

# Close Your Eyes and Touch It

## An Herderian Approach to Haptic Moving Images

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. Touch Before Sight: Herder's Embodied Viewer.....	5
2. Herder and the Moving Image: A Cross-Historical Dialogue .....	8
3. <i>The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02)</i> : An Herderian Reading .....	12
Conclusion: The Truth of Our Body.....	18
Bibliography .....	19
Illustrations .....	22

## Introduction

In 1778, the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder published *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*,<sup>1</sup> one of his most important contributions to the field of aesthetics. In this treatise, Herder claims the centrality of the sense of touch to the way we gain knowledge of the phenomenal world, and stresses the way sculptures can activate this tactile aspect of our perception in a powerful way.

Art historian Alex Potts has traced in this text early seeds of an embodied approach to sculptural perception which would later become essential to developments in sculptural practice and theory in the twentieth-century.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to Herder's treatise,<sup>3</sup> art historian Jason Gaiger shares this view with Potts, but seeks to expand the applicability of Herder's lessons further beyond sculpture—onto the myriad of art forms which constitute the art world today. This paper is an attempt to do so: instead of asking how Herder had prefigured later sculptural tendencies, I will ask how his ideas could *still* contribute to our understanding of a different, seemingly unrelated artistic medium—video-art.<sup>4</sup>

Since the 1990s, scholars from the field of film studies have explored the ways in which moving images extract haptic<sup>5</sup> responses from their viewers, producing a rich literature on this topic. My aim in this paper is to bring Herder into a dialogue with these ideas and examine how his in-depth analysis of the way tactile apprehension operates—in general and in front of artworks specifically—can add to our understanding of the haptic qualities of moving images.

To examine this question, I will begin by outlining in the first chapter Herder's main ideas on embodied perception as developed in *Sculpture*. In the second chapter, I will resituate Herder's ideas within the discussion on haptic moving images, namely as conveyed in the writings of two leading figures in this field: film scholars Laura U. Marks and Vivian

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, trans. and ed. Jason Gaiger (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). The text was originally published in German under the title: *Plastik: Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traume*.

<sup>2</sup> See Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, CT, London: Yale University Press, 2000), esp. 28–34.

<sup>3</sup> See Jason Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, by Johann Gottfried Herder, trans. and ed. Jason Gaiger (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–28.

<sup>4</sup> I use the terms 'video' and 'video-art' in this paper to designate moving images which are created and received in an art context. While this term is technologically anachronistic, it is still more conventional than terms like 'media-art', 'time-based media' or 'digital art'.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'haptic' is used in this paper to refer to a type of perception that involves our sense of touch, but not literally (e.g., 'haptic vision'), but also to the ability of objects to evoke such a perception (e.g., an 'haptic image').

Sobchack. Finally, I will examine in the third chapter how Herder's insights can contribute to these current haptic approaches not only in theory, but also in practice—by analyzing with the tools Herder gives us one case study: artist Semâ Bekirovic's video *The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02)*, a work yet to be discussed academically. Throughout the paper, I will be assisted by the illuminating interpretations of Herder's text provided by Potts and Gaiger. Finally, I am well aware that applying old texts to contemporary artistic practices always entails the danger of anachronism, and so I intend to approach this task with great attention to context—both historical and inner-textual.

## 1. Touch Before Sight: Herder's Embodied Viewer

The centrality of sight to epistemology has been a pillar of Western thought since its early days. From Thucydides, through Christian philosophers like St. Paul and St. Augustine, to empiricists like Hume and Bacon,<sup>6</sup> the sense of sight, more than any other sense, has been associated with achieving knowledge and revealing the truth.<sup>7</sup> This sense has also had primacy in the field of aesthetics since the latter was established as a distinct field of inquiry in the eighteenth-century.<sup>8</sup>

This hegemony of sight with regard to both truth and beauty is questioned by Herder in *Sculpture*. The German philosopher claims in this text that the way we see objects is always *already* rooted in previous experiences we have had touching things in the world.<sup>9</sup> This embodied sensorial memory is what allows us to translate what we see in terms of volume, mass and space. As our tactile imagination always mediates between subject and object, every vision is, *to a certain extent*, an haptic vision and an embodied experience, or as Herder puts it: “Forms are only given to us through *bodily feeling*.”<sup>10</sup> However, certain three-dimensional objects, like sculptures, tend to be experienced more haptically (triggering what Potts calls ‘tactile apprehension’);<sup>11</sup> while others, like paintings, are prone to extract a more superficial vision (what Potts terms ‘visual looking’).<sup>12</sup> Again, this is only a matter of degree, not a clear-cut dichotomy, as no vision is totally devoid of tactile imagination.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of these thinkers’ ideas on the primacy of sight with regards to truth, see: Maurice Bloch, “Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 22.

<sup>7</sup> This tendency is also apparent in language and its metaphors. The expression ‘I see’ is synonymous in different languages with ‘I understand’; the word ‘evidence’ comes from the Latin verb *videre*, meaning ‘to see’; and the term ‘theory’ derives from the Greek *theoria*, a term used to designate in ancient times the act of looking at and which later became associated with contemplation. In the history of ideas, this linguistic bias is best exemplified by the Age of Enlightenment, which appropriated the metaphor of light to represent the new authority of reason over knowledge and truth.

