Pigott, Michael. "Texture and Affect." *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 45–74. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544728.ch-002>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:44 UTC.

Copyright © Michael Pigott 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER TWO

Texture and Affect

By Night With Torch And Spear is one of the found footage film works discovered after Cornell's death in 1972, within the collection he donated to Anthology Film Archives in 1969. Of the ten untitled works identified as original Cornell collages, it is the most striking. It is perhaps the most enigmatic, subversive, politically charged, rigorously experimental, and moving of all of Cornell's films. It is a compendium of textures, an interrogation of gravity and fluid dynamics, a manual of found footage techniques, a compilation of lights and light sources, a history of machines and machine vision, an experiment with scale and perception, an inquest into night, an anthropological excursus, and a dangerous tryst with the savage Western fascination with, and desire for, the exotic.

In this chapter I will explore Cornell's interest in, and utilization of, texture in *By Night With Torch And Spear*; in so doing we will encounter questions relating to the textuality of the moving image, both in terms of the textures of objects and surfaces captured by the camera, and the textures of film itself (grain, scratches and decay). This will lead us to a discussion of affect, and the capacity for the eyes and ears of cinema to engage the sense of touch (as well as taste and smell) and to interface with the viewer's body through a wide spectrum of sensation. We will look through the lens of the haptic, a concept which has experienced a recent flourishing of theoretical activity in relation to cinema, video and other forms of moving image and photographic art, spearheaded by the critical work of Vivian Sobchack,¹ Laura U. Marks,² and Jennifer Barker.³ The notion of the haptic has provided a much-needed re-balancing of the relationship between narrative and image, between the textual and the visual in film studies and beyond, offering the potential for a retrospective re-evaluation of the history of moving images, and within this history we will see Cornell's work blazing a trail for a stylistic parameter and regime of experience that would be largely discounted and mostly ignored until more than half a century later.

As part of this will come an analysis of Cornell's cinephilia in the light of a number of historical cinephilias, clusters of strongly obsessive attitudes

towards the moving image, its objects, and its objective life as a distributed commodity and experience.

Haptic Visuality: A Short History of Intimacy

The term 'haptic' comes from the Greek *haptikos*, meaning to come into contact with, to touch, and has long been used in reference to physical relationships between humans and things, tactile sensation, and interaction. Currently, it is often employed within the science of human-computer interaction, and the design of interfaces and control technologies. However, it has undergone a remarkable repurposing that has recently reached a kind of tipping point with the publication of Laura U. Marks' *Touch*. This repurposing asserts that the dynamics and attributes of touch sensation (classically understood as available through the skin and especially the hands) may also be available at a distance, through the organs of sight and hearing. In Marks' work it is primarily the eyes that become the new organs of touch – the new concept rendered as *haptic visuality*. For her, the eyes are already prone to roaming over the surface of the flat image, 'grazing' upon it, but certain images⁴ offer particularly strong tactile experiences – sections of intense texture enhanced by cinematography, editing, and narrative context – for the eyes to 'graze' upon.⁵

Yet Marks is by no means the first to appropriate the term 'haptic' in this way. It has been used to describe the impression of touch at a distance (remote tactility) gained through visual experience since at least as early as the late-nineteenth century, when the radical and rebellious historian of textiles Aloïs Riegl published his seminal work *Late Roman Art Industry*.⁶ It is probably not a coincidence that Riegl was involved on a day-to-day basis with textiles – artworks that offer themselves to touch – rather than paintings. He used the categories of *haptic* and *optic* to distinguish the relative aesthetic priorities of different historical epochs and their characteristic forms of art. For Riegl, the qualities of the haptic, which consisted in 'close-range tactile perception',⁷ defined the ancient arts of the Egyptians and Greeks. This was superseded by the qualities of the optic ('long-distance, disembodied vision'⁸), which were increasingly prized by the Romans. Riegl's thinking here is largely in line with later arguments (even conflicting viewpoints such as those of Jonathon Crary⁹ and Martin Jay¹⁰) that identify a hierarchy of the senses in Western culture that places

the optical at the top of the pile. Riegl charts a history of the senses leading up to the ocularcentrism that becomes such an issue of contention with regard to its status in the modern period. What his account does not cover, perhaps only because it lay outside of the historical scope of his project (though Laura Marks describes it as a teleological assumption ‘founded in the first place on assumptions of Western cultural superiority’¹¹), is the point at which this ocularcentrist regime would be overturned. Many critics, including Marks, see the onset of Modernism as a return to the haptic, and a renewed focus on multisensory engagement. What we seem to have, then, is a sequence of revolutions. The haptic is replaced by the optic, which is in turn replaced by the haptic. This simplification, however, ignores the possibility that the haptic might be understood in a number of significantly different ways.

Deleuze and Guattari, for instance, use the concept as part of their model of *nomad art*.¹² They take from Riegl the notions of *close vision* and *haptic space* and latch them onto their larger conceptualization of *smooth space* and *striated space*, of the *smooth* and the *striated*. Cities, urban and suburban, even rural agricultural land are examples of striated space. These are spaces that have been ordered, segmented, categorized and instrumentalized. Sea, steppe and desert are examples of smooth space – the kinds of places that at first seem to be undifferentiated masses of the same thing (water, sand, grass), but are in fact heterogeneous, chaotic and differentiated in a way that striated space is not. While the smooth might seem to be homogenous (all the same thing), it is in fact the striated that comes into being precisely by creating and imposing homogeneity. The key to identifying these traits depends upon viewing distance. The smooth appears homogenous when viewed from a distance – one must get up close to it, see the detail, forego the possibility of an overview, in order to recognize the undulating chaos of the smooth. This corresponds to the close-viewing implied by the haptic. The striated, on the other hand, corresponds to the optic. Striated space is organised so as to be read from a distance. The top-down view of city blocks, metropolitan grids, crop fields and paddocks is an aerial language of civilization, of metric order, of matrices, seriality and sequence. The striated is meant to be viewed from afar – up close it is monotony and homogeneity.

