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Porous Bodies: On Touching *Phosphenes*

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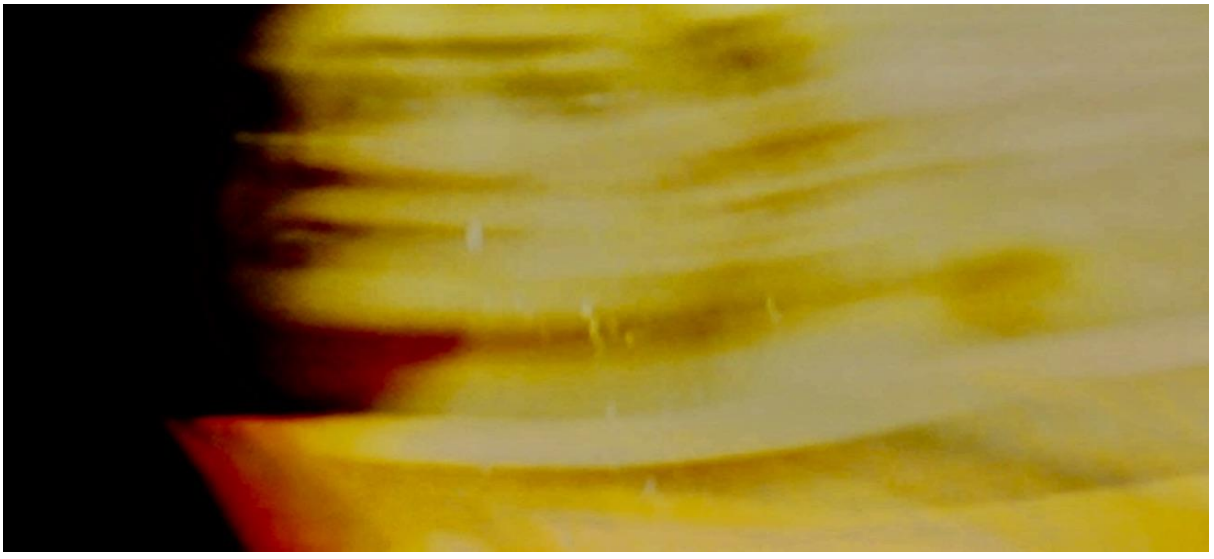


Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, whose unceded land I write from today. I would like to extend that acknowledgement to their elders both past and present. I am very grateful to be able to live and study in this country. Recently I encountered the concept of 'Deep Listening', a concept that exists in many First Nation languages. 'Nyernila' in Wergaia/Wotjobaluk language or 'Gulpa Ngawal' in Yorta Yorta language refer to a deep and respectful listening in quiet contemplation of Country and People. Learning from practices of deep listening, throughout this project I explore ways of listening more closely to our own body and the bodies of those close to us.

Film Viewing

I encourage you to watch the film in a darkened space, ideally with headphones.
I also invite you to keep your initial sensory responses to the film close as possible while reading through the thesis.

Link:

https://vimeo.com/643323603

Password: watchingphosphenes

'Look, sometimes I find that my hands have become aware

of each other, or that my time-worn face

shelters itself inside them. That gives me a slight

sensation. But who would dare to exist just for that?'

- Rainer Maria Rilke ("The Second Elegy" lines 46-49)

Introduction

This thesis seeks to leave you with mild symptoms of visual agnosia. *Agnosia* comes from the Greek word for 'unknowing' and refers to the rare disorder whereby one is unable to recognize and identify objects, persons, or sounds using one or more of the senses. Of course, all your senses will still function, however your visual relation to the word may be slightly unsettled. With these mild symptoms, I hope the reader will become better attuned to the possibilities offered by touch and attentive to sensual perception excluded by the ocular.