<sup>8</sup> In this realm, it has occasionally found a companion in the form of the sense of hearing, but the two, nevertheless, were distinctly separated from the “lower” senses: taste, smell and touch. Kant, for example, excludes those three senses from judgments regarding beauty and relegates them to the realm of ‘the agreeable’ (as they claim no universal validity and are rooted in interest). See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN, Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 47–48 (§ 3), originally published in Prussia in 1790.

<sup>9</sup> This idea is related to Herder’s larger philosophical conviction, influenced by empiricists like Locke and Berkeley and French enlightenment thinkers like Diderot and Condillac, that the knowledge we gain is never independent of our bodily encounters with the world.

<sup>10</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 90 (emphasis in original).

<sup>11</sup> Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Potts believes that there is a certain discrepancy here between Herder’s general analysis of sight and touch, which concludes that no vision is completely absent of tactile mediation, and his more categorical distinction when he discusses the arts—between a strictly “painterly” visual looking and a tactile “sculptural” apprehension. See: *Ibid.*

This sensorial theory is not only explanatory but also evaluative: contrary to conventional thought, sight, claims Herder, is deceiving and unreliable, while touch, with its slow and meticulous examination of things, is our most accurate and reliable source of knowledge, the key for truly grasping the phenomenal world. Sight transfers mere appearances (*schein*), but only when we can mentally relate these appearances to something we have touched before—in other words, only when we can process the world through our tactile apprehension—we can fully appreciate their presence as objects. “The more we are able to take hold of a body as a body, rather than staring at it and dreaming of it,” Herder writes, “the more vital is our feeling for the object, or, as it is expressed in the word itself, our *concept* of the thing.”<sup>14</sup> To put it briefly: “Sight gives us *dreams*, touch gives us *truth*.”<sup>15</sup>

The ascendancy of touch in the apprehension of objects has major consequences, naturally, not only epistemologically but also with regards to the aesthetic experience. If touch gives us a fuller perception of the *formal qualities* of things, then it must also lead the way in our experience of works of art and in our judgment of their beauty.<sup>16</sup> Correspondingly, since sight is a parasitic sense with regards to the perception of forms, always a-priori rooted in corporeal knowledge, optical beauty is not as true as tactile beauty:<sup>17</sup> “Beautiful appearance (*schöner schein*),” Herder stresses, “can present many things that are not owed to beautiful form and that are not the result of deeply felt, faithful, naked truth.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, painting is inferior to sculpture, as it “speaks” to the eyes while the latter “speaks” to the hand.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 37 (emphasis in original). Gaiger notes that Herder’s use of the German word for concept, ‘Begriff’, and of the German verb ‘begreifen’ (to understand), plays on their etymological relation to the words ‘greifen’ (to grip or take hold of something) and Griff (grasp). Ibid., 105 (note 9).

<sup>15</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 38 (emphasis in original). Herder’s distrust of sight brings to mind the famous Cartesian passage from the *Meditations*, where Descartes, as part of his hyperbolic doubt, questions if the figures he sees from his window are indeed people or maybe automatic machines (See René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* [Paris: Éditions Fernand Nathan, 1983], 53, originally published in 1641). However, Descartes uses sight’s faults to exemplify the unreliability of sensory experience *as such*, whereas Herder claims the unreliability of the sense of vision *specifically*. Opposite to Descartes, he believes that the senses, and most notably the sense of touch, are the basis for our knowledge, and therefore instead of the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am), Herder writes: “I feel! I am!” (quoted in: Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 9).

<sup>16</sup> Herder connects beauty with truth, and therefore if the true form is only approachable through tactile imagination than it follows that beauty must be “true and corporeal” (Herder, *Sculpture*, 83). However, beauty and truth for Herder, like all values, are not constants. They differ in different periods and societies.

<sup>17</sup> This differentiation between two types of beauty is grounded in Herder’s idea of a pluralism of beauties, where each type of beauty is an accentuated response of a certain (or a few) sense to an object that suits it. For more on this point, see Paul Guyer, “18th Century German Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016 Ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, 2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aesthetics-18th-german>.

<sup>18</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 53. An ‘appearance’, for Herder, is a *representation*, while a sculpture is a *presentation*: “It is *present*. It is *there*.” See Herder, *Sculpture*, 45 (emphasis in original).

<sup>19</sup> His attempt to differentiate between these two art forms has to be read on the background of a larger endeavor to do so in the second part of the eighteenth-century, for example in Falconet’s *Reflections on Sculpture* (1760),

We can see that Herder's ideal of an aesthetic experience is deeply embodied and responsive rather than detached and contemplative, an ideal which starts to gain prominence in his time.<sup>20</sup> His emphasis on the physical and involved engagement of the perceiver has led Potts and Gaiger to view the German philosopher as an early forerunner of much later embodied phenomenological approaches to sculpture, which would finally culminate in the 1960s with the Minimalist's conviction that the experience of three-dimensional objects is always a matter of the dynamic 'situation' created between the work, the viewer's body and the space.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Gaiger claims that in today's post-modernist and post-medial art world, Herder's lessons on embodied perception and tactile imagination should not be reserved to sculpture alone, but instead should contribute to our understanding of the ways in which various different media affect their viewers. "If Herder's reflections on the experiential basis of our appreciation of three-dimensional art are to speak to us today," he writes, "we must go beyond the opposition between painting and sculpture and read Herder's ideas to a range of different artistic practices."<sup>22</sup> This is exactly what I will try to do in the following chapters, by examining how Herder's ideas could better our understanding of the haptic mechanisms of moving images.

