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STRIKING TEXTURES, SENSUOUS SURFACES IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

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Abstract

This article examines materiality as a surface condition and as inscribed in the texture of photographic and filmic images. First, it discusses examples where surface textures become striking due to various, frequently combined factors, such as image transfer, enlargement, the exigencies of the machinery involved and the properties of the film stock. Here, image resolution is the main focus. Second, it deals with the case of camera-less photography and film, where apparent surfaces are caused by directly acting upon the photo paper or the film stock. The third part offers close-readings of three exemplary artworks to be apprehended as poignant and exciting examples of how a photograph's or film's materiality determines its meaning, how textuality and texturality match. These readings include Steven Pippin's series of photographs Laundromat-Locomotion *(1997), Alison Rossiter's works with expired silver gelatine photo papers (2007-ongoing) and David Gatten's film* Secret History of the Dividing Line *(2002). Finally, in my concluding remarks, I will briefly address the critical potential of textures that foreground their materiality.*

Keywords: texture, texturality, surface, photography, film, low resolution, art, materiality
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Biographical note

Gabriele Jutz is full professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria. Her current research interests include the history, theory and aesthetics of experimental cinema and film sound as well as media obsolescence and media archaeology. At present she is also participating in an international research project entitled *Reset the Apparatus! A Survey of the Photographic and the Filmic in Contemporary Art* (project leader: Edgar Lissel), which deals with so-called 'obsolete' media technologies in contemporary art (http://www.resettheapparatus.net). Her most recent book *Cinéma brut: Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde* (Springer 2010) discusses films that reject the usual tools of filmmaking, such as films made without the use of a camera, found-footage-films, and expanded cinema performances.

Banner image: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

STRIKING TEXTURES, SENSUOUS SURFACES IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

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Introduction

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the material dimension of artworks and their processes of production. This turn to materiality is in no way confined to artistic practices that result in solid, three-dimensional objects that obviously display their materiality. 'Planar objects' such as photographs or films, that is, images produced by technical media and that seem to have little or no substance, are light or have no weight, can also draw attention to their objecthood. A photographic print has a distinct material existence that differs from a projected image. A print possesses a physical presence, due, largely, to its haptic material support. A projected image, however, is more ephemeral and seems to lack substance. The conventional mode of projection easily makes us forget that its source is a material object, be it a slide or a film reel, which can be touched, has weight and even at times a characteristic odour. Where the physical presence of a slide projector and its continuous clicking might function as an acoustic reminder of the image's material base, a typical film screening, with a pacified, even 'sedated' projector hidden in a booth contributes considerably to the screening's seeming immateriality. Though concealed to the average consumer of moving images, film in its material existence – the filmstrip travelling through the projector – plays a decisive role in certain artistic practices.

Relating to a photographic or filmic image in terms of materiality means above all to approach those objects' *surface condition*: the textural surface where the material of photographic and filmic artefacts manifests itself. But what exactly constitutes a photograph's or a film's materiality? And when does its texture become apparent? There are various technological and temporal factors that have an effect on the appearance of the surface. These are the film stock and the emulsion, the recording medium (photo or film camera), the medium of presentation (the print, in the case of photography; projector and screen in the case of film) and finally factors caused by the use, distribution and age of a print, like signs of decay, wear and tear. It is interesting to note that the industry's aspiration to achieve absolute fidelity is, as Andy Birtwistle rightly remarked, 'grounded in a technical and aesthetic tradition of denial and concealment' (2010, p.59). The reduction of visual noise to zero results in crisp, smooth surfaces, characteristic of consumer goods, which are antithetical to a version of materiality based on the visibility of the technological process and the touch of time.

Conceiving materiality as a surface condition of photography and film goes far beyond the question of the represented object and its surface. In order to elaborate more nuanced concepts of surface materiality, it is absolutely vital to consider the technologies and techniques of the representation itself, in particular hardware (camera/projector) and software (the support). The activity of the artist as 'producing subject' (Drucker, 1994, p.112) and the question of his or her bodily involvement plays a decisive role, too. Only if we understand the surface as a complex, interlocking system arising from these three distinct components – the machinery, the support and the artist's mode of operation – does it become possible to grasp its materiality in its myriad of appearances. In her remarkable book *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media,* Giuliana Bruno focuses on the very topic of textural surfaces in film, architecture and clothing. Opposed to the tendency in our culture to denigrate surfaces, Bruno underlines the idea that 'in visual culture, surface matters and it has depth' (2014, p.5). However, when it comes to film, Bruno deals to a large extent with the texture of the pro-filmic object, whereas a focus on the technology itself remains surprisingly rare. In her discussion of *In the Mood for Love* (Wong Kar-wai, 2000), for instance, Bruno highlights the heroine's patterned *cheongsam*, a popular Chinese women's dress, and the weathered and textured walls of the alleyways (2014, pp.35–51), all of which are part of the pro-filmic event. How richly textured these objects might be, Wong's cinematic representation of them results in pristine images that bear no obvious trace of their production process. Bruno's example shows that there seems to be a reluctance among art historians and theorists of visual culture to address the medium's materiality in its own right. But concentrating on the texture of the represented item is only one way of addressing surface materiality (and, by the way, not the most interesting one). What seems more intriguing is to dig into the textural – or rather *textured* – surface of media images in order to reveal the medium's physicality in all its bareness, free from the slags of representation. What we need is to hew to the concrete, where, as Craig Dworkin reminded us, "'concrete" is what the street is made of' (2003, p. 5).

