kennedy's death in the traditional sense. Because of this there is also a strong sense that Garrison does not feel like he is in his own country anymore. In a way, he is an exile much like Beharry. The assassination has displaced him by violent means. This is not a film solely about Garrison's attempt to unearth and expose the plot to assassinate the president, but is also in a fundamental way about a citizen who has found himself displaced from his homeland by a violent event, and his efforts to regain what he has lost.

Derrida's injunction to listen to the dead, which is so prevalent in *JFK*, is also the impetus for Beharry's film, as she attempts to remember her mother. The film, as Marks states, "was made as an act of grieving for the artist's mother, who died once physically and once again in the inability of photographs to represent her." (Marks, 2000, p. 75). The relationship here is not just one of mourning, haptic viewing and memory, but also at a fundamental level a relationship between film (and photography) and death. The medium itself, in its peculiar capacity to record, preserve and present to us those who are dead, is similar to a haunting, in the sense that it can provoke a curious kind of anxiety.

Film's relationship to death has been discussed at length by Laura Mulvey in her book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. In it, she writes:

For human and all organic life, time marks the movement along a path to death, that is, to the stillness that represents the transformation of the animate into the inanimate. In cinema, the blending of movement and stillness touches on this point of uncertainty so that, buried in the cinema's materiality, lies a reminder of the difficulty of understanding passing time and, ultimately, of understanding death. (Mulvey, 2006, pp. 31-32)

This relationship to death marks the cinema as uniquely mournful. It somehow keeps us in the presence of the dead, and also reminds us of our inevitable future. Mulvey cites the "blending of movement and stillness" in cinema, a phenomenon which highlights this relationship to death through a shift from an animate state to an inanimate state. The inclusion of the Zapruder film in *JFK*, as well as the haptic qualities created by its low contrast ratio, is made all the more powerful by Stone's decision to freeze the frame, rendering these animate figures inanimate. While the Zapruder film has preserved the death of Kennedy, Stone has attempted to open up a space where he can communicate with us. This ethical and moral attentiveness to the lost other is also examined in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* and Jean-Luc Godard's series of films *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which aired on television in France from 1989 to 1998.

4. La Jetée

La Jetée makes for an interesting case study in this context, given the amount of attention it has received within the discipline. As is often commented upon, Marker foregrounds the cinematic shift from animate to inanimate discussed by Mulvey with a formal choice to compose the film almost entirely of black and white still frames, with the exception of one moving image, and nearly all the discussions of *La Jetée*, including discussions of it from a haptic framework, have hinged on this opposition. This concentration has had the unfortunate side effect of obscuring the actual content, which has only recently been subjected to a rigorous and critical investigation (Croombs, *in press*). Here, in light of such recent critical work, I will examine how the film can be read as appealing to both Derridean mourning and haptic visuality in an ethical attempt to break down the traditional barrier between the self and the other that Freudian mourning supports.

Davis has observed of Derrida's understanding of the work of mourning that there is in Derrida's account no separation between my relation to myself and my relation to the other, because the other is always already part of, prior to, and in excess of the subject: "in me before me and stronger than me," (Davis, 2007, p. 143) and that "this presence of the other both inside and outside the self disturbs the psychoanalytic model of mourning which, according to Derrida, depends on interiorisation, either in the form of incorporation or introjections." (Ibid.). This account highlights the ethical nature of Derrida's conception of the work of mourning, which brings the other within the self, not for the purposes of interiorization and closure, but in order to remain in conversation with the other. Elsewhere, Derrida notes that we should learn justice "from the ghost," that we

should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (Derrida, 1994, p. 221)

This rejection of interiorization is very much in keeping with the aims of haptic approaches to cinema. As Marks has noted, Tactile visuality draws upon the mimetic knowledge that does not posit a gulf between subject and object, or the spectator and the world of a film. The theory of haptic visuality I advance should allow us to reconsider how the relationship between self and other may be yielding-knowing, more than (but as well as) shattering. (Marks, 2000, p. 151).

