

Audiovisual “Texture”: Towards an Interdisciplinary Rubric

Andrew V. Uroskie

As a historian of art and media culture, I have long been fascinated by the language used both to describe and to frame our experience of the arts, and the ways in which the different rhetorics employed by historians, critics, and practitioners of various traditions articulate and circumscribe certain kinds of work, as well as drawing it closer, or pushing it away from other traditions and modes of practice. In what follows, I want to examine the idea of audiovisual “texture” by investigating how this term has evolved within both common language and certain disciplinary discourses as a means of thinking through its relevance to both historical issues at the postwar intersection of art, music, and performance, as well as contemporary sites of audiovisual construction, exhibition, and spectatorship.

Framing “texture” as perhaps the key aspect of her recent audiovisual practice, as Min Oh has done, immediately sent me scrambling to my library. For at its most basic level, “texture” in fine art has been understood as *faktura* or facture: the material surface of the work - regardless of what, if any, representational scene it depicts - that one might explore by coming into contact with that surface through physical touch. Thus woodgrain, canvas, marble or gold leaf, as well as eggshell tempura or watercolor, left plain or lacquer-coated, and so on. In photography, the glossy versus the matte versus the watercolor paper, or more recently, aluminum prints or lightbox displays. Even if one rarely interacts physically with the given surface of an art object on display, the material presents a correlative experience with prior objects we have touched, and thus keying a kind of haptic memory. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing his *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945, made it clear that humans - unlike seeing machines - cannot see the color “red” independently of a material texture in embedded in world: the “red” of a shag carpet *feels* to us completely unlike the shiny lacquered “red” of new automobile finish, even if they might register the same Pantone™ color to a computer’s “vision.”¹

Within human phenomenologically, color cannot be disassociated from texture - these elements do not appear to us as separate elements requiring integration, but as a compound experience that can only be subsequently decomposed by analytical thought. It is perhaps for this reason that Laszlo Moholy-Nagy - in both the original Germany Bauhaus school for art and design in the 1920s, as well as its American regrouping in Chicago in the 1940s - conducted numerous pedagogical classes focused on the importance of tactility. To this day, contemporary schools of art and design, such as the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, have gone so far as to create “libraries” of heterogeneous textures to aid students in developing a haptic understanding of materials as fundamental to any purposive construction.²

¹ See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Taylor & Francis, 2013. Merleau-Ponty’s final works addressed the intertwining, reciprocity, or “chiasmus” of haptic perception in “The Intertwining-The Chiasm,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor. Northwestern University Press, 2007, 393-413.

² See Oliver Botar, “Sensory Tracing” in *Sensing the Future: Moholy-Nagy, Media and the Arts*. Lars Müller, 2014; also T’ai Smith, “Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography” in *Grey Room*, no. 25 (Fall) MIT, 2006.

While this use of the term “texture” might seem far afield from the present inquiry, I begin with it not simply because it is widespread within both commonplace language and the disciplinary rhetoric of contemporary art, but because of the recent resurgence of interest in the haptic experience of physical objects and environments – almost certainly due to our age of proliferating, now almost ubiquitous digital imagery, typically exhibited and experienced through our personal devices. And beyond a desire to account for the manifold kinds of encounter and experience that have been subordinated by a thoroughgoing aesthetic and philosophical privileging of visuality within the Western canon, this renewed interest in materiality and its textures seeks also to recuperate certain kinds of “craft” production that has historically been written deemed unsuitable for aesthetic discourse in no small part because of its historical associations with gender and ethnicity.³ Finally, this renewed attention to texture is related to a renewed attention to “surface,” its intricacies and paradoxes - in opposition to earlier, hermeneutic models that sought to bypass the supposed “superficiality” of surface in order to reveal “hidden depths” of meaning and significance understood to lay concealed “beneath.”⁴

Yet it seems crucial to emphasize that, even keeping to this “material” conception of the term, texture is not a property of materials themselves, but of our present or remembered haptic encounter and interaction with these materials. As such, texture could be said to unfold as a duration. And this temporality - most prominently in the case of textures merely visualized but not literally touched - is always bifurcated between past remembrance and present encounter. This temporal dimension returns us to a much older notion of texture deeply embedded in our language and thinking as both a human construction and more specifically as something woven out of disparate threads over time.