The nomad moves and lives haptically, dynamically inhabiting smooth space, which is a continuously varied landscape. Any point in smooth space

is temporary, any experience is intimate. Nomad art therefore utilizes and accentuates the haptic qualities of smooth space. It is opposed to an idea of art that holds the viewer at a distance, that pretends to a purely optical and intellectualized relationship between viewer and work. Here we begin to see the potential political dimensions of the haptic, and of Cornell's use of haptic images.

Haptics and Politics

As Giuliana Bruno points out, the notion of the haptic was developed by Riegl at almost exactly the same time as the emergence of cinema, also correspondent to a more general 'reformulation of spatiality in art theory'.¹³ Indeed Jay Hetrick goes so far as to suggest that Benjamin's identification of the destruction of the 'aura' of the artwork in the age of mechanical reproduction (embodied for him in the emergence of the new mass-art of cinema) 'is to be understood as a fundamental shift from an optic to a haptic distribution of the senses'.¹⁴ Hetrick grounds this assertion in a careful elucidation of the profound influence of Riegl on Benjamin's work, which the latter did not pretend to keep a secret. But Benjamin freely adapts Riegl's concept of the haptic, taking its prescriptions of intimacy and tactility to apply to the shock effects of the cinema; its prescriptions of closeness as opposed to distance taken to apply to the displacement of the alienating presence of the aura by the engulfing agitation of the senses offered by the cinematic experience. Benjamin also adds a political dimension to Riegl's concept of the haptic by connecting it to the socio-cultural circumstance from which and into which it emerges. While Riegl made the significant achievement of identifying and describing the fundamental alterations to the formal and perceptual parameters of art occurring during the Roman period, he 'did not attempt – and, perhaps, saw no way – to show the social transformations expressed by these changes of perception'.¹⁵

For Benjamin the cinema represented the vital new possibilities of mass art. If, through its reproducibility and new avenues of simultaneous distribution, the cinema undermined the necessity for pilgrimage and the resultant aura encountered once the pilgrim reached the site of the artwork, then its hapticity was both a product and concomitant formal attribute of the new art. Viewers traded in their freedom to contemplate and free-

associate in front of a painting in a gallery for the experience of being assaulted by continuously changing image and sound in the cinema theatre. Cinema was available to most, and made few distinctions between customers. It destroyed hierarchies of access, and refashioned everyday discourse, embedding aesthetics into the lives of workers and bourgeois alike. In this way, all cinema was haptic for Benjamin, and the haptic was fundamentally political in this socio-cultural context.

What I would like to suggest is that, though the hapticity of the cinema (according to Benjamin's, and Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term) might have distinguished it from other forms and mediums, it is a formal aspect that has been largely downplayed in popular and critical understandings of cinema up until the late twentieth century. While it might have always been a foundational formal component of the cinematic experience, this fact has been submerged below a surface-level discourse of image, narrative and performance.

The cinema was quickly recuperated, over the course of its first few decades, as a primarily *optical* art form (often at the expense of the soundtrack, never mind tactility, taste and smell). The haptic, with its associations of cheap sensory invigoration, and worse, worryingly sensual bodily engagement (the body that views the film from the neck down) had to be forgotten, refused, repressed. It is this repression that makes Cornell's films so subversive, radical and, once again, well ahead of their time. They bring tactility back to the surface. They bring themselves naked to the viewer, exposing themselves for, and to, the audience.

Before I embark upon a closer analysis of some of Cornell's films through the optic of the haptic, as it were, I would like to introduce one more key figure from the history of the haptic who will, along with Riegl, help to further define what exactly it is that we shall be looking for in Cornell's work.

Forking Paths – Schmarsow and Riegl

At the time of writing this book, Antonia Lant and Klemens Gruber are leading a large research project entitled "Texture Matters"¹⁶ that aims to investigate the significance of texture across a wide range of twentieth century mediums and forms, including the moving image. One of the significant early results of this project¹⁷ has been the identification of two

significantly different (though I would argue complementary) approaches to the concept of haptic visuality (if we can use Marks' terminology to refer back to historical conjunctions of the haptic with the visual). The first of these two versions stems from Riegl, and the second from his contemporary: August Schmarsow.

Schmarsow developed his theory of *Raumgestaltung* in his writings on architecture, as part of the wider reformulation of the understanding of space mentioned above by Bruno. This broad movement was grounded in empirical science and a shift towards the determinant force of perception as key to an understanding of the physical world, which would also lead to the emergence of phenomenology in philosophy. Yet as Mitchell Schwarzer states, Schmarsow 'differed most from other theorists in his insistence that bodily movement through space rather than stationary perception of form was the essence of architecture'.¹⁸ Schmarsow privileged the moving body as the discovering-machine of physical space, over and above the long-range perception available solely through the eyes. To know and understand a space one had to move around it, to feel its edges and contours, its limits and topography. To know and understand things (objects in space) one had to get close to them – presence, intimacy, and proximity were central to Schmarsow's theory, just as they were for Riegl.