As opposed to the projected image, the printed image obviously not only appeals to the eye, but to touch, too. It invites the viewer to respond bodily to the feel of the support and its surface: is it rough or smooth, glossy or matte, cool or warm? Unquestionably, a photographic print is a material object that can be explored in a dual sensorial way, whereas a projected image seems only available to the eye. Nevertheless, the most interesting debates about a possible haptic dimension of visuality have emerged from cinema studies (Shaviro, 1993; Marks, 2000; Sobchack, 2004), and not from photography, simply because in the latter the haptic image is standard fare. Of course, moviegoers[1] cannot really make contact with the screen, let alone with the filmstrip running through the projector. The screened image is open to the non-visual register of touch in a larger sense. In *The Skin of the Film* Laura U. Marks examines how audio-visual media can create non-audio-visual sense experiences within their own constraints. Marks argues that '[f]ilm is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole' (2000, p.145). This 'embodied vision', as Marks terms it, is able to awaken a personal and cultural memory of touch. Drawing on nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl's distinction between haptic and optic images, Marks explains: 'Optical visuality depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object. 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' (2000, p.162). It is in no way surprising that noticeable textures are often paired with imperfect, substandard surfaces, whose grittiness, blurriness, degeneration or decay affects their representational dimension. These images' refusal to make themselves only accessible to vision compels the viewer to resort to haptic visuality.

This article will examine materiality as a surface condition and as inscribed in the texture of media images. It is not confined to a discussion of classical photography and film, though its focus lies on imagery based on photochemistry. First, I will draw on examples where textures become apparent due to various, frequently combined factors, such as image transfer, enlargement, the exigencies of the machinery and the properties of the film stock. Here, image resolution will be my main focus, because it serves as a strong marker of texturality. Second, I will discuss the case of camera-less photography and film, where striking surfaces are caused by directly acting upon the software (the film stock, the photo paper), whether by hand or with the support of exterior agents such as chemistry, biological or thermic processes, to name just a few. Third, I will offer close-readings of three exemplary artworks to be apprehended as poignant and exciting examples of how a photograph or film's materiality determines its meaning, how textuality and texturality match. Finally, in my concluding remarks I will briefly address the critical potential of textures that foreground their materiality and try to reframe my discussion within our contemporary media culture.

Low resolution as a marker of texture

In her manifesto *In Defense of the Poor Image* Hito Steyerl situates the discussion of low resolution within the context of contemporary digital capitalism. As a matter of fact, digitalisation and its possibilities to upload, download, share, reformat and edit has dramatically increased the circulation of what she calls the 'poor image'. As Steyerl declares, the class society of appearances and its hierarchy is 'not only based on sharpness, but also and primarily on resolution' (2009, p.3). Despite the growth of a digital *Lumpenproletariat*, most people, especially in advanced countries, would assume that bad image quality and low resolution has more to do with 'old' analogue media than with 'new' digital ones. If one considers, however, that images change physically as they circulate, that every transfer from one format or platform to another diminishes their quality, the supposed superiority of digital imagery in material terms is more than questionable.

The possibility to shift formats in order to produce legal or illegal copies was already fundamental for videotape. In his video installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Douglas Gordon utilised a customary video player and a remote control to slow down a video of Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Psycho* (1960) to a duration of twenty-four hours. In the gallery, the video is projected onto a large screen, measuring three by four meters. As Erika Balsom argues, it has to be emphasised that Gordon's point of departure was not a print of *Psycho*, but a video-based copy of the film, recorded off the television and hence a 'copy of a televised copy of a 35mm film, already two steps removed from the original format' (2013, p.141). According to Balsom, the home video technology and its inherent bootleg aesthetics are central to the appearance of Gordon's installation: 'The use of the VHS format causes a significant degradation of the image when compared to a 35mm print, made especially evident by the large-scale projection of the image, a scale for which VHS is by no means suited' (2013, p.141). Beside its agonising slowness and excessive duration, *24 Hour Psycho*'s poor resolution and diminished image quality due to transfer

1 Unless they are rubes like *Uncle Josh* in some examples of early cinema or the hero in Jean-Luc Godard's *Les Carabiniers* (1963).

and enlargement are equally important aesthetic factors.

Though it is true that projection multiplies the original image size and hence represents a kind of enlargement in scale, enlargement in photography and its potential for creating visual noise deserves separate consideration. The classical example is, of course, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), where the protagonist, a photographer, tries to solve a murder by magnifying the photos he captured by chance at the supposed crime scene. But, as we know, the more the footage is blown up (the technical term for photographic enlargement), the more it evaporates into mere pointillist abstraction. What are not so widely known are Antonioni's own blow-ups of tiny abstract watercolour paintings entitled *Le Montagne Incantate*, which, when blown up, look like mountains and visionary landscapes. Presented for the first time in 1983 at the Museo Correr in Venice, the mechanical transformation of the paintings leads to the revelation of their material life and a dramatically enhanced texture (Imponente, 2007).

Generally speaking, resolution refers to 'the capacity of a means of reproduction to describe detail, which can be quantified by measuring the amount of smallest distinguishable elements in an image' (Fossati, 2009, p.75). As far as classical photography and film are concerned, these elements are grain, consisting of light-sensitive silver particles of variable dimension and shape, which are randomly distributed in the gelatine emulsion on top of the base. The higher the number of grains per frame, the better an image represents detail. Far from defining the image carrier or support, grain can be regarded, beside light, as the proper physical substance of the photochemical process from which the representation emerges. One of the best-known examples of a low-resolution format is Super-8, which had its heyday during the 1980s. This narrow-gauge format was appreciated by experimental filmmakers for its quasi-tangible graininess, which soon became a trademark of low-budget independent filmmaking. The limits on resolution for Super-8 are determined by grain structure as well as by the screening environment. Originally conceived as a home-movie format, the projection of Super-8 imagery is intended for the scale of the living room. When screened in a movie theatre, the appropriate projection distance can only be ensured when the projector is placed in the middle of the auditorium. However, this diminutive film stock, when highly increased in scale through projection, results in a more or less swirling granularity. To summarise how Lenny Lipton puts it (1975), this continually changing granular pattern corresponds with the actual background noise of human vision. Film projection aside, these scintillations can also be experienced when one applies pressure on one's closed eyelids, or when a person's visual activity decreases because of age or under the influence of drugs like LSD, as commemorated by The Beatles' *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* (Lipton, 1975, p.14). Moreover, the projection of Super-8 entails that not only the grain becomes more perceptible than in larger formats, but also traces of the production process or use, such as splice bars, dust particles, scratches and scrapes.