The ancient Mesopotamian languages shared a root word, *tek-* or *tek-*, that would come to describe a whole panoply of these constructions: it is the root of architect, context, pretext, subtle, technical, technology, tectonic, text, textile, tiller, tissue, and toil, among many others.⁵ Their Proto-Indo-European ancestor signified a labor of construction, but also the weaving of a structure. In 95 CE, Quintilianus used the Latin *textus* to describe the eloquence of compelling speech:

But if there is such secret power in rhythm and melody alone, this power is found at its strongest in eloquence, and, however important the selection of words for the expression of our thoughts, the structural art which welds them together in the body of a period or rounds them off at the close, has at least an equal claim to importance... For it would never have done to spoil the fine and delicate texture [*textus*] of Lysias by the introduction of richer rhythms, since he would thus have lost all that surpassing grace which he derives from his simple and unaffected tone, while he would also have sacrificed the impression of sincerity which he now creates. (*Institutio Oratoria*, 9.4.13-17)⁶

³ Important sources here would be Julia Bryon-Wilson’s *Frey: Art and Textile Politics*. Chicago University Press, 2017, and Tai Smith, *Bauhaus Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design*. Minnesota University Press, 2014.

⁴ For an early and influential statement on this turn, see Susan Sontag’s 1966 essay “Against Interpretation,” republished in her collection, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. Picador, 2001.

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*. “texture” *OED Online*. Oxford UP, 2022.

⁶ Quintilianus, Marcus Fabius. *Institutio Oratoria*. Translated by H. E. Butler. Loeb Classical Library. Harvard University Press, 1920, as cited in Viljamaa, Toivo. “Text as *hyphos* in Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 9.4.3-23” in

While this original meaning of the term would largely be eclipsed in the Middle Ages by an overriding concern with the liturgical word or *text*, musicology would recover this older significance in the middle of the twentieth century, most likely out of a need to describe the vast new array of musical structures and timbres that had recently emerged. Not only the novel textures of Romanticism and Atonality in the early 20th century, but the postwar incorporation of non-Western instrumentation and structure, the newfound importance of percussion and rhythm, the influence of African-American jazz and blues traditions, as well as the birth of electronic music from early analog synthesis and tape equipment dramatically transformed the postwar soundscape of the 1950s and '60s. For both specialists and average listeners, the structures and timbres of the orchestra and choir that had held sway for centuries were swept under a remarkable heterogeneity. A suitably capacious term was required to begin to discuss such radically differing modes.

Writing in 1989, Jonathan Dunsby claimed that texture was a "familiar and easy term among modern English-speaking musicians," yet even then, he evidences concern, noting that "it does not have a correlate in the languages of France, Germany or Italy," and concludes it to be a relatively recent invention: "it not appear as a separate entry in the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and even its treatment in *The New Grove* (1980) is innocent of much information or indeed the conviction that the term has any important meaning."⁷ In its 1986 update, the *Oxford English Dictionary* completely neglected Donald Tovey's 1941 book *Musical Textures*, while putting a 1959 citation of the term in quotation marks, signifying that even an educated person might not be familiar with its use. And while contemporary musical pedagogy might focus on four major modes – the monophonic, the polyphonic, the homophonic, and the heterophonic – that are understood to mark, in some degree, the evolution of the classical Western forms. Lewis Rowell warns that "texture, surface or grain is a useful concept for the plastic and tactile arts but requires careful definition when applied to music or literature," before proceeding to enumerate eight dimensions: three of which are features - *Orientation* (horizontal or vertical), *Tangle* (the contrapuntal interweaving of melodies), and *Figuration* (patterning) - as well as the five dichotomies held in balance - "focus and interplay, "economy and saturation," "the thin and the dense," "the smooth and the rough," and finally, "the simple and complex."⁸

As we have seen, texture speaks both to a labor of construction and its resulting internal structure, both the specific materiality of an object and the way that materiality is affectively encountered, through an admixture of past memory and present tense experience, as haptic sensation. It is perhaps Rowell's concern with the "careful definition" of texture in durational production that has led scholars in film theory and sound studies to shy away from developing it as a critical term of analysis.⁹ But I believe

Merisalo & Vainio, eds., *Ad itum liberum*. Essays in honour of Anne Helttula, Finland: University of Jyväskylä, 2007.

⁷ Dunsby, Jonathan. "Considerations of Texture" *Music & Letters*. Vol. 70, No. 1., Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁸ Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking about Music: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts, Amherst Press, 1983, 27.

⁹ None of the major works in sound studies over the last twenty years seem to address the question of audible "texture" as such. Books by R. Murray Schafer, Emily Thompson, Michael Nyman, Roger Strickland, Michel Chion, Hillel Schwartz, Viet Erlmahn, Douglas Kahn, Christophe Cox, Seth Kim-Cohen, Joanna Demers, Gascia Ouzounian, Salomé Voegelin and Brandon Labelle certainly take up questions that could be related to what we might term texture, but they do not elaborate them using employing this rubric. Similarly, film theory has largely

some of the most interesting and important work in contemporary art and criticism has emerged from a kind of philological recovery of these two registers as necessarily alloyed and overlapping.

While we might initially consider the “material” and “structural” registers of this term to be opposed, I have tried to demonstrate that a material texture cannot simply be opposed to a durational structure, as verticality is opposed to horizontality, since its experience is always inevitably a temporal event, taking literal time to unfold and be experienced. At any instant, we can - analytically - examine a score, or even a spectral waveform, and examine the particular accumulation of overtones generated at that moment – but this is already the study of timbre. Texture seems to necessitate the analysis of at least a phrase, and in the examples I have encountered, it seems to lie in a variable duration somewhere between a single phrase or scene, and the entire piece considered as a whole.