Of most interest here, is Schmarsow's reliance on the Irish philosopher George Berkeley's theory of optics, which insisted that, due to the paucity of our visual sensors (which can only provide us with two relatively weak arrays of light and colour information) we can only render a visual impression of the space around us and in front of us through recourse to our sense memories, to the 'tactile ideas' of what it is like to touch the things that we can see.¹⁹

Schmarsow believed that the initial stage of the development of 'spatial consciousness' came from the subject's growing awareness of the physical extension of their own body, and the mechanical relations between its parts (that is, the relationship between the arm and the torso for instance).²⁰ This provided the subject with an initial understanding of height and length, but the perception of depth could only be accomplished through the movement of the body through space, and the progressive accumulation of images of the changing space around the body that this afforded. So the body is understood as a machine for discovering space, for gradually building up a mental picture of the topography of a space through both the correlation of

multiple visual perspectives, and the correlation of the tactile sensations of having a body (with its own physical extension) that dynamically inhabits multiple points within that space.

The body learns, through the accumulation of 'sense memories', what space feels like, and consequently what a space (and its contents) will probably feel like based primarily on visual information acquired at a distance. Schmarsow's theory of the haptic therefore presents the possibility of a truly remote tactility. Riegl identified a particular stylistic approach that brought the tactile to the fore, to the surface of the image. In this distinct formal approach texture came to meet the viewer and presented itself. Schmarsow designed a theory of the haptic that allows the spaces of an image to be inhabited by textures and forces that can be perceived or felt remotely. His theory accommodated the possibility that the viewer could go to meet the textures and forces contained within the depth of the image.

Jennifer Barker proposes what sounds like a similar concept within her system for a phenomenological analysis of cinema in *The Tactile Eye*. What she describes as 'muscular empathy'²¹ shares something with Schmarsow's notion of sense memories, and the potential for visual cues that trigger them. For her, it is also equally founded on the mimetic function; the capacity for the human body to mimic. Mimicry can of course be more or less accurate, and can often succeed in condensing a phenomenon into an incisive and economical impression while producing a copy that is quite obviously different to the original.²²

Barker's approach, however, is predicated upon the notion of the film itself having a body and a musculature, a body that provokes responses from, and responds to, the viewer's body. This seems to me to be useful up to a point, in that it does provide us with a way to broach that vast field of activity located between the viewer's body (and particularly their sense of sense experience) and moving images of things happening on screen. But it only gets us so far (just over the edge of the precipice as it were) before the framework begins to lose its effectiveness due largely to the fundamental ontological looseness of the notion of the film's 'body'. The conceit that the film has a body requires much imaginative flexibility on behalf of the reader/viewer in order to accommodate all of the potential ways in which aspects of the film's formal construction (camera movement, framing, editing, angle) can be considered manifestations of the film's intending body. It is viable, and even compelling (Barker's facility for describing what various film

moments are *like* and what they *feel* like is astonishingly acute and insightful), but it becomes so encompassing that it eventually makes itself redundant – its force dissipates due to overexposure. It is indicative, I think, that Barker's lasting descriptive-analytic achievements remain, pristine and unworried, by the presence, or lack, of the film's body. While it is a valiant and welcome attempt to articulate the haptic dimension of film experience, I believe that the key to critically engaging with this underworld of sensation and sensuality lies in a more direct examination of the textural and haptic cues of the film as a *film* – as a constantly refreshing, entirely flat image produced by either projected or radiant light, that is nevertheless capable of conveying impressions of three-dimensional texture, force, and speed. The film does not have a body in the sense that it is present to us in the room at the time of screening (apart from material apparatus and projected light). What we *are* in the presence of is an array of sensory stimuli (light, sound, and the moving images of real and unreal things that they create).

So, to recap, we have two primary expressions of the haptic, the Rieglian and the Schmarsowian. When we apply them to the moving image we find that we have two useful categories. There is the Rieglian surface texture that requires and rewards close-vision – the texture that comes out to meet the viewer, filling the rectangular frame and consequently making it seem more flat than it should be, de-emphasizing the depth of the image, and emphasizing the textures built upon the flatness of the film image itself. In this sense the texture of the medium itself (such as scratches, grain or digital artefacts) is a privileged example. On the other hand we have Schmarsowian spatial hapticity, which accommodates the transmission of experiences of textures, forces and movements within the diegetic world of the image, a hapticity that, in contrast with Riegl's version, is dependent on the illusionistic depth of the image. Cornell's films strongly employ the haptic at both the level of Rieglian textures of the flat image plane (what I will call the *surface texture*), and at the level of Schmarsowian intra-diegetic textural objects and spatial dynamics that exist within the depth of the image (what I will call *diegetic hapticity*).

By Night With Torch And Spear

By Night With Torch And Spear begins with a pencil, being used as a pointer, gesturing towards parts of what might be a scientific diagram, or

microscopic image blown up to poster size for the purposes of a lecture. The image lacks text or a discernible diagrammatic plan, and contains only two colours – a cream backdrop and speckles and splashes of maroon (fig. 2.1). The diagram fills the frame and flattens it. In fact the picture plane would be entirely and obviously flat were it not for the disembodied pencil (the controlling body is out of frame, remotely engaging with the image before it, through a surrogate tool) that seems to draw invisible squiggles that merely mimic the randomness of the maroon speckles, rather than elucidating any order. The colouring of this shot (most likely introduced by Cornell through tinting) accentuates the abstract characteristics of the diagram – the cream backdrop becomes a canvas and the maroon speckles become Pollockian drips.