A tremendous use of Super-8 can be found in Luther Price's *Sodom* (1989), mostly based on found footage of gay male porn. Its rapid editing rhythm seems to parallel the acts of intercourse and acknowledges the repetitive splices as well as the scratches and dust, which have gathered on the print's surface. *Sodom* clearly demonstrates that materiality and meaning are inseparable. Fred Camper summarises this intimate connection between semantics and technology in Price's film:

> Peering through splice bars and rapid cuts at genitalia and fucking and sucking, the viewer begins to suspect that for Price, if not for us, splice bars are themselves erotic. Trapped in the film's surface, this paean to sex becomes a paean to the qualities of Super 8 film as well.
>
> (1998, p.30)

An almost forgotten, but no less remarkable low-resolution format, is pixelvision video. Released by toy-maker Fisher Price in 1987, the PXL2000 camera was originally conceived as a children's toy, before artists such as Sadie Benning, Michael Almereyda and Peggy Ahwesh discovered it as an experimental analogue video-making tool (Jutz, 2017). Pixelvision's unique feature is that it makes use of a standard audio support in an unexpected way: it captures video on an audio tape. The limited information capacity of an audio cassette not only results in a lack of colour, but also in a reduced image size and substandard image resolution. Gritty, hazy imagery with a washed-out look contributes to the format's visual identity. As based on pixels and not on grain, the resolution of a digital system like pixelvision is hard to compare to a photochemical one. Despite its different form of representation, pixelvision is nevertheless able to encourage haptic vision.

Small-gauge film or video formats, such as Super-8 (Price's *Sodom*) and pixelvision, photographic enlargement (Antonioni's *Le Montagne Incantate*) or the use of already transferred images in combination with large-scale projection (Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*) are

just a few examples of how low resolution as a marker of texturality can be achieved. But even if there is no machinery involved in the production of the image, there are a great many possibilities to release the potential of the surface and to enhance its texturality.

Haptic images through camera-less photography and film

The impulse to go against the grain of accepted technical procedures in photography and film can also result in camera-less practices, based either on corporeal interactions between artist and material (a mode of contact) or external factors (a mode of distance or concept). From early on in film history, numerous artists have put their trust in so-called 'direct' methods. They started to draw, paint or scratch onto the film stock or let external agents, such as light, water, heat, erosion, chemistry or biological processes take command. The former option can be called 'hand-made' and is exemplified by Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna's lost hand-painted films from 1911, made at the dawn of the futurist movement, as well as by Marcel Duchamp's *Anémic Cinéma* (1926), where the artist left his fingerprint on the film's final frames. The latter option, termed 'automatic' or more precisely 'auto-generative' (Jutz, 2010, p.13), includes the photogram and was utilised by Man Ray in *Le retour à la raison* (1923). This version of direct filmmaking or photography neither depends on the intervention of a machine nor on the artist's hand. The wide terrain of camera-less practices between hand-made and auto-generative had been staked out as early as the mid-1920s.

The difference between these two practices also identifies two contrary ways of how the artist's body interacts with a medium or material, one based on closeness or even contact and the other on physical distance. Though starting from opposite premises, both models of artistic authorship represent a radical critique of the traditional photographic/cinematic paradigm. The point of the contact mode resides in the fact that, within the very framework of a technical medium, the artist returns to hand-made procedures, while the distant or conceptual mode rejects the gesturality and subjectivity that defined the classical artwork. In the realm of photography, the former mode is demonstrated by the body imprints of Edgar Lissel's *Myself* (2005–10), where the artist presses different body parts into nutrient solution and then the body's bacteria are transferred to the substrate, proliferate and successively reproduce its contours (Fig. 1.1). Opposed to this very elemental form of self-expression are other, more conceptual works by

Figure 1.1: Imprint of the artist's arm on agar solution in Edgar Lissel's *Myself* (2005–2010). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

Figure 1.2: Photogram of maggots, larvae and flies on bacteria culture in Edgar Lissel's *Bakterium – Vanitas* from his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). (Courtesy Edgar Lissel)

Lissel, in particular his *Bakterium*-series (1999–2001). For *Bakterium – Vanitas*, Lissel grew photosensitive cyanobacteria in petri dishes and exposed the bacteria culture to a light source – a projector's beam – as it came into touch with changing life forms such as maggots, and which over the long creation process of days or even weeks first turned into larvae and then mutated into flies. The insects' bodies warded off light and caused the bacteria to migrate to and finally settle in light-filled areas. This example shows that the artist only makes the necessary conditions within which to start and stop the process; the actual creative work itself is done by microorganisms (Fig. 1.2).[2]

Camera-less practices, if hand-processed or auto-generative, have a long tradition in experimental filmmaking. Examples include the hand-painted films of Len Lye and Harry Smith, Stan Brakhage's numerous explorations into hand-made film (even using his fingernails to leave marks), Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) with hand-scratched words or, more recently, *Blutrausch* (*Bloodlust*, 1998) by German filmmaker Thorsten Fleisch, who imprinted the blood from a self-inflicted wound on to the filmstrip using it as an agent for the production of image and sound and, finally, David Gatten's *What the Water Said* (1997–2007), where unspooled rolls of film stock were submerged inside an underwater crab trap, so that the resulting film can be seen as a collaboration between the filmmaker, the Atlantic Ocean, sand, rocks, shells and aquatic fauna.