Furthermore, and more problematic from the perspective of critical disciplinary norms, the term seems almost to necessitate a kind of intermedial inquiry. Thus Roger Scruton, in his *Aesthetics of Music*, uses the aesthetics of a painterly composition to account for the unity of a musical form: “When, in a great sonata movement, relations of key, theme, harmonic progression, and rhythm unfold across a vast time-span, we should see this [...] in the way that we see the composition of a painting – as forms and figures in a unified surface, each answering to, completing, or complementing the others.”¹⁰ Lucy Fife Donaldson, in turn, takes many of Scruton’s analysis of temporal development in music as the occasion for a new language of film criticism:

Texture is shaped by the interrelationship of elements – of strands, of instruments – and therefore can be altered as a result of decisions about orchestration and the different qualities this imbues in each strand, or how the strands interact as determined by the combination of possible elements. Musical texture offers the opportunity to think about rhythm, duration and amplitude of movement, giving what is abstract a tangible quality, in order to connect the expression of feeling through movement. Thus the spatiality of music is particularly evocative for texture in film, for the sense of experiencing something as material even though we can’t physically touch it. The physicality of musical texture resonates in the ways we might want to describe a camera movement as having texture, the cuts as cadences (or merely part of the rhythm) as well as the general pattern of the movement of the narrative, its rhythm and duration.¹¹

Laura U. Marks and Guliana Bruno have probably gone the furthest in trying to bridge these intermedial aspects of materiality and temporal structure into an analytic inquiry for audiovisual criticism. Extending Marks's elaboration of "haptic visuality" developed in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* and *Touch*, Bruno's *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality and Media* elaborates an aesthetics of the screen that attempts to bring together haptic materiality and affective texture through the metaphor of the translucent, pliant screen, made of fabrics and their folds, both reflecting and embodying history through evidence of the trace:

shied away from the issue until very recently, preferring a more fine-grained analytics of shot and structure to something as fluid (and perhaps subjective) as texture. A notable exception is the work of Michel Chion – see his *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. Translated and edited by Claudia Gorbman. Columbia University Press, 1994.

¹⁰ Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford University Press, 1999, 340.

¹¹ Donaldson, Lucy Fife. *Texture in Film*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 26

The visual text is fundamentally textural, and in many different ways. Its form has real substance. It is made of layers and tissues. It contains strata, sediments, and deposits. It is constituted as an imprint, which always leaves behind a trace. A visual text is also textural for the ways in which it can show the patterns of history, in the form of a coating, a film, or a stain... the motion of an emotion can itself be drafted onto the surface, in the shape of a line or in the haptic thickness of pigment, and it can be tracked down with tracking shots. When a surface condition is activated in this way on visual planes, it changes our notion of what constitutes support of an image and its way of siting a medium... In surface encounters, novel dynamics are generated, including an innovative form of materiality that is light, diffuse, flexible, and permeable... An architecture of mediatic transformations comes to the surface at this very junction. Surface tension can turn both façade and framed picture into something resembling a screen. This contemporary screen... far from representing any perspectival ideal, is no longer containable within optical framings, and cannot be likened to a mirror, but its to be reconfigured as a different substance... a screen-membrane is emerging, performing as a connective tissue, and turning the architectural and art into pliant planes of moving images.¹²

These seem to me the precise theoretical coordinates Min Oh's recent work is both inhabiting and engaging.

She transposes familiar musical structures into a cinematic articulation of live performance, multiplying the projected image across a precise architectural space that becomes an intermedial space of encounter. And it is from the philological and discursive complexity I have briefly attempted to trace that Oh's interventions strike me as all the more intriguing and worthy of sustained attention.

¹² Guliana Bruno, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. Chicago University Press, 2014, 5. See also Bruno's *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*. Verso, 2002. Bruno's rhetoric is here heavily indebted to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, both his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galta. Minnesota University Press, 1989, and *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley. Minnesota University Press, 1992. One of the earliest modern theorists of the haptic dimension as such was Vivian Sobchack, in her *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. University of California Press, 2004. For a succinct overview of Laura U. Marks's conception of haptic experience, see "Haptic Aesthetics" in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly. Oxford University Press, 2014. Marks's major works on the topic are *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment*. Duke University Press, 2000 and her *Touch*. Minnesota University Press, 2002. Jennifer Barker has also explored these ideas within *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. California University Press, 2009. Importantly related to the textural, but beyond my ambit here, a new rhetoric of "atmospherics" has developed across film and media studies that could make a valuable contribution to this discussion. One of the key texts in this new literature is Graham Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago University Press, 2015.