This opening shot establishes the film's focus on texture and pattern, and particularly on *surface texture*. It aligns the viewer's attention toward the textural, and alerts them to the existence of the flat picture plane, which harbours its own potential for texture and pattern. As in *Rose Hobart*, the film begins with a short, enigmatic opening shot, which retrospectively seems unconnected to any of the other footage found in the film. In fact, in many ways *By Night With Torch And Spear* is structurally and formally the film most like *Rose Hobart* of all of the rest of Cornell's oeuvre. In both, the strangely punctuated and disconnected opening shot seems to operate like a prologue, or truncated overture. In *By Night With Torch And Spear* the cut to the next shot effects a dramatic colour change to a strong rose tint. Now a rough circular aperture seems to be cut into the flat picture plane (fig. 2.2), torn as if the plane itself were as thin as paper. The edges are pure black, and through the aperture we see a boiling body of liquid being further agitated by a rod or pole of some sort. The next shot reveals that the black frame of the aperture is actually the thick wrought iron mouth of a furnace, and the pole is being brutally poked in and out of the mouth by some absent manipulator (fig. 2.3). The pole extends and retracts from frame left, pointing diagonally upwards – the same source and orientation as the disembodied pencil in the first shot (which is, of course, phallic). One implication is perhaps that the pencil – the disembodied pointing tool – has poked through the picture plane to reveal a seething mass underneath, an amorphous liquid (a detail of Deleuze's *smooth space* as well as an echo of the rippling pool in the first part of *Rose Hobart*, which has repeatedly been likened to the seething mass of the unconscious).

Another cut shows us the manipulator – a worker in what seems to be a foundry, frantically levering the pole up and down, in and out (fig. 2.4). But he is upside-down, as is the rest of the foundry. This is one of the most striking features of the foundry section, as well as the fact that many of the shots are also running backwards. Cornell flips the footage upside-down, runs it backwards (as he does to Brakhage's footage in the later *Gnir Rednow* (1955–60)). The tinting of the shots is also much more varied and forceful than in *Rose Hobart*, which used a night-time blue throughout. We move quickly from the rose tint of the worker and furnace to a sepia tint of another upside-down shot within the foundry, to the deep night-time blue of a moving, roiling cloudscape. We have already seen one graphic match between the pencil and the stirring pole, but there are many other looser associations based on texture – the editing sometimes seems to proceed according to a logic of similarity. The cloudscape fills the frame (just like the opening shot of the diagram) and, with the reduction of the image to tone and shade by the monochromatic stock, bears a textural similarity to the liquid in the furnace, thereby linking sea, metal and sky.

During the course of the foundry section we will see: great cauldrons of molten metal floating like balloons; showers of sparks searing the frame with white light; steam carefully flowing back into the furnaces from which it came; workers zipping around, at superhuman speed, on the ceiling of this cavernous, diabolical space; liquid metal slithering purposefully from one vessel to another; the mechanics of the world as we know it turned upside-down and inside-out. I would like to select a few of these moments and look at them in detail, to see how they relate to the Rieglian and Schmarsowian conceptions of the haptic.

Gravity: In one shot we watch a thick-walled, heavy metal cauldron rising like a hot air balloon from the bottom of the frame to the top, two metal arms hanging from either side, as if there might be a basket for balloonists at the bottom. As it reaches the top of the frame, the camera begins to tilt, following its ascension. The original footage was, of course, of this heavy cauldron being slowly lowered, the two arms straining to hold its weight. In Cornell's version (flipped upside-down) they dangle. The immense weight of the cauldron is twisted to become its opposite: what we intuitively know should be heavy and dense becomes lighter than air. Physical force and material presence become palpable through the image of gravity subverted.

Figure 2.1 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Figure 2.2 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Figure 2.3 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Figure 2.4 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Scratches: The footage that makes up *By Night With Torch And Spear* is dappled with scratches, dust spots and decay, extra-diegetic elements of surface texture that merge with the image. One of the few instructions that Cornell left relating to how his films should be shown and preserved was that the scratches and decay on the celluloid print of *Rose Hobart* be left as they were, not restored or cleaned up in any way, and printed into any further copies of the film that were to be struck from the original. This suggests that the scratches and surface decay were, for him, a significant element of the film's aesthetic. We also see Cornell clearly playing with this notion of depth being flattened out by surface texture in another of his films called *A Legend for Fountains* (1957–65). In this film we follow a young woman (Suzanne Miller, who was another of Cornell's assistants at the time) as she wanders through New York's Little Italy – running, sauntering, sometimes carrying a cat. This is interspersed with shots of street life, the interiors of shop windows, and shots of the street looking out from inside the shop windows. At one point we see the woman herself looking out onto the street from inside a building (fig. 2.5). She holds her cat and observes the everyday life outside, her gaze roaming, seemingly happy to simply linger and look on. We see her first from inside, her body in intimate proximity with the window, which is a bright pane of white in this untinted black and white film. Then several shots of pigeons perching and flying around the tops of the building across the street (the eyeline match suggests that this is what she is looking at). Next we see her from outside, through the window (fig. 2.6). The window, however, is quite dirty and the bright daylight reflecting off of the dirt makes it partially opaque. We can see the woman inside but her image has been somewhat flattened out. The dirty glass has a similar effect to decayed or damaged celluloid, drawing attention to the flat picture plane, and emphasizing a strongly textural surface. The image itself becomes dappled and rough, something that we can imagine touching.