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in Reynolds' tenth discourse to the Royal Academy in London (1780) and in Diderot's writings on the *Salon* (1765). For detailed citations of these works and explanations of their contents, see Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 24–28. According to Potts, Herder, nevertheless, was the first to distinguish between sculpture and painting on the basis of the *mode of apprehension* they elicit (or their specific *modes of address*, as Gaiger calls it; Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 17) rather than on the basis of their formal qualities or the creative abilities they require from the artist (Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 2).

<sup>20</sup> As Gaiger importantly notes, following art historian Oskar Bätschmann's research, Herder writes this treatise at a time when a new concept of art starts to appear—"one that emphasized the importance of the viewer's emotional response as a means of animating the work, or 'bringing it to life.'" This responsive art viewer holds a much more intimate relationship with the artwork than the remote connoisseur of old, who prefers a distanced contemplation. The myth of Pygmalion, who falls in love with the sculpture he created, was a paradigmatic metaphor at the time for this new relationship between viewer and work of art. See Herder, *Sculpture*, 103 (editor notes).

<sup>21</sup> This idea is famously articulated in Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (1966): 42–44.

<sup>22</sup> Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 28.

## 2. Herder and the Moving Image: A Cross-Historical Dialogue

Before we approach Bekirovic's work, a very brief overview of the insights gained by film scholars on the haptic qualities of moving images is needed. Since the early 1990s, a rich literature on this subject has been produced, most notably by film scholars Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks.<sup>23</sup> Approaches to this subject vary greatly in their theoretical groundings and analytical conclusions, but nevertheless they all share the view that moving images cannot be understood only in semiotic terms—as intelligible and representational signs—but also in sensual terms: as objects that evoke a corporeal, pre-reflective experience in the viewer, mostly through activating his sense of touch.<sup>24</sup> For these scholars, much like for Herder, touch is inherently intertwined with sight, and this relationship is especially apparent in our experience of moving images,<sup>25</sup> the “art of bodily truth” of our time, to paraphrase Herder.<sup>26</sup> But still, how could we connect Herder's ideas, which are so much rooted in the voluminous quality of sculpture, to a two-dimensional medium?

First, the techniques offered by the medium of the moving image are so dramatically different from anything Herder could have imagined in his time, that it is highly speculative to guess what he would have thought of it. Secondly, if we are truly loyal to Herder's historicist philosophy of art, at least as it is outlined in *Sculpture*, it is only logical that new and different forms of art would animate the contemporary viewer, as Herder believes that the principles of art change through time, and so does the sensory experience of artworks.<sup>27</sup> For him, a certain form or work of art is alive just for “a brief moment,” after which it is

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<sup>23</sup> While it is true that the issue of somatic responses to moving images only became central to film studies in the 1990s, earlier interests in this subject, as Sobchack notes, can be traced already in the beginning of cinema: for example, in the theories of Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein and theoreticians like Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, the latter claiming that “the material elements that present themselves in films directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*.” Quoted in: Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 55 (emphasis in original).

<sup>24</sup> Notable texts which will not be referred to specifically in this essay but play an important role in this discussion, include: Linda Williams, “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the Carnal Density of Vision,” in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3–41; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Elena del Río, “The Body as Foundation of the Screen: Allegories of Technology in Atom Egoyan's Speaking Parts,” *Camera Obscura* 37–38 (1996): 94–115; Richard Dryer, “Action!” *Sight and Sound* 4, no. 10 (1994): 7–10; and Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> As these scholars almost invariably come from the field of film studies, they tend to engage film as their object of inquiry, but most of their insights are relevant to all moving images, and some of them, like Marks, also analyze video works without making an effort to draw a clear line between the two. I, therefore, take the liberty to apply in this paper these scholars' insights to video works, as long as these insights do not rely on the cinematic apparatus as such.

<sup>26</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> See Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 25.

replaced by other art forms.<sup>28</sup> Thirdly, in the final analysis, three-dimensionality is not a goal *in itself* for Herder, but an aesthetic tool to animate the viewer's body. In fact, as Potts notes, it is rather the *time-bound*, kinesthetic, nature of tactile apprehension that is essential for Herder, as it makes sculptures "come alive" through the ever-shifting living dynamic of one's perception of them.<sup>29</sup> As Potts notes, Herder already prefigured in *Sculpture* the basic phenomenologist principle that it is through kinesthetic apprehension that we have the most immediate sense of things and of our own existence as bodies immersed within, rather than merely observing, the physical world.<sup>30</sup> And so, while video lacks the third dimension of space, it does indeed possess the fourth dimension of time<sup>31</sup>—a quality that arguably enables it to instigate perceptual dynamism better than any other representational art form.

