

Hands-on Film: Media Archaeology as Gestural Practice

Petra Löffler, Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg

Abstract

This article explores the necessity of gestures for film analysis and argues for a conception of media archaeology as gestural practice. Celluloid film copies are not only projected and watched but also touched repeatedly: they are put together and taken apart again, collected, restored and stored — or, on the contrary, forgotten, sorted out and destroyed. Each individual film is an equally fragile material thing with a micro-history of its own. The broad spectrum of gestures practiced in handling films will be examined on the basis of three examples dating from the 1990s where video technology became an important tool: first, *Interface* (*Schnittstelle*, Harun Farocki 1995) and *Playback* (Hartmut Bitomsky 1995), which demonstrate a self-reflective practice of film analysis whereby pointing to details of the arrested images or touching a film strip with the fingertips are crucial gestures. Second, I analyse the careful handling of archival material in *Transparencies* (*Trasparenze*, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi 1998), in which the authors re-filmed severely damaged footage recorded during World War I, and examined it frame by frame in a gestural way. What is at stake here is a rethinking of how to archive films and the need for what I call an ‘ecology of archiving’.

Touching Film Material

In his 1985 essay *Analyses in Flames (Is Film Analysis Finished?)*, film critic and theorist Raymond Bellour questions the future of film analysis, inevitably confronting not only the transience of the moving image but also the ‘irreducibility of the filmic substance’ — a substance that fascinates and stimulates, but nevertheless limits analysis because of ‘the exceptional resistance mounted by the analytic material’.¹ This resistance of film material manifests itself when a filmstrip is cut, jointed and glued, or runs through a projector. Among film professionals, the editing table was, at that time, the

¹ Raymond Bellour, ‘Analysis in Flames (Is Film Analysis Finished?)’, *Diacritics*, 15.1 (Spring 1985), 52–56 (p. 52).

preferred instrument for a frame-by-frame analysis of film material. Jean-Luc Godard's seminal *Histoires du cinéma* (1988–1998) poses the correspondence between freeze-frames at its centre. At the same time, the video recorder made it possible to fix the moving image, making it an ideal instrument for the analysis of videotaped imagery. Yet, as Bellour asserts, the resistance of the filmic substance remains as 'the mad desire to touch the film itself'.² He thus concludes: 'There are no longer, or should no longer be, any analyses of films. There are just gestures'.³ Bellour places the singularity of the film experience at the centre of his understanding of film analysis and argues for a close viewing of the moving image frame by frame, shot by shot. By advocating gestures, he insists on the encounter with film as a singular event, experiencing the rhythm and the editing of the film and thereby approaching the filmic substance itself.

If gestures are to replace analysis, then, the question becomes what are the gestures with which to approach the filmic substance? In the following, I will argue that the desire to touch films is not a bad one — on the contrary, it can serve as the very source for the analysis of film as part of the material world. The sense of touch and, more precisely, gestures are not only a way to approach the materiality of photographs and films, they also possess a productivity of their own. Gestures stand for 'a concept that is fundamental to the creation and reception of visual images'.⁴ Media theorist Vilém Flusser attributed great importance to gestures for what he called the 'universe of technical images'. In his understanding, the pressing of keys, for instance, is mainly linked to typewriter and computer keyboards operating computational programming.⁵

Gestures relate people and things in space as well as in time, they are a language of the body, and they can also create connections between images. It has been widely noted that the affinity of gestures with film and visual media, in general, consists in their close relationship to motion as well as to emotion. Furthermore, film theorists such as Laura U. Marks have reclaimed vision as a haptic perception and embodied experience.⁶ Taking inspiration from Giorgio Agamben's widely discussed ethical notion of gesture as the heart of cinema, exposing what he calls 'mediality as such',⁷ I will focus on film analysis as a gestural practice that is able to unfold the historicity of film at the level of the image's materiality itself. This

² Ivi, p. 54.

³ Ivi, p. 53.

⁴ The quote is by Keith Moxey reviewing the edited volume *Gestures of Seeing in Film, Video and Drawing*, ed. by Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson and Øyvind Vågnes (New York, London: Routledge, 2017); see also Barbara Grespi, *Il cinema come gesto. Incorporare le immagini, pensare il medium* (Rome: Aracne, 2017).

⁵ See Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 24.

⁶ See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', in Id., *Means Without End: Notes of Politics* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 49–60.

includes the desire to touch the filmic substance and the complex relationship between gesture and glance as part of a critical thinking *with* film that considers it a specific, historical material.