Increasing texture in photographic or filmic works can also be due to the fact that the artist appropriated already impaired footage. In this case, distortions like blisters, stains or blotches are not traces of artistic manipulation, but tell-tale signs indicating a film stock's age, its storage conditions, its use and neglect, in short, its material history. Examples of this variant of an auto-generative process include Eric Rondepierre's large-format photographic prints based on decayed 35mm-film frames, Peter Delpeut's *Lyrical Nitrate* (1990) as well as Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002), both based on pre-1950s decayed nitrate film stock, a material that is particularly sensitive to temperature, moisture and chemical alteration. As Marks observes, '[e]very time we watch a film, we witness its gradual decay: another scratch, more fading as it is exposed to the light, and

2 Edgar Lissel also leads an international research project titled *Reset the Apparatus! A Survey of the Photographic and the Filmic in Contemporary Art* (co-researchers Nina Jukić and Gabriele Jutz). The project is based at the Department of Media Theory of the University of Applied Arts Vienna and is funded by the Austrian Science Fund. (See www.resettheapparatus.net)

chemical deterioration' (2000, p.172). According to Marks, all of these temporal marks increase texture; film becomes more haptic as it dies.

Both the hand-made and the auto-generative process attest to a *pre-normative* engagement with the medium, what Pavle Levi, building on a term introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, calls 'retrograde remediation' (2012, p.42). Bolter and Grusin's concept of 'remediation' (1999) focuses on the ways in which an older medium (such as film) may be contained within a newer one (such as television). 'Retrograde remediation', however, takes the reverse path: it concentrates on the ways in which a newer medium or device, in this case photography or film, by definition based on a camera, may be represented through older, camera-less means (Jutz, 2011, p.79). The act of withdrawing from the technical apparatus stands for the desire to minimise the distance between the world of objects and the world of signs and representations. Although camera-less – or direct – filmmaking, be it by a finger's imprint or the process of making a photogram, is not able to completely abolish the distance that irreducibly separates object and sign, it nevertheless brings the object to the closest possible proximity to its representation, because it is the object itself (and not merely its emanation of light) which touches the film stock (Dubois, 1998, p.87). Emerging from a haptic gesture, camera-less practices are fundamentally textured because of their production process; their striking surface textures bear testimony to the history of their material life.

How the past materialises into the present

The following close readings will focus on works of three contemporary artists who distinguish themselves by highly unorthodox means of production: Steven Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997), Alison Rossiter's manipulation of expired photographic papers (2007-ongoing) and David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). Each of these attest to a fascination with pre-digital photography and/or film. Pippin's repurposing of a household appliance into a camera, Rossiter's camera-less explorations into gelatine silver papers and Gatten's bringing film splices to the fore, open multiple lines of inquiry. The wider context of these projects are 'expanded photography' (Baker, 2005) and/or 'expanded cinema' (Walley, 2011). By stepping beyond the bounds of standard practices these works provide insights into the contingent nature of their apparatuses. They are also engagements with history and the past in that they include the restaging of pre-cinematic experiments and deal with the dormant potential of dated photo materials or the rewriting of a chapter of American history via elementary cinematic means. Deliberately provoked or assisted by chance and happy accident, all three examples result in striking surface textures.

Muybridge in the washing machine: Steven Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997)

The photographic works (which also include performative elements) of British artist Steven Pippin (born in 1960) revolves around transforming everyday objects so that they function as cameras. Unexpectedly, some of his experiments culminate in stunning surface textures fully in line with the respective subject matter and his modus operandi. For example, he once repurposed a refrigerator into a camera and took pictures of its contents. Another time, he converted a train lavatory into a photographic studio, with the toilet itself functioning as a camera. In the mid-1980s the artist discovered a number of similarities between a camera and a commercial washing machine. By comparing a front-loading type washer and a single-lens reflex camera, he noticed parallels not only between the two machines' visual appearances – the large glass door of the machine resembling the camera's optical lens – but their functioning and their 'ideology', too. As Pippin points out in his notes on the project *Laundromat-Locomotion* washing clothes and the process of photography both involve a chemical process, require time and are motivated by the desire to reach ever better results: 'The continued trend for washing powders to try and obtain whiter whites equates to photography's constant search for better definition and higher quality of image. Higher resolution, sharper definition and better colour saturation versus whiter, cleaner and more sterile clothing' (Pippin, 1998, pp.156–7).

Only slight mechanical and chemical interventions were necessary to start his series of *Laudromat Pictures* (1991). Pippin soon abandoned attaching Super-8 cameras to the interior of the washer drum, as in earlier projects also involving washing machines, because he found out that the machine already possessed all the relevant characteristics to function as a camera by itself, and that he only had to modify its glass front as a lens and shutter device and add the proper chemicals. There was also the benefit of being able to process the negative picture afterward by pouring the chemicals directly into the machine's powder drawers and then run it through its cycles: 'The development and the fixing processes perfectly aligned themselves to the wash, rinse and spin cycles of the machine's normal programme' (Pippin, 1998, p.152). After having completed an initial series of photographs using a single washing machine,