This dynamic, indexical rendition of the flow of life is exactly what enables moving images to be experienced haptically, according to Sobchack. Quoting film theorist Jean Mitry, she writes: "Whereas the classical arts propose to signify movement with the immobile, life with the inanimate, cinema must express life with life itself,"<sup>32</sup> and this simulation of reality and its structures allows it to provide the viewer with *an extension* of his senses, not merely *an illusion* of such.

This results in the intense and integral bodily awareness of the filmic spectator:

[...] at the movies our vision and hearing are informed and given meaning by our other modes of sensory access to the world: our capacity not only to see and to hear but also to touch, to smell, to taste, and always to proprioceptively feel our weight, dimension,

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<sup>28</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 92.

<sup>29</sup> See Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 37. Elsewhere, Potts gives a concise explanation of this point, stressing that for Herder, "the apprehension of sculpture is not a literally tactile experience, but a looking that then assimilates itself to the *dynamic* of a tactile exploration." See *Ibid.*, 29 (emphasis added).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Without resulting to anachronistic speculations, it is still worth mentioning that the problem of life's temporal nature and visual art's static nature already preoccupied Herder. In Herder's *First Grove*, he claims that a beautiful sculpture manages to solve this conflict through the immortalization of a moment in time: "In nature everything is transitory, the passion of the soul and the sensation of the body: the activity of the soul and the motion of the body: every state of changeable finite nature. Now if art has only one instant in which everything is to be contained: then every alterable state of nature is unnaturally immortalized through it, and thus with this principle all imitation of nature through art cease." Quoted in Paul Guyer, "18th Century German Aesthetics." To read this passage in a slightly different translation, see Johann Gottfried Herder, "Critical Forests, or Reflections on the Art and Science of the Beautiful: First Grove, Dedicated to Mr. Lessing's Laocoön," in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics, Johann Gottfried Herder*, trans. and ed. Gregory Moore (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 98.

<sup>32</sup> Jean Mitry, *Esthétique et psychologie du cinéma*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1965), 453–54. Quoted in Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, 5. For an elaboration on this point, see *ibid.*, 9.

gravity, and movement in the world. In sum, the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies.*<sup>33</sup>

Reading this deeply embodied notion of spectatorship, it is perhaps not entirely surprising to discover how similar are Herder's accounts of the sculptural experience to Sobchack's filmic ones. On her experience of the film *The Piano*, for example, Sobchack writes: "My fingers *comprehended* that image, *grasped*<sup>34</sup> it with a nearly imperceptible tingle of attention and anticipation and, offscreen, 'felt themselves' as a potentiality in the subjective and fleshy situation figured onscreen."<sup>35</sup> Compare this to Herder's art lover in front of a sculpture—"his eye becomes his hand and the ray of light his finger."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Marks' idea of an haptic experience, where "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch,"<sup>37</sup> calls to mind Herder's claim that in front certain sculptures "we believe we see something when in fact we touch it and where only touch is appropriate." In these cases, he claims, "sight is but an abbreviated form of touch."<sup>38</sup>

These clear experiential similarities may raise the question of why Herder is entirely absent from the writings on haptic moving images while other philosophers are frequently cited,<sup>39</sup> but they still *cannot* teach anything new about haptic images. Where Herder *can* add to these ideas is in the analysis of the specific aesthetic tactics that provoke haptic responses from the viewer. In other words, in analyzing what kind of images "speak" to our hands and why. Marks formulates some characteristics of haptic qualities in images, but hers only pertain to abstract images, as she claims that haptic vision always privileges the *material* qualities of the image over the *signifying* ones.<sup>40</sup> The representation of a hand, she claims,

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<sup>33</sup> See Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 60 (emphasis in original).

<sup>34</sup> See note 14.

<sup>35</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 63 (emphasis in original).

<sup>36</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Marks adopts the term 'haptic' (from the German 'Haptein', meaning 'to fasten') from the nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl, who uses it instead of the word 'tactile', as he finds the latter too literal. See: *Ibid.*, 162. The terms 'haptic visuality' or 'haptic vision' must not be confused with the physiological term 'haptic perception', denoting in motoric studies the literal grasping of an object by the human hand.

<sup>38</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> The likes of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, Deleuze and Nancy are common points of reference in these texts.

<sup>40</sup> Marks, *Skin*, 171. In these passages Marks criticizes, for example, Deleuze for his analysis of the haptic effects evoked by the direct depiction of touching hands in Bresson's film *Pickpockets*. For her, *direct* representation is *indirect* in approaching the sense of touch; Elsewhere, she adds: "Haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure—a sensory-motor reaction—so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (*Ibid.*, 163).

makes the viewer identify with an on-screen character, rather than allowing him to focus solely on the “texture” of the image. This claim is highly problematic, however, as our experience of the world is always sensual *and* semantic, corporeal *and* intelligible at one and the same time (as cognitive discoveries in the field of “mirror neurons” can also attest).<sup>41</sup> Sobchack offers a more subtle approach, which takes into consideration the interrelations between signification and sensoriality, and she actually does analyze some images of touching hands and bodies in her writings.<sup>42</sup> However, she still does not attempt to explain *what kind* of images of touch, specifically, are prone to evoke an haptic experience.<sup>43</sup> I believe Herder’s in-depth analysis of the specific qualities and modalities of tactile apprehension could help fill this gap and in this way enter into a productive cross-historical dialogue with these scholars. In the next chapter I will focus on one case study to show how this can work out in practice.