'Seeing' and 'thinking' have a long history of being conflated with one another. Martin Heidegger describes how in the tradition of Western metaphysics, "that which is to be grasped by the eye makes itself normative in knowing" (1977, 166). Along with Heidegger, Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that ocularcentric thinking – the privileging of vision – tends to objectify and silence the multiple resonances of the senses. In this thesis, I not only argue that disturbing our normative relation to the visual field can expose new ways of 'seeing' the body, but I also suggest it may interrupt and suppress an objectifying, mastering gaze. To

examine this, I turn to my filmmaking practice, typically considered a visual medium, to consider film's potential to activate modes of seeing the body that exceed the visual.

My project began to take form after I read Fiona Wright's *Small Acts of Disappearance: Essays on Hunger* (2015). It was the first time I had read anything that came close to articulating a feeling I had experienced since I was teenager: the power that comes from hunger. Wright positions hunger as a motivating force, driven by "a desire for control or predictability" (2015, 196), a "desire to remain small" (2015, 84). Yet by dividing itself into these zones of desire, Wright describes how the body protects itself against what it craves most – the desire for intimacy. Throughout the essays, Wright explores how emotional and physical intimacy demand a certain *nakedness*, a willingness to let go of the usual control we have over how we are perceived. Reflecting on this, I became acutely aware of how my own relation to my body had changed over the course of a two-year intimate relationship. I noticed I was far less concerned with monitoring my body's boundaries and had become much closer to my body as a result. Paradoxically, being *seen* by someone else had made me less aware of my body's visuality; and my sensory involvement with my own body began re-configuring itself through my relation to another's body.

To better understand this experience, I turned to phenomenological writing on the body, beginning with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and feminist phenomenologists such as Iris Young and Germaine Greer. While phenomenology forms an important backdrop for my research, the philosopher I was most drawn to was Jean-Luc Nancy, who stresses the need to overcome the way in which phenomenology has privileged seeing as the mode of access to the phenomenon (Roney 2014). Bringing deconstruction to bear on phenomenology, Nancy turns instead to 'touch' to theorise the body, offering a conceptualisation of touch that

exceeds the singular sense and refers to our multi-sensory interactions with other bodies. Examining the body through this lens, Nancy posits the body's boundaries are never perfectly intact, but instead appear porous, expanding or extending through touch. Inspired by this idea, my research centres on how 'seeing' our own body involves an integration of self-conceptualisation realised through the eyes and touch of another.

I chose to explore this idea through a 'coupling' of sight and touch, which I seek to engage with through the medium of film. Laura Marks' work in this area has been profoundly influential in my thinking. According to Marks our experience of film is never purely audio-visual, as film speaks to the body as whole. Marks describes this phenomenon as "haptic visuality", referring to the "the way vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (2000, 3). Haptic visuality is primarily experienced, or at least our experience of it is intensified, through what Marks calls "haptic cinema" or "haptic images" (1998, 341). This type of cinema is defined by "non-mastering visuality" (1998, 347), a type of visuality where the viewer is unable to familiarise themselves with what they are seeing and therefore the other senses are called upon. Exploring this form of visuality, I found that it correlated with Nancy's writing on film, which suggests that the viewer must give up a degree of visual mastery in order to be drawn into a more intimate bodily relation with the image (2001; 2008c). In this thesis, I seek to develop this parallel, arguing that the hapticity of film, as examined by Nancy and Marks, provides an opportunity to re-orientate our sensory engagement with the body. It is through the making of my short film *Phosphenes*, that I draw Nancy and Marks into direct conversation.

Phosphenes offers an opening for the different senses to interact, as is captured through the title; phosphenes being the colours, lights or shapes you see when you close your