The young woman is abroad in a world of texture. In *The Aviary* (1954–55), we watch the same actress run her hand over the ornamental features of a stone monument in a Union Square park (fig. 2.7). She slowly moves her palm and fingers over a stone butterfly and the snout of a lion, touching as if it were a way of seeing (it strikes one, more than anything else, of the familiar trope of the blind person using their hands to build up an image another's face – seeing through touch).

Figure 2.5 *A Legend for Fountains* (1957–65)

Figure 2.6 *A Legend for Fountains* (1957–65)

Figure 2.7 *The Aviary* (1954–55)

Light: A distinct sequence within the foundry section groups several shots that make striking use of steam and showers of sparks. These are high contrast shots, and the central region of the otherwise dark frame is repeatedly punctured by an eruption of light. Spumes of steam, liquid and sparks flare up and become so white that they white-out – they very momentarily become undefined patches of whiteness. Light becomes a textural element bridging the dual aspects of surface texture and diegetic hapticity.

In an essay on J. M. W. Turner's painting *Regulus* Jonathon Crary describes Turner's attempt to represent the sensation of being dazzled by the light of the sun. The painting tells the story of the Roman general Regulus who was taken prisoner during the Punic Wars. He was released and allowed to return to Rome in order to negotiate an exchange of prisoners, but only on the condition that if the negotiations were unsuccessful he would go back to Carthage and, very likely, death. Being a man of his word, Regulus does

indeed return to Carthage after he finds that there is no possibility of compromise on Rome's part. As punishment, his eyelids are cut off; he is imprisoned in a pitch-black dungeon and then dragged out into the blinding light of the North African sun.

Turner's painting represents both the story of Regulus (his figure can be seen in the top right of the painting) and the moment of his blinding. As Crary describes it 'Turner places us as spectators in the position of Regulus in his last incandescent moments before the extinguishing of his visual world'.²³

Turner represents the intense, encroaching light of the sun, while also attempting to convey a sense of what it might have looked, and, importantly, *felt* like, placing the viewer in the position where they too experience the intensity of the sun's light blotting out vision, obliterating image. This obliteration of the image is figured in the creeping whiteness, which is both an optical phenomenon, obscuring the detailed elements of ships and people crowding the seaport of Carthage, and an extra-diegetic material accretion of paint, burning through the horizon in the picture, burning through the image itself, flattening the three-dimensional projection into depth and then conversely building outwards towards the viewer – 'Its lethal radiance both terminally obscures and radically unveils'.²⁴

Crary also notes that Turner kept returning to this picture to pile more and more white paint onto the central section of the painting. He reproduces a quote from a colleague of Turner's who said that '[T]he sun was a lump of white standing out like the boss on a shield.' This pleasingly correlates with Cornell's tendency to return to his film works repeatedly, to tinker further with the editing, adding further or alternative manipulations, sometimes taking more than a decade to finally decide that he was satisfied (in some cases never achieving satisfaction, as the unfinished works found in his collection attest). But the much more interesting connection is in the way the two artists approached the representation of light, by suggesting a brightness so intense that it contravenes the illusionistic depth of the image, blotting out image, becoming a pure patch of non-image, breaking through the wall of the diegesis to become something within the world of the viewer, simultaneously becoming the image of intensely bright light and conveying the experience of blinding intensity. In *by Night with Torch and Spear* this association of diabolical industry and dangerous, prohibited light suggests heretic vision from heretic technology.

Moloch: Technology and Darkness

Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* was released in the USA in 1927, certainly playing in movie theatres in New York that Cornell frequented. *Metropolis* is a film in which the resonant and spectacular power of a number of scenes (and the visual design in general) outweighs the naivety and confusion²⁵ of the whole. It is a film partly about the oppressive power of technology and the dehumanizing effects of increasing automation. One of the most famous and memorable scenes gives us a vision of workers sacrificed to a god of technology, identified in the intertitles as Moloch. Freder (Gustav Fröhlich), the hero of the film, watches as the sight of workers toiling before a massive machine transforms into a vision of the machine as monster-god, consuming the workers who are forced up a ramp-tongue and into its maw (fig. 2.8).

The maw of the *Metropolis* machine-god is not unlike the mysterious furnace mouth that we encounter at the beginning of *By Night With Torch And Spear*, being stoked by a dutiful worker, and the erotic connotations of the relationship have already been noted. Whether this association was intentional or not, we can detect a curious crossover with the concerns and fascinations of *Metropolis*. In the overlap we see hungry machines and workers driven by erotic desire for commune with them, even if this means being eaten.

We also see the visual correspondence in the use of spumes of steam obscuring large metal industrial machinery, in a dark space that has no sky (the workers of *Metropolis* toil in the cavernous Undercity), and where the lights all seem to come from the machines, from the industrial processes themselves.

Not only this – the first shot after the foundry section in *By Night With Torch And Spear* appears to be of Native Americans dancing around a blazing fire (fig. 2.9). We see little of the fire itself – it is the billows of brilliant white smoke that take our attention. The association with the previous section (with its prolonged meditation on the non-narrative, quasi-abstract qualities of industrial processes) conditions us toward reading what should be rural, natural smoke as industrial. What is more, it highlights the similarities, which have been further emphasized by Cornell himself through tinting and contrast, accentuating the silhouettes of the dancers, and making the fire and smoke flare up and dominate the frame with bright and expressive intensity. However, the associations also work in the other

direction, retroactively indicating the ceremonial, mythical, religious aspects of 'modern' industry. The workers perform strange rituals in the foundry, sometimes moving backwards into preternaturally synchronized tableau (fig. 2.10).