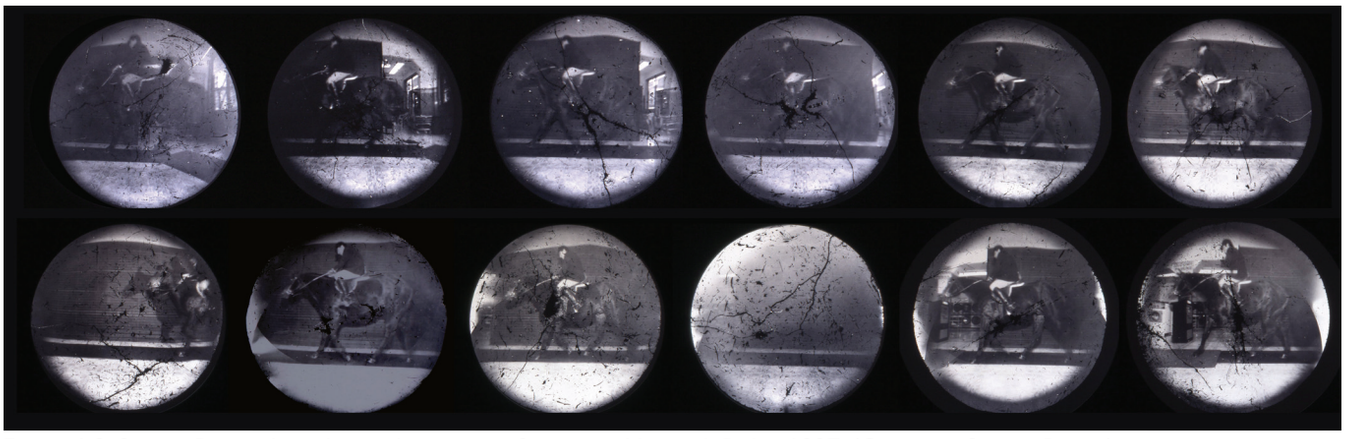

Figure 1.3: Steven Pippin, *Laundromat-Locomotion*, Sequence Horse & Rider, 1997. (Courtesy Steven Pippin)

Pippin decided to realise his series *Laundromat-Locomotion* (1997) in a public laundromat with twelve converted washers aligned in a row.[3] In order to shoot a sequence of photographs he attached cotton trip-wires to each of the machines; these activated the camera whenever something passed it. As the title suggests, *Laundromat-Locomotion* is a homage to the pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge and his analysis of human and animal motion, in which he examined movement through sequential images using multiple cameras furnished with mechanically tripped shutters. In 1887, his animal motion studies were published under the title *Animal Locomotion*. It was Pippin's aim to pay tribute to Muybridge's work, 'perhaps even taking it a step or two further by making some studies which Muybridge forgot, or at least overlooked' (Pippin, 1998, p.153). Pippin's 'restaging' of the motion studies in the environment of a laundromat portray the artist in profile and range from walking backwards to passing in front of the machines wearing a suit or naked, and even included a rider on a galloping horse in reminiscence of Muybridge's research on equine locomotion (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4). The artist's concern with clothes (or their absence) is a critical element of *Laundromat-Locomotion* in that it points back to the laundromat's original function.

Each series consists of twelve sequential images, captured on circular paper negatives. These were the result of carefully cutting out by hand a circle with a diameter of 24 inches from the originally rectangular sheets in order to fix them to the back of the washers' drums, opposite the machines' 'eyes'. To Pippin's surprise, the resulting circular pictures, developed and fixed in the washing machine, looked like beautiful Muybridge originals. It is worth quoting Pippin's experience at length:

> Later, on looking at one of the developed pictures of the horse and rider it seemed peculiar to note that the photograph, with excessive scratching caused by the negative being processed inside the machine, appears to look just like an original Muybridge. A result caused by the vigorous agitation of the washing cycle combined with the high speed spin of 500 rpm, which not only damaged the emulsion but in some cases completely destroyed the negative.
>
> What was originally conceived as a problem arising from an inferior method of loading and attaching the film to the interior of the washer drum then turned into an effect that gave the photograph some degree of authenticity by making it look like an original Muybridge photograph from one hundred years ago. The scratches on the negative surface becoming a substitute for time, an artificial ageing process lending the pictures an accidental air of authenticity.
>
> (Pippin, 1998, p.154)

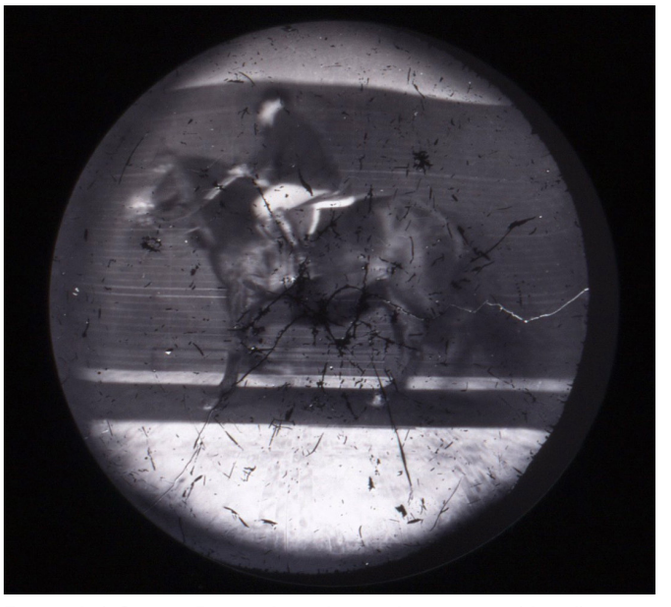

Figure 1.4: Steven Pippin, *Laundromat-Locomotion* (detail), Sequence Horse & Rider, 1997. (Courtesy Steven Pippin)

3 Thanks to *Laundromat-Locomotion*, Pippin was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1999.

Though Pippin was originally concerned with re-performing Muybridge's experimental setting within the framework of a Laundromat and never planned to produce a 'vintage look', the primitive form of motion capture in his *Laundromat-Locomotion* series created the effect of instantly aged photographs with an unexpected patina. The re-use of a very specific piece of machinery, the washer and its 'misuse' as an optical device not only revealed the connections between photographing and cleansing, but also expanded the idea of the photostudio to include the humble laundromat. Despite the fact that the photographs' highly telling texture does not carry the actual weight of time, it undeniably bears the marks of its production process, the photo papers' passage through the washing cycles. That the resulting images look like old Muybridge prints is an unexpected surplus, which nevertheless transmits meaning through material.