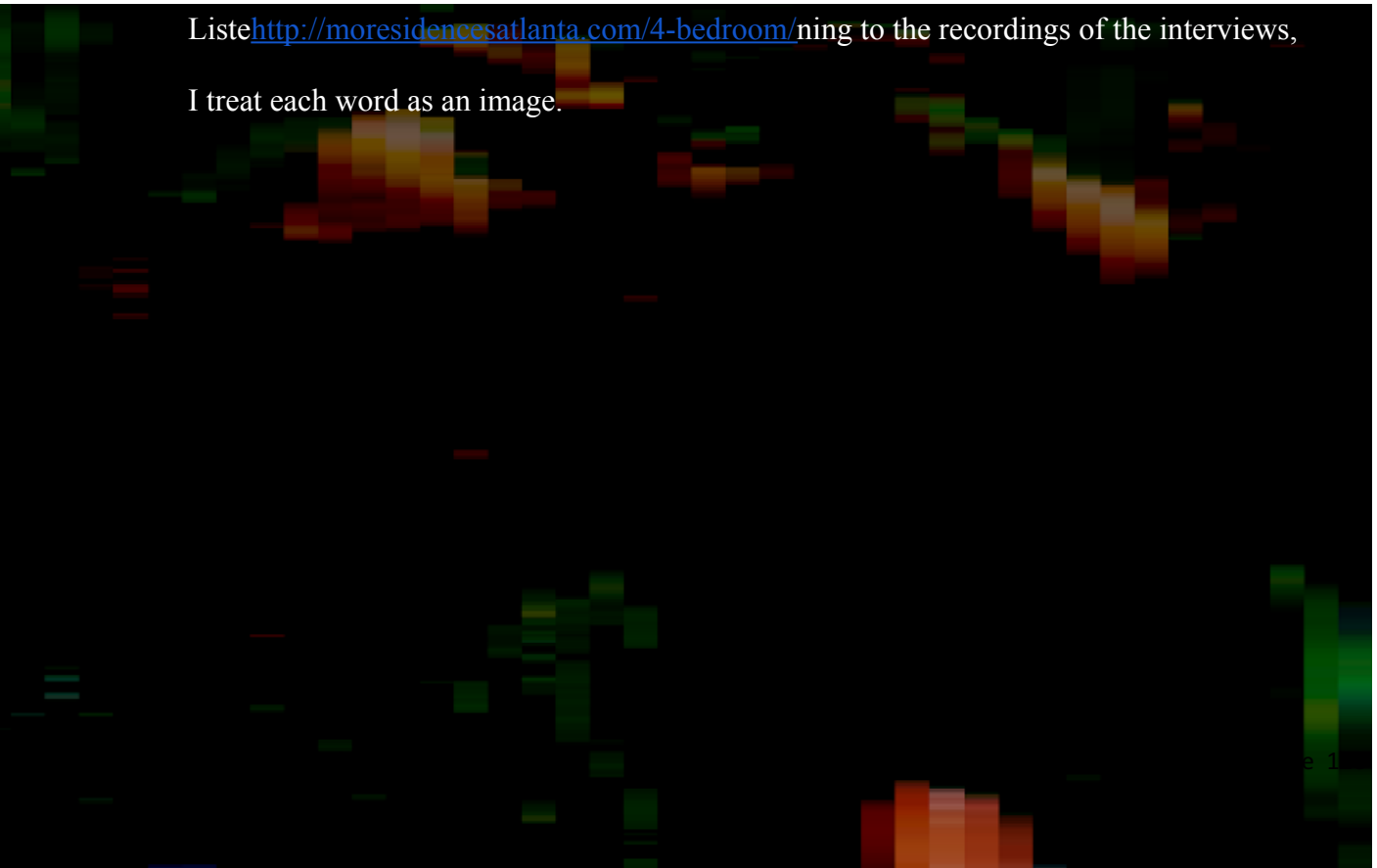
eyes tightly or press them with your fingers. In the opening of *Phosphenes*, my voice-over invites the viewer to contemplate the key endeavour of the film and the guiding principles of my thesis, Goethe wrote: "The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress" (quoted in Pallasmaa 2012, 17). Through experimentation with shutter speed, framing and exposure, the video imagery seeks to produces a type of non-mastering visuality. Acting as the *breath* of the film, my voice-over guides the viewer through the audio interviews and haptic images, making explicit the personal and conceptual framing of the film. As *Phosphenes* opens, the viewer hears my instruction that the interviewees "close [their] eyes". The film then follows the voices from four different paired interviews (two separate partners, sisters and a mother and daughter), as they describe their embodied relation to one another.[16] "Love unveils finitude" (1990, 98) Nancy writes, cutting across bodies and re-drawing their borders. Traversing the body's porous borders, *Phosphenes* looks at the transformative relation one has to their body as a result of being in a relationship infused with love.