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<sup>41</sup> Growing neuro-scientific research shows that in the human brain, particularly in the parts connected to the sense of touch and control of movement, there are so-called “mirror neurons” which react similarly when a we act in a certain manner and when we observe this same action. The existence of these neurons proves that when we watch a touching hand, our sense of touch would necessarily be activated in one way or the other. Our body will mirror, or imitate, to a certain extent, what he perceives.

<sup>42</sup> Sobchack claims that cinema “is marked by the way in which significance and the act of signifying are *directly* felt, sensuously available to the viewer.” Sobchack, *Address of the Eye*, 8 (emphasis in original).

<sup>43</sup> Other texts which direct specifically and intentionally literal images of touching bodies are: Romain Chareyron, “Haptic Vision and the Experience of Difference in Agnès Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000),” *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 7 (2013): 83–96; and Laura McMahon, *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras and Denis* (Oxford: Leganda, 2012). The latter was criticized precisely for not explaining why this choice is valid in Tarja Laine, review of *Cinema and Contact: The Withdrawal of Touch in Nancy, Bresson, Duras, and Denis*, by Laura McMahon, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 11, no. 3 (2013): 392.

### 3. *The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02): An Herderian Reading*

*The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02)* is a three-channel video work by Dutch artist Semâ Bekriovic, which was shot by a thermal camera in the plaster department of the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. It shows a hand patiently caressing casts of body parts, making them visible to the viewer only by the transference of human body heat onto them [fig. 1].<sup>44</sup>

This work uses different aesthetic tactics to engage the viewer haptically. Some of them correspond with Marks' characteristics of haptic images: first, the work complies with her emphasis on grainy, faded or broken images, which "refuse visual plentitude."<sup>45</sup> In *Radiance*, the touching hands and the casts are fragmented, they constantly shift in and out of focus, and the video as a whole possess a grainy, lo-fi quality owing to the thermal technology. These qualities give, indeed, a "textural" feel to the images we observe, which is very different from the distinct "opticality" of sharp images. The work also applies the tactic of over-proximity, which is important for Marks because it renders the viewer's vision largely inefficient and forces him to resort to other senses, calling his body into action.<sup>46</sup> In *Radiance* everything is, indeed, shot in extreme close-up, and since the work is usually exhibited free-standing in the exhibition space, one can literally approach it to the verge of touching it [fig. 2],<sup>47</sup> a fact that further enhances the bodily engagement of the viewer.

Closeness is also crucial to Herder's notion of embodied perception, as it can animate the viewer<sup>48</sup> and make him fully aware of his basic physical engagement with things in the world.<sup>49</sup> However, while for Marks closeness is a way to achieve the abstraction of the image, to deconstruct the figure,<sup>50</sup> for Herder proximity and figuration work in accord to evoke our

<sup>44</sup> The work can be partially viewed online, on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/128465716>; or on the artist's website: <http://www.semabekirovic.nl/715>.

<sup>45</sup> Marks, *Skin*, 177.

<sup>46</sup> According to Marks, hyper-close images "appeal to embodied memory by bringing vision as close as possible to the image [...] [C]onverging vision to touch" (Ibid., 159).

<sup>47</sup> Together with Max Bauhaus and Sara van Bussel, I have recently curated the exhibition *Screen Matter(s)*, where *Radiance* was exhibited in this fashion as well. For more on this exhibition, see: "Screen Matter(s)," Amsterdam Institute for Humanities Research, University of Amsterdam, accessed June 13, 2018, <http://aihr.uva.nl/content/events/exhibitions/2018/06/screen-matters.html>. The work was also exhibited in: "Thinking Sense, Save the Loom" (Witteveen Visual Art Center, 2016); Art Rotterdam Projections (with Stigter van Doesburg, 2017); and "The Materiality of The Invisible" (Marres/Jan van Eyck Academie, 2017).

<sup>48</sup> Herder writes: "The *closer* we approach an object, the more *alive* our language becomes" (emphasis in original). See Herder, *Sculpture*, 42 (emphasis in original). This intimacy is important for experiencing artworks but also with regard to other "objects" of our desire, as Herder poetically explains: "Pity the lover who gazes upon his beloved from a distance as if she were an image on a surface and for whom this suffices! Pity the sculptor of an Apollo or a Hercules who has never embraced the body of an Apollo, who has never touched, even in a dream, the breast or the back of a Hercules." See Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> A similar stance is expressed by film scholar Romain Chareyron, who claims that "whereas optic images set discrete, self-standing elements of figuration in illusionistic spaces, haptic images dehierarchize perception,

tactile imagination. And indeed, the close-ups of intimate encounters with sculptures in *Radiance* are more similar to the Herderian haptic experience—where the viewer is led to focus on the details of a sculpture to the extent that he almost feels like he is in fact touching it—than to the Marksian abstract one.<sup>51</sup> The work achieves its haptic effects by “textural” and figurative tactics, as the close-ups compel the viewer to focus on the sole action that is taking place before him—touching—and to be absorbed by the specific manners in which it is depicted. Marks claims that it is always the movement of the camera that evokes in the viewer a “caressing relation to the real,”<sup>52</sup> but it is quite clear that in *Radiance*, where the camera stands completely still, it is actually the *caressing hands* that invite our imaginary fingers.