Forgotten silver: Alison Rossiter's works with expired photographic paper

Before committing herself to making photographs without the usage of a camera, Alison Rossiter (born in 1953) was a well-trained photographer, holding degrees from two prestigious universities, the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts in Alberta. Her career as a regular photographer took a decisive turn in 2007 when she became interested in old sheet film,[4] purchased on eBay, and began to work with expired, unused and unexposed silver gelatine paper. What initially captured her attention was the fact that all sheet film had a notch code in the upper right-hand corner, which allowed photographers to identify specific film by touch in the darkroom. For Rossiter, this code represents a kind of braille (Enright, 2011, p.72). One of her early purchases included a box of Eastman Kodak Kodabromide E3 paper, expired in May 1946. Here is how Rossiter describes her accidental discovery of the visual potential of these old materials:

> The box of 500 sheets was divided into two packets; one had been opened and one had not. So I went to the unopened one and pulled out one sheet from the centre of this 250 pile and sent it through the black-and-white developer. If it were still viable it would come up as a clean white sheet of paper, and if the emulsion had failed, it would be totally black. What came up was an image that looked as though someone had rubbed graphite over a rough piece of paper, like a rubbing on a gravestone. I was astonished and dancing in the darkroom because I knew there was something to pursue in expired papers.
>
> (quoted in Enright, 2011, p.73)

Rossiter prefers materials manufactured prior to 1950, because these early silver-gelatine papers offer – unlike more recent papers – a broad variety of choices with regard to the emulsion's silver content, the added dyes, coating, tonality and contrast grade, which all have an influence on the texture and appearance of the image. According to their handling, Rossiter distinguishes two categories of images. On the one hand, there is what she calls the 'found-photograms', or 'latent images', where the artist simply develops and fixes (or only fixes) what is already there in the unexposed paper. On the other, there are her 'processing experiments', which require more calculated procedures (Heckert, 2015, p.17). Latent images may result from a number of imponderables that have affected a package of paper or a single sheet. These range from physical damage such as accidental light exposure, oxidation, introduction of moisture, spores or mold, to impressions of protective wrappings or traces of handling. Quite often Rossiter finds fingerprints from previous photographers who had cut the paper in order to prepare test strips and then put it back in the package. A slightly greasy finger is enough to disturb the photographic emulsion. For Rossiter, these imprints represent 'a communion with the last person to hold the film. There can be a 50-year hiatus from that person opening the package and my opening it, and that time gap is one I don't really have words to describe' (quoted in Enright, 2011, p.74). While the found-photograms bear testimony of an auto-generative process that brings the latent image to life, Rossiter's processing experiments, in which she handles the paper in the darkroom, demand much more decision-making and manipulation by hand. The actions she performs are simple and consist of 'immersing or dipping a sheet of paper in developer or of pouring or pooling the developer on the sheet, followed by stopping and fixing the print' (Heckert, 2015, p.16). Thanks to her extensive knowledge of photographic processes and papers and her long-time experience in handling silver-gelatine materials, she achieves a rich array of results.[5]

The only other intervention Rossiter makes with her photo papers is to title them. Interestingly, Rossiter

4 Sheet film is photographic film that comes in sheets rather than rolls.

5 The art world has recognised Rossiter for her unconventional method of image-making. Her works are in the collections of major public institutions, including The Art Institute of Chicago, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, The Milwaukee Art Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago and the Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Figure 1.5: Alison Rossiter, *Eastman Kodak Solio, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1910, unprocessed, 2013*, 2013. Gelatin Silver Print. (© Alison Rossiter, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York)

resists poetic titles, despite the rich associative potential of her works, and instead draws attention to their production history by carefully labelling them in a way that reflects their situation and provenance. The work titles thus include the name of the paper's manufacturer and the brand, the expiration date, and the date when the paper was subjected to various processes. So, for example, the note 'unprocessed' in her *Eastman Kodak Solio, exact expiration date unknown, ca. 1910, unprocessed, 2013* (2013) means that the print falls into the former category of found photograms or latent images (Fig. 1.5). 'Processed', however, accounts for her processing experiments, such as *Defender Argo, expired September 1911, processed 2014 (#5)* (2014) (Fig. 1.6). Rossiter's titles reference crude objective facts and are purely descriptive. They are central to her project, as she explains: 'I need to know what it is. […] For me, exactly what the material is, is its strength conceptually, because it suggests a time line' (quoted in Heckert, 2015, p.18). The papers' often curious names such as 'Defender Argo,' 'Solo Gaslight' or 'Haloid Military' and the indication of their expiration date prompt the observer to speculate about their circumstance, maybe even to time-travel to their place and year of origin, or wonder why their production designers might have chosen a specific name. All these 'hints' are able to evoke a wide variety of connotations that are

Figure 1.6: Alison Rossiter, *Defender Argo, expired September 1911, processed 2014 (#5)*, 2014. Gelatin Silver Print. (© Alison Rossiter, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York)

immediately connected to photographic history as well as to twentieth-century history at large and its flow of goods. Rossiter's sober record of objective technical data, acknowledged by her titling, provides a contrast to her series or exhibition titles such as 'Lament', 'Expiry' or 'Paper Wait', which often allude to the demise of analogue photography in the face of the digital and one's regret over this. Intimately related to the history of their production and use, these vintage papers, nowadays devoid of commercial usefulness, have tales which are materially registered in their surface.