La Jetée rather uniquely illustrates Derrida's claim that the existence of the subject is itself "grounded in loss and self-loss." (Davis, 2007, p. 144). When discussing *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*, a collection of Derrida's memorial essays, Davis has written that "if [they] grieve over numerous dead friends, they also signal that death already inhabits the Cartesian *cogito*" (Ibid.) and that Derrida "also suggests that the subject's self assertive 'I am' also implies 'I am dead', and that the traces left behind by the subject always assert that 'I died'." (Ibid.). The film shows us that the man's life necessarily implies his death, while also using the work of mourning, as Derrida understands it, as the primary motivator for the narrative. The man had not properly mourned the image of the woman (which also comes to represent the image of his own death), and as a result, it maintained a strong presence in his mind. This improper mourning has a threefold effect: it marks him as a candidate for the experiments and as such causes him great suffering; it allows him to travel through time successfully, to commune with the (now) dead woman in the past (as the narrator tells us, "In order to be sent back to her, she is dead"), (Jetée, 2007) to enjoy her presence, as well as enter the future; it is also what leads to his death, as his inability to interiorize her memory, or lack of desire to, is why he chooses to be sent back to her. That he chose to go back to the jetty, instead of into the future, is illustrative of the complicated relationship of the self to the other in the film, for though that image represents an incomplete work of mourning, it also represents his own death, suggesting that in some sense, the woman represents the other inside of his own self. Elana Del Rio, in a comparative examination of the film to its loose remake, *12 Monkeys*, has observed that "the traveler lies on a rudimentary hammock and has his eyes covered with a simple mask, which suggests a turning inwards through the dark recesses of memory and fantasy." (Del Rio, 2001, p. 388). This is suggestive

of how, in the film, these other presents, people and ghosts, all exist inside of the man. The syntax of the narrator's phrase "Elle l'appelle son Spectre" ("she calls him her ghost") (Jetée, 2007) resonates as both an implication of the man's death, and also an indication of the complex ways in which the self and other are bound together.

That Marker is concerned here with the barrier between the self and the other is also evident in the haptic qualities of the film, which function to break down this barrier. J.M Coetzee has described how the still images in the film encourage "a remarkable intensity of vision (because the eye searches the still image in a way it cannot search the moving image)." (Coetzee, 1992, p. 60). This recalls Marks' claim that haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture. It is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze. (Marks, 2000, p. 162). The relationship between haptic visuality and a certain understanding of the self and the other in the film has also been remarked upon by Del Rio. In her comparative analysis of *Twelve Monkeys* and *La Jetée*, she argues that "the blurring of the boundaries between viewer and image, and the viewer's yielding of epistemological mastery, characterize *La Jetée's* visual aesthetic" (Del Rio, 2001, p. 397) and that "the one feature Marks attributes to haptic visuality that is perhaps most consistently exhibited in this film is the image's 'limited visibility,' its offering of the object 'only on the condition that its unknowability remains intact'." (Ibid.).

There is one more exploration of the tactile quality of *La Jetée* that is worth mentioning. Jennifer M. Barker briefly uses the film as an example of Drew Leder's concept of dys-appearance, which is when the internal organs of the body, the viscera, are "made an object rather than a medium of our attention and action" (Barker, 2009, p. 127): she notes "the moment . . . when a woman's blinking eyes disrupt a quiet rhythm of successive, extended still images." (Ibid., p. 129). Barker describes this dys-appearance as the *reappearance* of the body into conscious life under conditions of disease, pain or other extreme circumstances. In those moments, we take notice of the body's internal functions, its rhythms and sounds, which seem alien by virtue of their appearing to our attention at all. (Ibid., p. 127). Despite the ecstatic nature the moving image of the woman has, these terrible conditions abound in *La Jetée* through the setting of a diseased post-war France in which the survival of human life is not assured, and the images of the pain the man must endure throughout the experiments in the concentration camp. Matthew Croombs, when discussing the Algerian war and the question of torture as a backdrop for the film, has noted that Marker "makes the spectator imagine screams that cannot be heard, and the pain of the man's stretched and contorted muscles. The stasis of the photographic image only amplifies the agony associated with the body's prolonged binding in time." (Croombs, *in press*). The body is also brought into consciousness by the quickening heartbeat heard during the experiments. That these heartbeats are only heard during the "present" again suggests that his forays into the past and future are disembodied, or, in another sense, his interactions with others, and their ghosts, take place inside of his self. The film is concerned with bringing the body into conscious life, and particularly the politics of the body and torture.² As the narrator tells us, "nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments; it is only later that they show themselves to us, on account of their scars." (Jetée, 2007). This emphasis on torture and concentration camps as a setting for an elaboration of an ethical approach to the other is shared by *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the final film I will discuss, which is also deeply concerned with trauma, torture and pain.