What exactly in these caressing hands “speaks” to our body and makes our fingers “tingle”?<sup>53</sup> The first Herderian modality of touch that immediately strikes us in *Radiance* is the utter *slowness* of the touching hands. They rub the plaster casts patiently, with no rush, unveiling them detail after detail, recalling Herder’s link between the slowness of touch and its thorough and intimate exploration, which negates the immediacy of vision.<sup>54</sup> The hands here touch the objects like Herder’s blind man, who is “slowly but surely making out concepts, [and] is able to judge the form and living presence of things far more subtly than the sighted, from whom everything flees like a shadow.”<sup>55</sup>

This brings us to the next Herderian modality of touch that is made sensually present in *Radiance*—its *obscurity* and *muteness*. For Herder, touch “is the obscurest, tardiest, and most sluggish of the senses,”<sup>56</sup> at odds with the distinctness of sight and the clear visibility

drawing attention back to the tactile details, and the material surface where figure and ground start to fuse.” See Chareyron, “Haptic Vision,” 88.

<sup>51</sup> See Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 30. Theater scholar Bram van Oostveldt stresses the “*as if*” structure that lies at the heart of this Herderian haptic experience. See Bram van Oostveldt, “‘Ut Sculptura Theatrum’: On the Relation between Theatre and Sculpture in the Late Eighteenth Century,” in *Idols and Museum Pieces: The Nature of Sculpture, Its Historiography, and Exhibition History, 1640–1880*, ed. Caroline van Eck (Berlin, Paris: De Gruyter, Ecole du Louvre, 2017), 150.

<sup>52</sup> Marks, *Skin*, 192.

<sup>53</sup> See note 35.

<sup>54</sup> See: Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 20.

<sup>55</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 37. Herder discusses blind people in a few instances in *Sculpture* to prove his points, and this is not unusual for his time. Blind people were a common point of departure when discussing sensorial knowledge and the differences between sight and touch in the late seventeenth-century and throughout the eighteenth-century, most notably since empiricist philosopher John Locke treated the ‘Molyneux problem’ in his famous *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis, IN, Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 1996), first published in 1689. For a thorough discussion on this topic, see Michael J. Morgan, *Molyneux’s Question: Vision, Touch, and the Philosophy of Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), quoted in: Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 10 (note 18).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

that a painting might offer.<sup>57</sup> In *Radiance*, we literally experience “the silent sense of touch that feels things in the dark,”<sup>58</sup> as the three mute channels start with sheer darkness (that takes the color of orange/pink), and little by little our proxy’s hands start to feel their way in the dark and reveal the sculptural forms,<sup>59</sup> reminding us of Herder’s description of the way we have to “slowly and blindly feel [our] way forward” when we perceive a sculpture.<sup>60</sup>

Other essential characteristics of tactile apprehension, according to Herder, are its *gradualness*, *dynamism* (shortly discusses earlier) and *endless exploration*. He writes that “the work of the hand is never complete: it goes on feeling, so to speak, infinitely.”<sup>61</sup> This endless dynamism is inherent in this work, since heat—a dynamic force—is its “medium”. The figures, therefore, constantly emerge, fade and then re-emerge again in an endless exploration, which is accentuated by the presentation of the work in an actual loop.<sup>62</sup>

These different modalities of tactile apprehension which *Radiance* manages to skillfully tap into are also being experientially enhanced by the specific grammar of the work. The fragmentation and anonymity of the touching hands<sup>63</sup> invite us, as viewers, to project ourselves onto to image and fill-in this identity vacuum, as there is no concrete Other which hampers such self-projection. This renders the on-screen touching activity even closer to our own hands. We also become completely dependent on this agent, as we can only see what he or she elects to rub, making him almost like our proxy and thereby creating an hybrid perceiver composed of the on-screen toucher and the off-screen observer. The Herderian embodied phenomenological process, by which we always experience the objects of our sight through the *mental* mediation of touch, becomes concrete here.

Finally, this work does not only manage to engage the viewer haptically through the visual concretization, or translation, of Herder’s modalities of tactile perception, but also

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<sup>57</sup> Gaiger rightly notes that Herder’s positive evaluation of slowness and obscurity counters the Enlightenment metaphorical identification of reason with clear vision and light (see Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 20). This emphasis in Herder, nevertheless, creates an intriguing tension, as Potts notes, between touch’s obscurity on the one hand, and its ability to perceive things firmly and fully on the other hand. For more on this point, see Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> This atmosphere of darkness is enhanced by the association of thermal cameras with night vision, as they are frequently used to trace movement in dark conditions, for example in security systems or in animal movies. Recently, for example, this technology was used by photographer Grey Hutton to document homeless people at night in the streets of London. See Grey Hutton, “Traces of Warmth: Thermal Images of London’s Homeless,” *Guardian*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/gallery/2018/feb/27/traces-of-warmth-thermal-images-of-londons-homeless>.

