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Making Media (Study) Haptic

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Taking media to be extensions and amplifications of the human senses, Media Study identifies the senses as vital sites for the formation and circulation of culture. In this conceptualization, media technologies are not simply passive conduits for the senses, but instead actively reshape and transform both the individual senses and the sensorium more generally, prioritizing certain perceptual modalities over and above others. Media simultaneously provide the epistemological framework for making claims about reality *and* the ground for sharing aesthetic experiences, participating in the construction of a hegemonic cultural sensorium. To contextualize and historicize the emergence of the contemporary mediated sensorium, scholars have focused on the interplay among the embodied senses, media technology, culture, and power. The body's expression through media—how media are adapted to the perceptual capacities of human subjects—has been a paramount concern in this tradition. Jonathan Sterne, for example, situates “the sounding or listening body” as “an object of cultural struggle and historical transformation” (346) in the development of sound reproduction technologies. Particularly with the rise of technical media from the nineteenth century on, the iterative design and engineering of media systems depended on the abstraction

and quantification of the senses, with machines of image and sound reproduction calibrated to the parameters of vision and hearing as revealed through dedicated programs of scientific investigation, executed with a variety of electrical and mechanical apparatuses. Identifying this mutual reciprocity between the physiology of the senses—with its focus on uncovering the just-noticeable difference between applied stimuli—and the genesis of media technologies—which operate by calibrating stimuli to the psychophysical parameters of perception—troubles conventional media historiography, by linking the origins of contemporary media technologies to broader histories of medicine, psychology, and scientific empiricism. The political significance of this project lies in the way it defines media as expressions of normative models of the senses, rather than extensions of some natural and transhistorical body.

While this investigative program may be motivated by a radical and disruptive impulse aimed at upending and undoing linear histories of media⁴, it has proceeded from a rather limited conceptualization of media as primarily acting on and extending the senses of seeing and hearing. Consequently, we are left with a narrative that reifies and replicates—rather than challenges—the audiovisuality of media. The other senses are left behind and marginalized both by contemporary media and by contemporary media historiography. Where touch is concerned, this focus on seeing and hearing perpetuates what Jacques Derrida calls a “haptocentric intuitionism” (300) that takes as its core assumption touch’s resistance to

⁴ This approach is typified by Siegfried Zielinski’s sprawling excavation of hidden histories of image and sound media in *Deep Time of the Media*. The critique of linear histories can be found throughout the media archaeological tradition. Friedrich Kittler, for example, argues that “in spite of all beliefs in progress, there is no linear or continuous development in the history of media” (119). Similarly, Timothy Druckrey asserts in his foreword to Zielinski’s *Deep Time* that media archaeology provides a means of countering the “anemic and evolutionary model” that has come “to dominate many studies in so-called media” (vii).

virtualization and extension via electronic networks.⁵ In my work, I have explicitly pushed back on the assumed audiovisuality of media by identifying a research tradition that seeks to give touch its own set of dedicated technical media. While some narratives—such as Derrida’s—portray media that extend and digitalize touch as part of a promised future, I look at a series of efforts pursued throughout the twentieth century to transform touch into what Carl Sherrick called a “communicative sense” (218)—a sense that could have its own set of affiliated technologies for sending and receiving coded messages. In pursuing this attempted technological transformation of tactility, Sherrick and his mentor Frank Geldard developed a wide range of experimental mechanisms and languages for transmitting messages through the skin, establishing the Cutaneous Communication Lab (active from 1962-2004) to house this ongoing project. Just as designing technical media for the eyes and ears required a detailed knowledge of those senses’ psychophysiological parameters, designing media for touch entailed calibrating machinic tactile stimuli to the sensing properties of the skin. And just as nineteenth-century psychophysiology had quantified the processes of seeing and hearing, it had similarly quantified the process of touching, with psychophysicists developing scores of dedicated apparatuses and batteries of tests to uncover the microphysics of tactile perception. By the 1890s, this new accrued knowledge about touch had grown so complex that it was given the formal name “haptics,” defined as “the doctrine of touch,” (Titchener 441) and positioned explicitly in relationship to the scientific study of seeing (optics) and hearing (acoustics). Nineteenth-century psychophysiology, then, attempted to make touch like seeing

⁵ Echoing Marshall McLuhan’s claim that future systems of mediated tactility may upend the audiovisuality of media, Derrida looks to the nascent haptic human-computer interfaces of the late 1990s—the PHANToM and the CyberGrasp in particular—as evidence of touch’s impending virtualization.

and hearing by giving it its own dedicated field of research; twentieth-century tactile communication researchers attempted to make touch like seeing and hearing by giving it its own dedicated set of transmission apparatuses and languages.

By situating technologized touching at the center of a sustained media historical research program, I have sought to counter the longstanding assumption, operating in a range of fields including psychology, communication, and aesthetics, that touch, through some inherent set of intractable properties, resists mediation. My aim is not to suggest that those who have sought to perfectly replicate the sense of touch in virtual worlds have succeeded in doing so, but rather to situate *the efforts at* transforming touch through media technology as a coherent and stable formation, articulated discursively by scientists and engineers in a host of disciplines and materially in the form of both experimental and commercial touch technologies (ranging from haptic bodysuits to vibration alert systems found in smartphones). The prompt to treat media technologies as technologies of sensory extension allows us to expand the field of Media Study outward, so that it encompasses a sense previously thought hostile to mediation. Media Study provides a model for approaching the archive of haptic media, allowing us to understand, for example, how normative models of the body and perception become embedded in the design of media for touch. Beyond this historical orientation, attending to efforts at mediating touch also prompts us to examine the social construction of touch technology, as media and communication researchers have shown recently in edited volumes, special issues, and related projects focused on tactility and mediation (Cranny-Francis; Elo and Luoto; Jewitt et al.; Parisi, Paterson, and Archer; Pozo; Richardson and Hjorth). Media, as Lisa Gitelman describes, are social as much as they are technological, involving negotiated protocols of use that take shape through their adoption, habituation, and incorporation into everyday life.

Moreover, touch's social life and cultural history are inseparable from issues such as gender, sexuality, power, race, class, ableism, and labor, as scholars in the field of Sensory Studies have detailed.⁶ Finally, with the wave of new digital touch technologies—cybersex devices, exoskeleton gloves, and haptic bodysuits—accompanying the recent re-emergence of virtual reality, it is worth considering the possibility that we may be on the cusp of a long-promised shift in the mediated sensorium, away from the visual and toward the haptic. Proponents of haptics technologies—especially the marketers and engineers of haptics devices—have assured us that this shift will undo the negative and distancing effects of visual media, countering a hegemonic viscosity with a counterhegemonic tactility. However, an understanding of touch as a media-historical object pushes back on this technoutopian narrative by showing the touch expressed through media technologies to be thoroughly transformed by its encounters with capitalist technoscience.

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⁶ See for example monographs by Constance Classen and Mark Paterson, in addition to Mark Lafrance's special issue on Skin Studies.

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