Tears, splices and cement: David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002)

American experimental filmmaker David Gatten (born in 1971) explores the edges of film as a medium. His 16mm films often employ cameraless devices and illuminate a wide array of historical, conceptual and material concerns. When Gatten was a graduate student in filmmaking at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, his reading of Susan Howe's *Early Poems* (1996), which include a section called 'Secret history of the dividing line', made him curious about the title's source. He found out that it came from two texts written by William Byrd II from eighteenth-century colonial Virginia. Byrd was the owner of one of the biggest colonial libraries at that time as well as the leader of a survey-expedition in 1728 to establish the border between Virginia and North Carolina. Byrd's *History of the Dividing Line* is the official account of the survey; his *The Secret History of the Line* is his private account. From that moment on, Gatten decided to learn as much as he could about Byrd and his family (McDonald, 2009, pp.308–9). His multipart film project *Secret History of the Dividing Line, a True Account in Nine Parts* (1999-present) draws inspiration from events in the life of William Byrd. Shifting the focus from the broader narratives (the history of national settlement, on the one hand, and processes of writing, dissemination of knowledge and print culture, on the other) to Byrd's dual commitment as a surveyor and a collector of books, offers the advantage of making history 'tangible' (Faubert, 2016). Moreover, as Gatten found out, there was a thematic connection between the actions of the surveyors and the destiny of Byrd's library: both were deeply marked by division. Obviously, the government-sanctioned survey expedition's declared aim was to divide the two states, Virginia and North Carolina. But Gatten realised that Byrd's library has been subject of division, too. After its owner's death, the collection was auctioned and the books physically dispersed all over the world.

Secret History of the Dividing Line (2002), the title film and first part of Gatten's nine-part project, focuses specifically on Byrd's two accounts of the survey expedition. As its overarching theme is 'division', Gatten was looking for a cinematic equivalent of the 'dividing line' and found it in the film splice, the physical splitting and rejoining of film strips. *Secret History's* disruptive aesthetics not only calls attention to the splice, usually repressed, but also to other unconventional procedures, such as tearing the filmstrip in two, then taping it back together. Translating his subject matter into cinematic terms is revealing of Gatten's sense of the project and of his identity as an experimental filmmaker.

Secret History of the Dividing Line is twenty minutes long, silent and filmed in black and white. Though the investigation of the splice is its central aesthetic device, the first section begins with a vertical tear, itself a form of splice, which splits the black screen at the middle. This short initial sequence leads, over the continued tear, into a time line, consisting of important historical dates and texts, hardly legible because of the rapid editing rhythm. The selected dates and short verbal descriptions of the corresponding events were each printed on a piece of paper, then shot a single frame at a time, with a number of frames in between (Fig. 1.7). As Gatten explains, the time line was meticulously crafted by hand: 'I got the strip of film processed, and then I ripped it in half. I didn't want to rip through the texts, so I had to be very careful to keep the tear in between the dates and the texts. Then taping the strip back together also took quite a long time' (quoted in McDonald, 2009, p.315). The first dates and texts are clearly not on screen to be read, because they

Figure 1.7: Timeline with vertical tear through the film strip in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)

flash for only one or a few frames. Only as we get to the crucial events of Byrd's history, the time line moves more slowly and even stops for a moment. After the sequence of dates and events, the film gives similar formal treatment of Byrd's two accounts of the survey expedition, presenting passages from the official history on the left side and passages of the private, secret history on the other, both printed in different typefaces as scrolling texts and divided by a deep, jig-sawed scar, right down the center of the screen.

The middle section of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* investigates the film splice at length. For nearly ten minutes we see fifty-seven enlarged cement splices made of black leader. These splices are first presented at high speed, so that a flicker effect occurs (Fig. 1.8). Then the editing pace slows down and freeze frames of the enlarged splices are exhibited one by one, for up to ten seconds each. As Gatten's splicer was slightly out of alignment and as he used cement instead of tape, the black strip of leader, enlarged by an optical printer, is filled with tiny white lines, anything but invisible. As Gatten expounds, '[t]he white area on screen is the area where the blade irregularly scraped off all the emulsion or into the celluloid base itself. Also, the cement forms bubbles, which you can see' (quoted in McDonald, 2009, p.309). Magnified as they are, the splices are incredibly varied and stimulate the viewers' imagination as if they were looking at a Rorschach test (Figs. 1.9 and 1.10). According to Gatten, they are supposed to evoke the terrain of North Carolina-Virginia in accordance with the expedition's move from east to west; for each of the splices the filmmaker was trying to find a connection to one of the fifty-seven landmarks, as described by Byrd. Combined with Byrd's descriptions, it was Gatten's own familiarity with most of these places that allowed him to assign each splice a location (McDonald, 2009, p. 317). After this substantial section, the final Appendix, without splices or tears, consists of a rolling text that lists the names of the fifty-seven locations used for camp sites and mile markers during Byrd's expedition, indicating in miles their respective distance from the ocean.