<sup>60</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 56–57.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>62</sup> Potts describes this tactile exploration as an “awareness of a thing that emerges and is given fullness in time.” See Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> These hands are not only anonymous because they lack a face, but also because they are not specific, they are featureless: they could belong to a male/female, young/old, black/white, hairy/smooth person.

through the specific objects of touch the artist chooses. For Herder, *simple* sculptures are prone to evoke our tactile imagination because touch “likes” simple forms.<sup>64</sup> As Potts notes, Herder views sculpture as “an art of centering attention on a single form that a felt exploration can easily probe,”<sup>65</sup> and he also directs us to approach a sculpture simply:

Let us approach a statue as if enveloped in holy darkness, as if we shall discover there for the first time the *simplest concept* and the *meaning of form*, the richest, noblest, and most beautiful form of the *human body*. The greater the simplicity with which we commence this task, the more the mute image will speak to us.<sup>66</sup>

Again, this simplicity is concretized in *Radiance*, as all we see in on the screens are nude body parts probed by two hands, nothing more.<sup>67</sup>

Sculptures, according to Herder, also address the viewer’s body through the way they “*come to life*,”<sup>68</sup> and consequently animate the viewer.<sup>69</sup> In *Radiance*, owing to the thermal technology, the casts are made to appear more alive than the human hands that touch them, creating an undifferentiated environment where animate and inanimate matter seem to enter “a zone of indiscernibility.”<sup>70</sup> The work becomes a site where the dichotomy between subject and object—both dismembered here—does not hold up, resulting in an Uncanny feeling.<sup>71</sup> Bekirovic wanted to highlight the fact that humans and inanimate objects are ontologically much less separated than it is normally thought, as every time we touch an object part of us is

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<sup>64</sup> This simplicity also requires that a sculpture be completely nude and colorless, as only thus it “obliges us to attend to the *presence and existence of an object*.” Herder, *Sculpture*, 81 (emphasis in original).

<sup>65</sup> See Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 65–66 (emphasis in original).

<sup>67</sup> Also, the application of a non-human mode of vision creates an effect of estrangement, where our human vision is revealed as relative and unreliable, while touch shines through in its familiarity.

<sup>68</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 91 (emphasis in original).

<sup>69</sup> Herder writes: “For what is so uncommonly certain and definite in a sculpture is that, because it presents a *human being*, a fully *animated body*, it speaks to us as an *act*; it seizes hold of us and penetrates our very being, awakening the full range of responsive human feeling.” See *Ibid.*, 80 (emphasis in original). The interest of Herder’s contemporaries in sculpture’s ability to make inanimate matter be experienced as animate is discussed in length in art historian Caroline van Eck’s *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Berlin, Leiden: De Gruyter, Leiden University Press, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> A formulation I borrow from Deleuze, who uses it to describe a situation where living bodies and dead meat become indistinguishable from one another, for example in the paintings of Francis Bacon. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. D.W. Smith (London, New York: Continuum, 2003), 20.

<sup>71</sup> The Uncanny, according to psychologist Ernst Jentsch, results from the viewer’s feeling of uncertainty, especially when he is unable to differentiate between an animate and an inanimate entity. See: Ernst Jentsch, “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” trans. and ed. Roy Sellars, in *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties*, ed. Jo Collins and John Jervis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 216–28, originally published in German in 1906.

transferred onto it and vice versa—making our environment one of constant physical merging between the animate and the inanimate.<sup>72</sup>

The embodied experience we have of sculptures is also strongly tied, according to Herder, with the fact that they were made by the human hand: we seek “to grasp the image that arose from the arm and the soul of the artist.”<sup>73</sup> This relationship between perceiver and creator comes into play in *Radiance* as well, since we perceive the casts as if they are molded in real time in front of our eyes, brought to life by the touching hand<sup>74</sup> (which is indeed the artist’s hand).<sup>75</sup> The “warm, creative hand”<sup>76</sup> of the Herderian sculptor becomes, again, concrete, as the warmth of the artist’s hand and the energy it transmits is actually what allows the forms to emerge in front of us.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, it might be interesting to note that Bekriovic herself felt like she was activating and reviving these casts.<sup>78</sup> Her work could, thus, be seen as an attempt to enter into a more vital and immediate relationship with sculptures and with images, similar to the relationship which Herder seeks in his treatise<sup>79</sup> and which scholars like Marks and Sobchack advocate for in their writing. By implementing all of these varied aesthetic devices discussed

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<sup>72</sup> Bekriovic explained this intention in an interview I held with her. The reciprocity between humans and other non-human entities—animate and inanimate—is explored in other works by the artist as well: she “collaborates” with birds (in *Koet*, 2006–7), a snail (in *Grid*, 2006) insects (in *A Story Digested by Insects*, 2014) and bees (in *Untitled [honeycombs]*, 2011–13), and allows material processes to interfere and modify objects in unexpected ways in works like *Combustions (Pyrography)*, 2014–15, and *Snowflake*, 2012. From this perspective, her oeuvre could be seen as reflective of a recent tendency in continental philosophy, which has spread into the realms of art, to transcend the anthropocentric dichotomy between subject and object and approach non-human and non-animate entities as agents in their own rights. These ideas are associated with theories like Actor-Network-Theory, New Materialism, Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented-Ontology, among others.