At the very end of the foundry section the workers remove a glowing lump of encrusted crystalline matter from a furnace using giant tongs, and wheel it away in a wheelbarrow (no longer upside-down or backwards, distinguishing this – the result of all these arcane processes – from the rest of the section) (fig. 2.11). We ask ourselves: what is this thing they want? What have they produced? Is that what all this is for? The address is similar to that in Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), where Herzog's own voice-over narration re-presents documentary footage of oil-workers in the desert of post-Gulf War Kuwait as evidence of the strange habits and customs of an alien civilization. Both *Lessons of Darkness* and Herzog's earlier *Fata Morgana* (1971) pose the desert²⁶ as an alien landscape, one that is unfathomably other (at least to many Western viewers). *Fata Morgana* specifically links the desert, with its heat mirages, to unreliable vision, to false images. And the oil that flows and gushes and burns in *Lessons of Darkness* is both the sticky, pure-black, glutinous negation of vision and the harbinger of kaleidoscopic light, the rainbow sheen of petroleum. Likewise, the desert section of *By Night With Torch And Spear*, which follows the foundry section, toys with notions of false images and the pure-black of negative film. The use of negative film has the effect of once again flattening the image and emphasizing the graphic lines (fig. 2.12). If, in the foundry section, Cornell manages to turn gravity on its head by turning the image upside-down, here he turns the image inside-out, practically inverting the tonal distribution of the desert scenes. What should be bright white becomes pure black. Three-dimensional forms within the scene (such as trees, camels and the rough contours of the landscape) are defined by gradations of grey, looking like grey sheets stretched over shapes. What should be the darkest graphic contours of shape (the hind legs of the camels, their saddles, and the robes of the people in the shot) are brilliant shards of white. The image takes on the qualities of a bas-relief – the brighter, most detailed elements seeming to project outward from the dark background. Normally, light noticeably illuminates the most prominent details of a bas-relief, the flatter curves and planes of the background remaining darker.

Figure 2.8 *Metropolis* (1927–restored 2010)

Figure 2.9 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Figure 2.10 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Figure 2.11 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Figure 2.12 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

Language: The intertitles in *By Night With Torch And Spear* are mirrored, negative and upside-down (fig. 2.13). They are only on screen long enough to tempt the viewer with the possibility of deciphering the original meaning, and so exist as statements in an unspeakable language, for a reader that is perhaps not human. Language itself is held up as an abstract efflorescence of light in the darkness, a flickering of life and perhaps even intelligence, though not one that we can necessarily understand or communicate with. We may connect the strategy at work here to an aspect of a number of Cornell's shadow boxes that use text (handwritten, printed, and typed) as a material for collage. *Verso of Cassiopeia* #1 (1960) is a particularly relevant example, as it features what appears to be a sample of mirrored handwritten text. Like the intertitles in *By Night With Torch And Spear*, the meaning has been made illegible, drawing attention to the graphic qualities of the text, while also actively employing the connotations of writing, meaning and communication, frustrating the viewer with enforced obstacles to understanding.

Figure 2.13 *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942)

That is, apart from the final intertitle of the film, the only one that is immediately legible, and from which the film takes its title. After a series of negative close-ups of caterpillars, including a number of mirrored, negative intertitles, a conventional, white on black, English intertitle marks the beginning of a final section. 'By night with torch and spear', it says, clearly introducing the following shot of a pair of men fishing at night with a spear. They move forward out of the bottom left of the frame, one carrying a torch burning with an iridescent flame, a flare of brightness, white and smoky like burning magnesium. The night is pitch-black, and he illuminates the water for the other man, who quickly thrusts his spear downward into the shallow depths. Another pointing, prodding, poking instrument, this time in the hands of the 'uncivilized'. Artificial light, borne by a man, illuminates a path, draws space around it, couples with vision to create things within a void (a fine analogue for the Schmarsowian space-discovering subject), while another man uses technology to perform the labour of survival.

Joseph Cornell versus Cinephilia

In this section I will look at Cornell's cinephilia – his obsessive love for, and fascination with, popular cinema and its stars. Cornell was first of all a collector of films, then he was a film-maker. How did this fascination, this 'fan's love' drive his artistic practice? And what might Cornell's working relationship with his raw material tell us about contemporary issues of cinephilia, as they apply to fans, critics and artists alike?

Rose Hobart is a haunting and mysterious film endowed with a deeply suggestive ambiguity that does not seem to be present in the original film. It is as if Cornell has found the code to releasing these latent qualities in the original images, as if they had been there all along, but hidden, requiring an obsessive, fascinated, and loving eye to see them. Cornell takes the next step – he makes the necessary changes that will bring those qualities to the fore.

The work of analysis that has already been done on *Rose Hobart* in the first chapter sheds some light on the character of his engagement with cinema, the icon and the image. In order to take this enquiry further I will draw upon the work of Jean Epstein, whose early twentieth century theory of film touched upon what he called *photogénie*, a concept originally coined by Louis Delluc, and a word etymologically linked to the characteristic of being *photogenic*. This, coupled with what we already know of Cornell, will form part of an exploratory discourse on the nature of some specific forms of contemporary cinephilia, particularly the question of the fan who loves so deeply that they feel the need to interrupt the text, alter it, freeze moments and replay them, take them out of context and re-set them.