As Patrick Faubert has elaborated (2016), Gatten does not only shift the focus from macrohistory (the larger historical and cultural developments) to microhistory (Byrd's life), but also from history to historiography, the very act of writing history. Gatten's aesthetic devices in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* such as tearing the film and in particular foregrounding the splice mark involve basic elements of the filmmaking process, but not for their own sake. The return to the medium's physical properties and their expressive potential negotiates the question of how a filmmaker,

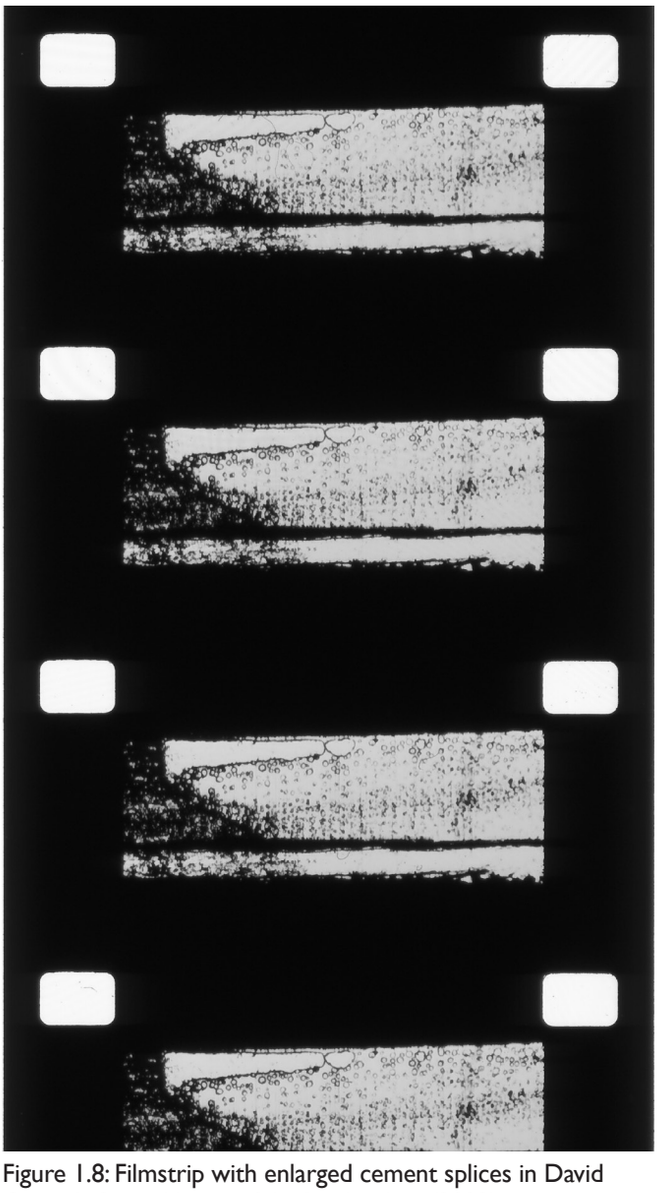

Figure 1.8: Filmstrip with enlarged cement splices in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)

within the constraints and non-constraints of his medium, 'writes' history. So, for example, the deep tear that separates Byrd's two accounts of the expedition is an expressive means and reveals the inconsistencies between the official and the private view. Similarly, to offer the shape of the enlarged splice bars with their torn edges and their smears of cement as a visual equivalent for the expedition's landmarks and their landscapes is a very inventive way to combine filmic materiality and meaning. Gatten's film, which unleashes the hidden potential of tears, splices and cement, discourages a purely referential deciphering of its texts and dates, and encourages the viewer to appreciate its texturality in all its viscerality.[6]

6 Despite the fact that Gatten's films are not distributed on DVD and can only be seen in the theatre, he is a regular guest at landmark exhibitions and film shows around the world and won over twenty acclaimed awards, including the Grand Prizes at Ann Arbor, Media City and Black Maria.

Figure 1.9: Freeze-frame of enlarged cement splices in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)

Figure 1.10: Freeze-frame of enlarged cement splices in David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002). (Courtesy David Gatten)

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate, the surface texture of media images reveals information about the object's material history, its trajectories in time and space and the forces of production at work. The emergence of striking textures is dependent on various factors and results in sensuous surfaces that escape the optical register alone and appeal to other sense experiences too, in particular to touch. Enhanced texture is not only due to the artist's performance, but also to matter itself, which has a performative quality and plays an active, at times even dominant role in artistic practices. As Barbara Bolt has pointed out, matter should no longer be regarded as "'dumb", "mute", "irrational" stuff on which humans act' (2013, p.5), but as an active co-producer, bringing its agency to the fore. Photographic and filmic materiality, not to mention agential matter, is neglected or even ignored by most film and photo theories. The significatory paradigms that have come to dominate the study of film and photography and their emphasis on questions of signification and representation disguise the fact that materiality contributes considerably to the production of meaning. As I hope to have made clear, artworks like Pippin's *Laundromat-Locomotion*, Rossiter's work with expired photopapers and Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line* would be hardly comprehensible without knowledge of the artistic gestures performed in conjunction with the materials' own agencies at work. Thinking of media in textural – rather than textual – terms, invites us to consider the critical value inherent in provocatively salient textures.

There are several points where the critical potential of striking textures comes to the fore. Let me briefly evoke two possible issues. My first point raises this question: can the refusal of unequivocal visibility (as is inherent to all the works discussed here) be regarded as a political strategy? Thinking of Marks' brief remark that 'haptic images are not very useful for identifying people' (2015, p.275), one could speculate in how far images that escape clear representation function as a means of resistance, in particular in our contemporary context where surveillance and control become ever more pressing. My second point focuses on the still present 'otherness' of striking surfaces. Despite the fact that enhanced textures are gradually migrating into mainstream culture – think, for example, of the popularity of 'degraded' materials that give clothes a 'used retro look' or the recreation of vintage effects on digital devices – 'well-behaved' surfaces still dominate our consumer culture and lure our eyes. Enhanced surfaces and their increased tactile qualities, however, can be seen as a devotion to the 'the drive-invested underside of representation that comprises the matter of films [and photographs]' (Chare and Watkins, 2013, p.76). The haptic image, often undesired, represents the other side of the dominant optical image and bespeaks, in the words of Marks, a 'respect for otherness' (2002, p.20). Far from being formal exercises for their own sake, artworks foregrounding the materiality of their surface can be mobilised for critical purposes and even be a site of resistance. In any case, they constitute an important corrective to the dominance of the slick and glossy images that surround us.

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