<sup>73</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 41.

<sup>74</sup> The special presence plaster casts possessed for the early nineteenth-century viewer is discussed in an essay by art historian Pascal Griener, where he stresses their ghostly existence between presence and absence, particularly the presence and absence of past cultures. See: Pascal Griener, “Plaster ‘Versus’ Marble: Wilhelm and Caroline von Humboldt and the Agency of Ancient Sculpture,” in *Idols and Museum Pieces: The Nature of Sculpture, Its Historiography and Exhibition History 1640–1880*, ed. Caroline van Eck (Berlin, Paris: De Gruyter, Ecole du Louvre, 2017), 159–76.

<sup>75</sup> The artist confirmed this in my interview with her.

<sup>76</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> In fact, Bekriovic’s inspiration for the work, as she explained in our interview, came from witnessing a Chinese sculptor transmit her bodily “energy” into a sculptor she created. This reminded me of Herder’s intriguing comment on the evasive energy “which streams from the human body into the body of art” (Herder, *Sculpture*, 81). It is also interesting to note, in this context, that Herder himself was inspired to write *Sculpture* after a powerful sculptural experience he had when visiting the the collections at Versailles and at the Mannheim’s Antikensaal. See Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 2–3.

<sup>78</sup> In our interview she told me that she had filmed the work completely on her own and had felt as if the sculptures were “almost like dead bodies that I revive”—an experience we can relate to Herder’s remark that “if we are alone and approach the statues with devotion, they can, unnoticed, come to life [...]” See Herder, *Sculpture*, 92.

<sup>79</sup> According to Gaiger, this urge to forge an immediate relationship with sculptures is the main reason Herder evokes Pygmalion, (see Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 25). Van Oostveldt claims that Herder’s main interest in his treatise is actually this intriguing desire, which a sculpture instigates in its beholder, to enter into an immediate, physical contact with it. See van Oostveldt, “‘Ut Sculptura Theatrum,’” 150.

in this chapter, *Radiance* succeeds in achieving this goal—it makes us, as viewers, “find ourselves, so to speak, embodied in the nature before us, or the nature in question is enlivened by our own soul.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 81.

## Conclusion: The Truth of Our Body

In this essay, I have tried to explore how Herder's ideas on tactile apprehension and embodied spectatorship could contribute to our understanding of haptic moving images—an attempt which followed-up on Jason Gaiger's call to read *Sculpture*'s lessons to new artistic practices. To perform this task, I have resituated Herder's ideas in the contemporary discourse on haptic moving images and examined what they can add to it—first theoretically, than in practice—by focusing on one case study: Semâ Bekirovic's video *The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02)*.

Through an in-depth analysis of this work, I have shown how the Herderian modalities of tactile perception—namely, slowness, obscurity, dynamism and infinite exploration—as well as his insights on the objects which are prone to elicit our tactile imagination, can provide tools for analyzing the specific mechanisms by which figurative moving images of touch can engage the viewer haptically—tools which are currently absent from the discussion on this topic. That being said, in order to verify whether these haptic modalities can, in fact, carry a more general significance, further examples of moving images must be analyzed. In addition, further research into Herder's rich thought on the embodied experience of art, as developed in his other aesthetic writings, would definitely add to the conclusions of this essay.

As a final remark, I wish to propose that Herder's philosophy can help us explain not only *how* moving images extract haptic responses, but also *why* these haptic responses are meaningful. A truly embodied perception, as we have seen, gives us a fuller understanding of the presence of things, but it also gives us a fuller understanding of *ourselves*; as Gaiger notes, Herder tells us that our embodied experience is the *indispensable condition* for genuine self-awareness.<sup>81</sup> That being the case, when an artwork manages to engage our body in a powerful way, it actually “penetrates our very being [and awakens] the full range of responsive human feeling.”<sup>82</sup> And if one of the central roles of art is to make us closer to ourselves, to extricate us from the habits of everyday life and evoke the possibility of a fuller and truer mode of being, than engaging our tactile body is a crucial task.

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<sup>81</sup> Gaiger, introduction to *Sculpture*, 9.

<sup>82</sup> Herder, *Sculpture*, 80–81.

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## Illustrations



Fig. 1. A detail from Semâ Bekirovic's *The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02)*, 2016. Three-channel video installation, 22 minutes loop. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2. Semâ Bekirovic, *The Radiance of Sensible Heat (02)*, 2016. Installation view from the exhibition "Thinking Sense, Save the Loom" (Witteveen Visual Art Center, 2016). Three-channel video installation, 22 minutes loop. Courtesy of the artist.