Epstein was, just like Cornell, a figure linked tangentially to the Surrealists and Dadaists, but (again, just like Cornell) too much of a Romantic to join them fully. Both were drawn to the photographic image of the face, to the close-up, to surface texture, and to the malleability of motion speed (the speed of life and of human bodies) that film offered. In the new technology of film he saw the potential to expand human vision, to reveal to us dimensions of objective life not readily available to our natural senses (slow motion and time-lapse photography being two particularly indicative examples). As mentioned in Chapter One, Malcolm Turvey includes Epstein in his exploration of a third strand of early film theory that sits between Realism and Formalism, which he calls 'the Revelationist Tradition'. According to him, Epstein, along with Vertov, Balázs, and Kracauer, put forward the

argument that ‘certain cinematic techniques – the close-up, slow motion, time-lapse photography, editing – can reveal features of reality that are invisible in the sense that it is impossible for the human eye to see them without assistance’.²⁷ Beyond these distinct modes of altered vision, Epstein also identified *photogénie* as a special characteristic of some filmed material, an operation effected by the act of filming – not quite a transformation or transfiguration, but perhaps a revelation of the kind described by Turvey. *Photogénie* is a quality that an object (which may or may not be a living thing) has, but which only becomes apparent, perhaps is only activated, when it is recorded on film. This might sound like a somewhat nebulous and enigmatic concept, but Epstein does attempt to refine and explicate the category. He asserts that only ‘mobile aspects of the world, of things and souls, may see their moral value increased by filmic reproduction’.²⁸ He continues by saying that the photogenic aspect of an object comes from its mobility in space-time. It is unlikely that Epstein literally means that an object needs to be moving, rather that its existence as an object with spatio-temporal duration, during which change necessarily occurs, becomes unusually apparent when recorded on film. This process endows objects with ‘personality’.

Personality is the spirit visible in things and people, their heredity made evident, their past become unforgettable, their future already present. Every aspect of the world upon which the cinema confers life is elevated only if it possesses a personality of its own.²⁹

Epstein’s description is reminiscent of Rancière’s description of the image of the silent witness, upon whose features histories are written.

For Epstein, the film director is the one who discovers the photogenic qualities of objects through the framing and recording functions of the camera. This would seem to apply most easily to Cornell’s late-period work, in which he commissioned film-making assistants to shoot objects and places according to his instruction. However, I would like to save discussion of this for the final chapter, and to return now to Cornell’s found footage work, and to *Rose Hobart*. It should be possible to expand Epstein’s theorization of the moving image so that it can accommodate the particular kind of world-building that Cornell was doing with his remix works – a creative act that is founded on a dissatisfaction with something that one loves, that nevertheless identifies something *to* love, and an attempt to

redress this imbalance through the remix, through a creative transformation of the imperfect world into another that emphasizes and elongates those moments that first entranced. Cornell, I would suggest, is playing the role of discoverer, the one who spots the object with *photogénie*, and who is capable of bringing it out, though in this case the process is effected through the crafts of editing and collage, rather than cinematography.

In Hobart's face, recorded in *East of Borneo*, Cornell sees the remnants of something worth looking at more closely, the seed of *photogénie* that brings the cinephile back for another look. Through a set of specific operations on the film material, which I elaborated in the previous chapter, he draws this quality out. He slows down her motion (one of the capabilities of cinema that Epstein and the other revelationists drew particular attention to), and he cuts her duration out of the context of the continuity-edited narrative, removing the reifying effect that flattens out the strangeness of the living, mobile object, rendering it back into a world-story that we understand and are familiar with.

We are repeatedly returned to unanchored close-ups of Rose, her eyes directed downward – a photogenic face (in the common sense – in that it is an attractive face that comes across well on film), but one that also harbours an aberrant detail, of the kind that has been said to appeal to the cinephile in recent theory. Rose's performance style (which has been considered 'bad' elsewhere), is intriguing, especially after Cornell's modifications, which increase and accentuate its natural illegibility.

A recent flurry of interest in the concept of cinephilia has focused on a set of questions relating to its critical relevance, and the shifting historically-situated nature of the cinephile. Christian Keathley has attempted to validate the cinephilic approach to the film image as a potentially productive mode of analysis and criticism.³⁰ For him, the cinephile engages a mode of 'panoramic perception', which grazes upon the image, looking closely at the details of the main action, as well as around and behind it. Keathley uses the same term – 'grazing' – as Laura Marks to describe a special mode of engaged looking. Both uses invoke a sense of the viewer as actively doing something to the text, as well as a sense that they are potentially doing something that was not originally intended. However, Marks' emphasis is on the surface texture, whereas Keathley's is on stray details within the pro-filmic space. The notion that both kinds of material may be grazed upon suggests that they both have the capacity to engage the viewer in a similar way. Is it

possible that a surface texture of the kind that Marks' is interested in could entrance a cinephile, and that an idiosyncratic detail within the film world could have a haptic effect? The analysis of *By Night With Torch And Spear*, with the aid of Schmarsow and Riegl, has already offered potential answers to these questions.

According to Keathley, the cinephile's mode of 'panoramic perception' allows them to develop the 'cinephilic anecdote'; an unusual path of enquiry into the history and aesthetics of cinema, emerging out of attention paid to a specific, often aberrant, detail within a film. Keathley's work is indicative of a recent turn towards considering the phenomenon of cinephilia as more than simply an example of routine fandom, or a manifestation of obsession, but rather a complex, historically situated, intellectually creative mode of engagement, and in its finest instances an original mode of research and academic enquiry.