5. Histoire(s) du cinéma

Jacques Ranciere, when writing about *Histoire(s)*, has noted that Godard's thesis is that cinema "has failed at the task that its powers imposed on it: that of filming the horror of the camps." (Ranciere, 2002, p. 115). While part of the poignancy of *JFK* draws on the cinema's ability to record powerful moments in history, *Histoire(s)* is a reaction to something that the cinema did not capture, namely: the holocaust and the tragedies of World War II, to a renege on its promise to record reality. *Histoire(s)*, unlike *JFK*, was done on video, allowing Godard to put into practice his theory of historical montage, which "seeks to halt the March of progress in order to reveal the suffering that is its corollary." (Morrey, 2002, p. 127). As it is such a large project, comprising eight episodes, I will limit my discussion to its use of collage and to this experimentation, with reference to a scene lasting less

than a minute near the end of the first episode, *Toutes les histories*. In this scene, Godard juxtaposes and superimposes—a process Ranciere refers to as “pasting (*collage*)” (Ranciere, 2002, p. 114)—colour footage taken by George Stevens at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück of corpses piled upon each other with a scene of Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift in Stevens’ *A Place in the Sun*, and further with Giotto’s painting *Noli Me Tangere* of the biblical resurrection passage. Marks has noted that the video medium has its own unique prohaptic qualities, such as “the constitution of the image from a signal, video’s low contrast ratio, the possibilities of electronic and digital imaging, and video decay” (Marks, 2000, p. 175) as well as its “electronic manipulability.” (Ibid., p. 176). Many of these qualities are present here and encourage haptic visuality, most notably the low contrast ratio, decay and electronic manipulability. The entire project is essentially an extended electronic manipulation of footage from hundreds of films with Godard’s commentary. Marks further argues that “the tactile quality of the video image is most apparent in the work of video makers who experiment with the disappearance and transformation of the image due to analog and digital effects.” (Ibid.).

During this scene, Godard manipulates the images in many ways: he freezes and drastically slows down the footage of the concentration camps; he plays with the temporality of the footage from *A Place in the Sun*, slowing it down and speeding it up again; he also rotates Giotto’s painting 90 degrees, making Mary Magdalene appear to be an Angel reaching down from the sky; and lastly, he superimposes each of these images with each other. The scene also starts and finishes with black leader. When speaking of Mary’s reorientation by Godard, James S. Williams has stated that Mary’s outstretched hands seem to encircle Taylor, drawing her up into the heavens as if in the form of an iris shot. Christ’s prohibition against touching (“Don’t touch!”) has been stunningly reversed in a new and unheralded form of touching across form, encompassing art, cinema and video. (Williams, 2000, p. 135). Godard’s commentary here, as Williams has noted, is a reworking of words from George Bernanos’s novel *Le Journal d’un cure de campagne* (1951): “O what wonder to look at what one cannot see/O sweet wonder of our blind eyes.” (Ibid.). To really look at what you cannot see, cannot comprehend, you must look with all your senses. While the introduction of the theme of touching hardly renders the scene haptic, the linking through montage of Giotto’s Mary, with arms outstretched, touching Stevens’ Elizabeth Taylor, with the commentary focusing on blindness “forms a metapoetic comment on Godard’s own process: on the subtlety of vision and recognition as opposed to mere sight.” (Ibid.). It can thus be read as an argument for the resurrection of cinema in a new form or medium where the privileging of optical vision (“mere sight”) has been banished, thereby aligning it with the goal of encouraging haptic visuality (“subtlety of vision” and “recognition”), as elaborated by Laura Marks. In fact, when speaking of the video medium’s low pixel density and contrast ratio, she has argued that while film approximates the degree of detail of human vision, video provides much less detail. When vision yields to the diminished capacity of video, it must give up some degree of mastery; our vision dissolves in the unfulfilling or unsatisfactory space of video. (Marks, 2000, p. 176). It may be that the simple use of the video medium renders *Histoire(s)*, and all video works, inherently haptic, but it was this medium which made the project possible, and Godard certainly took advantage of its formal possibilities, which has enabled him to embrace the goal of the projects of haptics. As Vicki Callahan has noticed, Many times in his video project, Godard tells us “to ‘think with our hands’ (*penser avec les mains*),” (Callahan, 2000, p. 157) an instruction which constitutes “a radical merger of body and mind where matter is not *determined* by rational ideas, social constructs, and essentialist politics, but reaches outside this oppressive modality to embrace alterity as a way of being.” (Ibid.).

This provocative scene is also a good example of the very mournful nature of the video project, as the effects of a resurrection of cinema in a new form align with the goals of the re-imagined work of mourning. This mournful element is contained primarily in the attention it pays to cinema’s relationship to history through historical montage, a type of montage similar to that employed by Chris Marker. Much like Marker’s juxtaposition of a still, tortured and blinded man with a serene moving and waking woman, this kind of montage works primarily through the interstices between images of horrifying acts and beautiful ones. As Alan Wright has observed of the Elizabeth Taylor scene, film exposes the brutal reality of human suffering in the interval between the beauty of a smile and the hell

of the Final Solution. Montage à la Godard constructs an image of history in the light of an extreme variation between a vision of happiness and the sense of catastrophe. (Wright, 2000, p. 52). This historical montage, for Godard, is no less than the long-awaited invention of montage. (Ibid., p. 51).