For the film director and critic Harun Farocki, the handling of film material played a crucial part in teaching film classes and doing film analysis. In a short contribution to the German film journal *Filmkritik* in 1980, he argues that the cutting room and the editing table were essential to his understanding of film analysis.⁸ Here, he also speculates about a ‘gestural thinking’ as a way of practising film analysis. According to Volker Pantenburg, Farocki, in his essay film *Interface* (*Schnittstelle*, 1995), practises this way of thinking *with* film and demonstrates the importance of gestures in analysing some central filmic operations like framing and cutting.⁹ He especially focuses on the differences between cutting a celluloid film and cutting a video.¹⁰ To cut a film means to make an actual cut in the image or sound strip, as Farocki explains, whereas to edit a video requires only the operation of copying from one tape to another. The difference between the two visual media becomes evident when comparing the gestures implied in each case. As Farocki states, he touches a film strip or sound reel with his fingertips (‘Fingerspitzen’) to perceive the cut or the glue before he sees or hears it. For him, this simple gesture indicates a perception and a sensibility or intuition (‘Fingerspitzengefühl’) that is crucial for film analysis. That is, touching the film material creates a tactile experience initiating a sense of how the film was made — in other words: to touch a film is a way to think *with* the film.

Working with videotaped material involves gestures of another kind. Here, it is no longer about touching the material itself but about inserting a videotape into the recorder and pressing keys — gestures, which nevertheless need the sensibility of touch. In *Interface*, Farocki explicitly shows the different gestures in handling a filmstrip or a videotape and addresses the specificity of each media technology. However, the gesture of pointing to significant visual details presented on screen is a way to approach the moving image without touching the film material itself. The gestures inherent in the analysis of visual media change with the media technology that provide these images.

Farocki sustained a lifelong interest in gestures as a mode of productivity, connecting bodies and actions in space and in time. In *The Expression of Hands* (*Der Ausdruck der Hände*, 1997), he claims that film has to transform all tactile sensation into glances because it is not a medium of touch but of vision. Yet, in analysing the complex chains of gestures performed by a pickpocket in *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller 1953), Farocki uses his own hands over

⁸ Harun Farocki, ‘What an Editing Room Is’, in Id., *Nachdruck/Imprint: Texte/Writings*, ed. by Susanne Gaensheimer, Nicolaus Schafhausen (Berlin, New York: Vorwerk 8, Lukas & Sternberg, 2001), pp. 79–85.

⁹ See Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard: Film As Theory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), pp. 157–220.

¹⁰ The German word ‘Schnitt’ (‘cut’) indicates the main procedure in film editing, and ‘Schnittstelle’ literally means the exact place of the cut.

the video monitor. Together with the spoken commentary, they are his most important instruments to analyse film. As film scholar Doreen Mende's detailed examination shows, Farocki frequently points with his hands to specific details of a sequence to emphasize his analytical observations of technical images ranging from celluloid film to computer simulations.¹¹

Hartmut Bitomsky, like Farocki a former student at DFFB, was also interested in new ways of film analysis.¹² His video *Playback* (1995) focusses on the practice of film analysis with videotaped images in the context of a workshop on film preservation. The participants of the workshop discuss early films that were transferred to video in order to watch them several times, fast forward and rewind the moving images easily and analyse them in detail. *Playback* shows the gathering of film directors, scholars, archivists and students around a collection of monitors: they speak about what they are seeing; they operate the keyboard of the video recorder and point, with their almost touching hands, to details of interest. These people execute a film analysis as gestural and participatory practice in a very direct manner. Moreover, their operating and indicating gestures sometimes encounter the gestures performed by people on screen. This random encounter expresses the potential of gestures to connect people and things in space and in time.