There is perhaps something useful to be said here about the correlation between Cornell's remixing practice, *photogénie*, cinephilia, and the late twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenon of the fanvid (or the practice of 'vidding', as it is known), especially as Cornell is sometimes attributed the honour of having, in *Rose Hobart*, produced the very first fanvid. The 'vidder' takes one or more popular television or cinema texts and re-edits them. Many fanvids re-edit the footage to a meaningful piece of popular music; another common trope consists in re-editing to bring out the potential for same-sex or otherwise 'forbidden' relationships between characters. Vidding emerged in the 1970s, and its history has been tightly entwined with the history of consumer video technologies. As the vast majority of fanvids are, and have been, produced by amateur enthusiasts who see the practice as a means to 'express appreciation for movies and television shows',³¹ the production of these works is limited by available and affordable technologies. Kandy Fong is sometimes credited as having begun the practice, with her live slide-projector performances that placed a sequence of stills from *Star Trek* into a relationship with a musical soundtrack. Once home recording on VHS cassettes was widely available, this became the medium of choice. Vidders would use two VCRs to painstakingly produce their edits. Now that we have YouTube and digital video editing capabilities in every home computer, fanvids have become much easier and quicker to produce and distribute (though many vidders choose to intentionally limit the circulation of their vids).

The cinephilic moment too has been historically tied to technology. The classical cinephile, the ideal model of which attended Parisian cinemas in the 1950s and 1960s, was a pilgrim, a routinized and communal creature. The contemporary cinephile emerges along with the technologies that make another kind of cinephilia possible: videotape and domestic video cassette recorders, pause buttons, DVD and digital video, and the Internet and online video distribution networks.³² Here cinephilia and vidding would seem to converge; yet in popular understanding and discourse they remain separate. There is also a gender-bias that contributes to the correlation between the two practices. Vidding has been primarily associated with women, while the cinephile has been routinely imagined as male.

Cornell's work in *Rose Hobart* brings together the two practices, and the two figures, of the cinephile and the vidder. He is drawn to the face of Hobart, to the soft marble of her skin, the radiant flesh of her decelerated body. And he is drawn back to view again by the peculiarity of her performance, the collaboration between texture and behaviour, between material and life. He re-edits as a fan would, cutting out his favourite bits and re-arranging them to alter significance, and tune it to his preferred meaning. Yet he is also drawn to the aberrant detail, the idiosyncratic factor that launches a flight of imagination or even argumentation.

East of Borneo's reputation as a bad film, and Hobart's as a substandard actress, mean that *Rose Hobart* could be considered camp in the Sontagian and popular senses. Cornell's attraction to, and use of, textures (both the textures of the medium and textures within the film world) resonates with the cinephile's fetishistic love of film-grain, as well as the traditionally 'feminine' coded senses of touch and bodily engagement. The two kinds of 'grazing' mentioned earlier can, in many cases, perhaps be understood as one chameleonic form of optical touching.

Henry Jenkins describes the fact that, in the history of *Star Trek* vidding, a relatively limited set of moments, or samples, from the show are used repeatedly across the works of numerous authors.³³ This suggests that vidders too are often interested in specific images or moments, details extracted from their larger narrative context. Certain provocative images bring vidders back to them, to re-use them, twist them into new configurations, draw out new connotations. While fanvids are often concerned with the construction of new narratives, and with the preparation of relatively clear propositions about characters and their relationships,

fundamental to this process is the enigmatic and multivalent nature of certain pieces of available footage. Cinephile and vidder are perhaps more similar than they would like to admit, but the discourse surrounding them has maintained a distinct and mostly unmentioned separation that is at least partly gender-defined.

Hobart's *photogénie* is the source of discovery, but it also needs to be discovered:

Mechanically speaking, the lens alone can sometimes succeed [. . .] in revealing the inner nature of things. This is how, by chance in the first instance, the *photogénie* of character was discovered. But with the proper, by which I mean a personal, sensitivity, one can direct the lens towards increasingly valuable discoveries. This is the role of the author of a film, commonly called a film director.³⁴

Cornell performs the role of discoverer, the one who notices something worth putting on film, a thing with potential *photogénie*. But of course, Rose was already on film, and we might be better off looking to George Melford, director of *East of Borneo*, or his cinematographer George Robinson, as the original discoverer and framer of *photogénie*. Yet, in *East of Borneo*, we see the fascinating and illegible singularity only in potential. Cornell therefore represents the viewer who spots something latent, hidden or potential in a moving image text, who is drawn back to the moment, and ultimately feels the need to attempt to release this latent potential, to reveal it to other viewers, make it more prominent and clear. The vidder may do so by cutting directly into the work and re-forming it into a more accurate rendering of the potential image that they see. The cinephile-critic may choose to take the moment as a jumping-off point for a conversation, or they may attempt to articulate their reading of the moment for other viewers in blog or video-essay form.

As we saw at the end of Chapter One, many contemporary arguments for the value of the remix rely upon the notion that the text engages the viewer's awareness of the nature and meaning of the source (or individual sources), and the text's capacity to deploy those already known meanings in order to instigate a dialogue. Through the remixing of sources the author is said to be able to convey new and surprising ideas specifically *about* those sources, and this act of creation is cited as the source of value in the new work.

I argued that Cornell offers an example of another way of reading and attributing value in a remixed work, an alternative that stressed the immediate and base experience of the work above any ascriptions of 'higher level' reflexivity.

Here we have seen that a more concerted focus on the haptic and textural qualities of found footage material, and the ways in which remixers identify and deploy such qualities, reveals another possible source of value. Vidders and cinephiles might be understood as releasers of potency, as a branching into two types of users who intercede in the form of a moving image work, who see irregularly and subversively, and who deploy the means available to them in order to generate new meanings and new experiences that grow out of the original work, but which are in themselves original phenomena.