When discussing Godard's argument that the cinema failed to meet its responsibility to reality by not filming the concentration camps, Douglas Morrey tells us that,

at the same time, he has instigated a research for 'une image d'une nouvelle nature', an image-resurrection, image-redemption that might compensate for the earlier fault; something that only becomes possible given a non-linear conception of time, where each present moment communicates with the past. (Morrey, 2002, p. 207)

This non-linear approach to history, which is the basis of historical montage, is strongly reminiscent of *La Jetée*, where we in the present have made space for the lost others—others who are past, present, and future—to return, what Morrey refers to as a “politics of the ghostly.” (Morrey, 2002, p. 207). Operating under a linear conception of time, we could never allow ghosts to return, for as Warren Montag has suggested, “the linear time of birth, life and death, of the beginning and the end, has no place in the hauntic.” (Montag, 1999, p. 71). When this non-linear conception of time is implemented through historical montage, when two historical events are juxtaposed, whether they were constructed on a film studio lot or not, cinema, according to Godard, achieves its true potential. When discussing the Elizabeth Taylor scene in an interview with Gavin Smith, Godard said that it “is historical montage. This is critical work: explaining why the smile of Elizabeth Taylor is such a smile . . . Because of the Holocaust.” (Smith, 1996, p. 38). Godard has allowed the past, the holocaust, to come forward and re-emerge within the smile of Elizabeth Taylor, and this allows us to see the true beauty of her smile, and the true horror of the holocaust.

6. Conclusion

Garoian and Gaudelius have positioned the ethical aspect of Derrida's hauntology in its approach to history:

hauntology is an evocative process that enables us to transgress and transform our social and historical moorings. Re-visiting, re-memembering, re-conceptualizing, and re-presenting knowledge from the past constitutes a critical conjuring process whereby someone or something invisible, “beyond being,” is imagined and imbued with the immanent possibility of becoming other than what we already know. (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2008, pp. 114–115)

In these films, the reconfigured work of mourning functions in conjunction with the aesthetic qualities, which often encourage haptic visuality to ethically interrogate the relation between history and media and the self and the other. These haptic qualities are employed by those who wish to examine history in some way, either for the purposes of redefining the separation between the self and the other, for regaining communion and mourning with lost or displaced relatives, like Shauna Beharry, or those who want to create alternative views of history like Oliver Stone and Jean-Luc Godard. Derrida's work of mourning and the haptic properties of the films I have been discussing represent an ethical concern for opening up alternative approaches to being in and of the world, to being with ourselves and others. They allow us to bring into the present those who have passed on and who have yet to be, and allow us to stay in communion with them, a communion which is often textural, sensuous and non-objectifying. This exploration of the ways in which *JFK*, *La Jetée* and *Histoire(s) du cinéma* engage with both Derrida's reconfigured work of mourning and Marks' haptic visuality has highlighted the ethical commitments of the film-makers, and also outlined a fundamental relationship between the two discourses. The nature of this relationship also suggests that a greater affinity between Derrida (2005) larger project and theorizations of haptic visuality is likely. Given the English language publication of his review of philosophies of touch, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, as well as the recent recognition of Derrida's enduring concern for issues of embodiment by Jones Irwin (2010) in *Derrida and the Writing of the Body*, it is odd that this relationship has thus far been unremarked upon within the discipline of film studies.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details

Evan M. S. Woods¹

E-mail: evanmswoods@gmail.com

¹ Wolfson College, University of Oxford, 404 Dundas Street East, Toronto M5A 2A5, ON, Canada.

Citation information

Cite this article as: To touch a ghost: Derrida's work of mourning and haptic visuality in three films, Evan M. S. Woods, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1197871.

Notes

1. For a discussion of how narrative films can appeal to haptic visuality (see Trotter, 2010, pp. 156–170). Marks has also noted that Hollywood films can appeal to haptic visuality: "Commercial film and television share some interest in the sensuous qualities that experimental works evoke. However, given their constraints (to put it kindly), commercial media are less likely to dedicate themselves to such exploration. Experimental and independent works often develop strategies that later get taken up in, or stolen by, mainstream media. Thus the sensory exploration that is newly being taken up by experimental and noncommercial film and video is beginning to show up in mainstream and commercial media as well (Marks, 2000, pp. xii–xiii)."
2. See Croombs for a detailed analysis of the film's relation to the politics of torture in the context of the Algerian War.

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