It is no coincidence, that one aim of the 1995 workshop was to decide which film copies are worth being preserved and restored. To make this decision, the film scholars discuss the historical and aesthetic value one can attribute to these copies archived in the Netherlands Film Museum (Amsterdam), the organizer of the conference. Among the participants was Peter Delpout who advocated for the preservation of damaged nitro film reels. His compilation film, *Lyrical Nitrate* (1990), resulted from the growing interest in the history of singular film copies from early cinema — and from a profound understanding of the fragile materiality of cellulose-based film.¹³

While electronic media and digital editing now dominate the film industry, nitro and celluloid film has not entirely disappeared. Film archives and other cultural institutions continue to store and maintain vast inventories of films that once were not only projected and watched but also, more importantly, handled over and over again. These films have been put together and taken apart, collected, stored and restored. As such, these nitro or celluloid films were not only perceived visually and acoustically, but also physically and they were repeatedly touched by human hands. Passed, as they are, from hand to hand, they might even be understood as 'distributed objects' — objects possessing a history

¹¹ See Doreen Mende, 'The Many Haruns. A Timeline Through Books and Hand Gestures from 18,000 BC-2061', *e-flux journal*, 59 (November 2014) <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61102/2061/>> [accessed 29 February 2020].

¹² See Frederik Lang, *Hartmut Bitomsky: Die Arbeit eines Kritikers mit Worten und Bildern* (Wien: Synema, 2020). I thank Michael Baute for drawing my attention to Bitomsky's *Playback*.

¹³ To mention are also the found footage films *Decasia* (Bill Morrison 2001) and *Film ist* (*Film ist*, Ernst Deutsch 1998–2009).

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and an agency of their own.¹⁴ This touching and handling leaves innumerable traces on the film material and affects our ability to preserve them. Moreover, photochemical substances such as celluloid are subject to their environments. That is to say, films and photographs are fragile material things that undergo numerous states of transformation, changing in accordance with the varying conditions of temperature, light and humidity to which they are exposed — and they are always in the process of deterioration and decay.

In the 1990s, new film history shows a great affinity with media archaeology in investigating the dispersed genealogies of media technologies and the variety of localized media practices.¹⁵ Far from being a single scientific discipline with a clear-cut research methodology, media archaeology is a heterogenic field where different research interests meet. In addition to Friedrich Kittler's and Jussi Parikka's approach,¹⁶ I would identify as a key media archaeological issue the fragility of the media materials and the related bodily practices of care and repair. The observation of the short or long lifespan of substances and their compounds from which technical devices and media infrastructures are made, opens media archaeology to ecological questions because these substances interact with their environment and react to heat or cold, dryness or wetness.¹⁷ The limited stability and durability of technical devices and media infrastructures is strongly related to these interactions and thus to environmental conditions. The global circulation of media materialities depends on economic calculations and geopolitical conditions that must also be considered.¹⁸

From a media-ecological perspective, the traces of their use and storage form part of the 'social biography'¹⁹ of every reel of celluloid film or photographic print. As individual, material things, they have a singular micro-history demanding specific practical approaches. My proposal of media archaeology as gestural practice stems precisely from this idea that accounts for the ecology of media materiality, its 'variations in texture, ductility, rates of decay'.²⁰ To illustrate it, I will refer to the method of 'analytic camera' which was developed

¹⁴ See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Media theorist Siegfried Zielinski has coined the term in 1994. See his *Deep Time of the Media: Towards an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2006). See also *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011); Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge UK, Malden MA: Polity Press, 2012).

¹⁶ See Jussi Parikka, 'Green Media Times: Friedrich Kittler and Ecological Media History', *Archiv für Mediengeschichte*, 13 (2013), 69–78.

¹⁷ See my article 'Medienarchäologie und Film', in *Handbuch Filmtheorie*, ed. by Bernhard Groß, Thomas Morsch (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019), pp. 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-09514-7_35-2> [accessed 9 November 2020].

¹⁸ See Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

¹⁹ See *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 58.

by two filmmakers, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, in order to examine damaged nitro-film material frame by frame. Through this gestural film analysis, they contribute to the idea of a 'critical cinema' focusing especially on the entanglement of Italian visual culture with the geopolitical histories of imperialism, colonialism and racism.

An 'Analytic Camera'

Since the 1970s, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi have been employing a gestural practice in their work on the battered material of films from the early decades of cinema, which they track down in local archives as part of their project to reconstruct their complex geopolitical and colonial histories. Many of their 'archival films'²¹ make use of the extensive film material recorded by Italian filmmaker and cameraman Luca Comerio in the early decades of the twentieth century, including, primarily, battles of World War I, as well as extended travels through various European and African countries, and the rise of Italian fascism. In spring 1982, when Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi were granted access for the first time to Comerio's private archive in Milan, they became immediately aware of the precarious state of the film material that had survived two World Wars and decades of time in Comerio's old film lab.²² In order to work with this fragile material, their preliminary operation became preserving it for analysis by re-filming it frame by frame, a process they describe explicitly as 'vivisection'.²³

Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi demonstrate their sensitive handling of the found archival material in their short video *Transparencies* (*Trasparenze*, 1998) through the audible whirring of the camera as it approaches the highly damaged footage, capturing every scratch, every sharp crack or cut at close range. The camera follows the careful handling of the sensitive and highly flammable nitro-film material with a pincer to start a detailed examination of each individual frame (fig.1). The transparent frames are illuminated to provide a better view of the captured figures and their environment. In a 1995 essay, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi describe their method for dealing with damaged footage, employing the principle of the 'analytic camera' consisting of two interdependent elements: first, the careful preparation of the damaged filmic substance and, second, the re-filming of the material frame by frame using a sort of a 'microscopic camera' in order to examine every detail.²⁴

²¹ Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi made their first long 'archival film' *Karagoz – Catalogo 9.5* in 1981.

²² See Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, *Notre caméra analytique* (Paris: post-éditions, Centre Pompidou, 2015), pp. 88–90.

²³ Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 274–84 (p. 277).

²⁴ Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, pp. 85–97. The filmmakers here refer to experiments with stop-motion cameras conducted by Eadweard Muybridge and Jules-Étienne Marey, in the nineteenth century.

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Fig. 1: *Transparencies* (*Trasparenze*, Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi 1997).
By courtesy of the authors.

The objective of these operations is to prevent further damage and decay from the sensitive material and to point to the fragility and volatility of every single frame. By appropriating and reediting decayed film material, the filmmakers turn documentary film into a monument: it is the film material that speaks (and acts) for itself, as film scholar Christa Blümlinger has claimed.²⁵ Moreover, viewing the film material from the perspective of the filmmakers' camera, we experience the extent of its decay to the point that virtually none of the image's visual content can be identified. In their approaching camera guiding the view of the spectator, gestures are transformed into glances — Farocki's claim is made literal here. When the camera zooms in and focuses on individual frames, more and more singular signs of damage and deterioration become recognizable. In *Transparencies*, the preparation of the film material, the touching of it with a pincer and the re-filming frame by frame, including enlargement and duplication, are related gestures of work that are part of a gestural film analysis.

²⁵ See Christa Blümlinger, *Kino aus zweiter Hand: Zur Ästhetik materieller Aneignung im Film und in der Medienkunst* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2009), p. 143.

The filmstrip investigated in *Transparencies* belongs to the material that Comerio himself recorded or collected in 1916 from battles at Monte Adamello in the Southern Alps. What particularly affects the two filmmakers here, is the double erasure of human life: once through acts of war and second through the decay of the photochemical emulsion on which their figures had been fixed, but which happened to leave only the rocks intact. In their close examination of the footage, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi refer to this ghastly double erasure of human figures. A red line across a frame reminds Gianikian of a trace of blood and captures the filmmaker's particular interest. Of course, it is impossible to determine the origins of the red trace after so many years, but had it actually been human blood, it is plausible that it originated from an injury. However, every scratch or cut, every sign of damage or chemical decay, every trace, like the red line, makes the filmstrip a singular event of film history and, at the same time, a material thing with a singular biography.

Transparencies ends with a common gesture in handling footage: the camera follows the unrolling of a heavily damaged film reel that has been preserved. Unfortunately, the entire strip of rolled up film sticks together, and a strange sound can be heard as it is pulled apart by hand — a gesture that is, however, not captured by the camera and thus remains outside the visual frame. Despite the fact that hands are completely out of sight, they are not absent at all. Without question, hands are necessary to adjust and operate the camera, to open the film can and unroll the film, to hold the pincer and manage the light source. All these common gestures remain largely unseen and unnoticed.²⁶ Gianikian's and Ricci Lucchi's work of documentation and preservation is an analytical gesture through which to approach and finally unveil human bodies and their environment captured on film — a substance that is itself subject to the passage of time.

The gestures in their analytical work include not only the re-filming, reframing and precise examination of individual frames, it incorporates also off-screen gestures: unrolling film reels, putting strips of film on a light table and fixing them. For the filmmakers, as for film preservation in general, touching the material in one way or another is not, as Bellour's statement suggests, a 'mad desire' but a necessary practice. For in the work of preservation, filmic substance is not primarily the projected moving images but the reconstitution of the material of which these images are made.

As was customary at the beginning of the twentieth century, the images Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi seek to preserve are fixed on nitrate or nitro-film, a highly inflammable and, hence, particularly dangerous material that also decomposes quickly under unfavourable storage conditions. The unstoppable decay of this footage represents the *ultima ratio* for their analysis of the films, as

²⁶ Bellour asserted that Gianikian's and Ricci Lucchi's constituted a 'gigantic catalogue of twentieth century gestures'. See Raymond Bellour, 'L'arrière-monde', *Cinéma-thèque* (Autumn 1995), 6–11, reprinted in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, pp. 205–211 (p. 210).

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the filmmakers emphasize, ‘C’est là toute l’histoire du nitrate, qui nous intéresse autant pour sa forme que pour sa contenu, pour ce qu’il contient de mémoire et de violence. Pour nous, cette mémoire qui lentement s’efface a une grande valeur symbolique’.²⁷ For them, then, the photosensitive material, its form as film and its visual content, holds historical value for its symbolic relationship to memory. In their perspective, the decay of nitro-film material is similar to the fading of cultural memory. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi even speak of the self-extinction of film material — ‘auto-effacement’ — and emphasize their artistic intention to preserve the cultural memory inscribed in the archived films of Luca Comerio. Yet, their desire to make visible and indestructible the traces of memory inscribed on the decaying film material does not allow them to fall prey to a well-known archival phantasm — the desire to come into a complete possession of the past. As film scholar Jamie Baron has shown in her study *The Archive Effect*, every historical film document is inevitably only a fragment and, therefore, any reconstruction, whether analytical or artistic, must deal with the inevitable gaps in the archive.²⁸



Fig. 2: *Memory Reel* (Adela Muntean 2015). Screen capture.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 55.

²⁸ See Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Moreover, as philosopher Jacques Derrida has prominently argued, archives are institutions of power and have ever been subject to destruction and the desire of extermination.²⁹ Adela Muntean's short film *Memory Reel* (2015) captures the remains of an abandoned film deposit in the Romanian town of Cluj that became obsolete after the political and economic collapse of the country in 1989. The unrolled film strips are distributed everywhere covering the soil populated by plants where they undergo intensified processes of decay (fig. 2). The destruction of the film deposit and the decay of the film material are parallel with the desire to forget a past that is permeated by memories of a repressive socialist regime. To save these memories captured on film, the artist interviewed contemporary witnesses and rewound some of these films on a big reel by hand. The installation of her *Memory Reel* in art exhibitions is not simply a gesture of care, it points to the necessity of a politics of remembrance that is also an ecology of archiving.

Ecology of Archiving

Once composed, photochemical materials undergo a continuous process of decomposition. Cellulose-based photographs and films, negatives as well as positives, gradually fade under the influence of light, humidity and air, they get scratches and stains through frequent use and change their colours, until finally the photochemical emulsion dissolves. Every negative, every print and every reel of film is ultimately an unstable assemblage of various chemical substances interacting with its surroundings and thereby in a permanent state of flux.³⁰ They are not simply manufactured things, objects of visual pleasure or critical analysis, but transitory compounds of matter that produce, as sociologist of science Bruno Latour has put it, their own 'waves of action'.³¹ Following this argument, we might think of materials performing gestures and, in doing so, extending gesturality beyond human action.

A media archaeology understood as a gestural practice might profit from these considerations in two ways: firstly, the self-empowerment of substances, materials and their mixtures present considerable challenges, especially to archivists and cultural memory institutions that have the task not only to store and preserve photochemical materials, but also to work with them in a way to acknowledge their potentials as materials and material compositions. Under the label 'archival art', artistic methods and strategies are combined,

²⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁰ Anthropologist Tim Ingold places the many interactions of concrete substances, such as clay and wood, at the centre of what he calls an 'ecology of materials.' See Tim Ingold, 'Toward an Ecology of Materials', *The Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41 (2012), 427–42.

³¹ Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017), p. 101.

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so that the transience of archived objects becomes the starting point for exploring our critical engagement with the archive materials.³² Secondly, a gesture-based media archaeological approach should be combined with the ecology of archiving. The gestures performed by archivists and artists alike produce a ‘tacit knowledge’ in Michael Polanyi’s sense;³³ a knowledge that, once more in our era of digitization, deserves to be re-evaluated as a crucial legacy of film history.

³² See for instance *Living Archive: Archivarbeit als künstlerische und kuratorische Praxis*, ed. by Stefanie Schulte-Strathaus (Berlin: b_books, 2013).

³³ See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).