This thesis has three primary functions. Firstly, to introduce my methodological approach to research – my readings motivating the practice; and the practice motivating the engagement with the readings. Secondly, to explore the theoretical context of my work, arguing that when read together, Marks and Nancy demonstrate that film's hapticity is not merely the result of a reversal of the hierarchization of sight and touch, but the result of destabilising the separation of these senses. Thirdly, to examine how I use Nancy and Marks to guide my practice, extending their writing beyond the exploration of film viewing to consider their work within the context of my filmmaking practice. To begin this section, I introduce the film's conceptual framing in relation to Nancy's writing on the body. I will then shift focus to explore my intentions behind the filming and editing, the development of

[16]Note that throughout this thesis I refer to the interviewees by their first names, as is also done in *Phosphenes.*

‘haptic interviews’, and the writing and recording of the voice-over. While my project focuses predominantly on the relation between the sense of touch and vision, hearing is also of critical importance within my exploration of Irina Leimbacher’s writing on “haptic listening” (2017), a concept closely aligned with Nancy and Marks’ work.

It is useful to distinguish the different bodies within my research. There are the bodies of the those interviewed and filmed; the viewer’s body; my body; and the film’s body. While the haptic elements interact differently in each of these cases, a central part of my research is concerned with throwing into relief the porous boundaries between these different bodies. In this thesis, I explore haptic cinema not merely as a visual medium that records but also an embodied engaged practice. In doing so, I do not claim to make to make any conclusive judgments on what happens to embodied experience when we challenge the visual field. Nor do I try to prove whether the audience has a more embodied response as a result of my experimentation with haptic visuality. Both these judgements are left up to the reader/viewer to determine for themselves.



Listehttp://moresidencesatlanta.com/4-bedroom/ning to the recordings of the interviews, I treat each word as an image.

Methodology

"To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body"

– Maurice Merleau-Ponty

One of my peers said that he was trying to keep his writing as 'close to the body as possible'. This idea resonated with my own practice, as my writing and reading are always in conversations with my embodied experience. Developing these conversations through my research journal, I was then able to creatively explore what was raised for me through the making of *Phosphenes*.[17] This approach to research may be defined, in the words of Brad Haseman, as "performative" (Haeman 2010), meaning the research is never just 'reading' or 'writing' but researching through the act of making. Referring to Norman Denzin, Haseman explains that in performative research, texts "move beyond the purely representational and towards the presentational" (quoted in Haseman 2010, 149). This approach to research is particularly apt for exploring Nancy's concept of the body, which posits the body is fundamentally present in ways that transcend representation (Morrey 2008, 20). By employing a performative approach, my research has both practice-based and practice-led outcomes.[18] Through the making of a short film exploring our haptic entanglement with other bodies, my practice-based research examines Nancy and Marks alongside one another. My practice-led research on the other hand, applies Nancy and Marks to the practice itself, developing a haptic approach to filmmaking. The practice-based and practice-led research are mutually entangled, as demonstrated through my reflections on how I approached the

[17] I chose to include extracts from my research journal on the image pages that sit between chapters within this thesis.

[18] Taking Linda Candy's definitions, research is practice-based "if a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge", whereas research is practice-led "if the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice" (2006, 1).

production of the video footage, the interview techniques, and the creation of my personal voice-over.

Initially I did not intend on making a film that could sit within the genre of the 'personal essay film'. Yet my performative approach to research naturally led me to interweave personal reflections with theoretical concepts. In Michael Renov's words, in the personal essay film "a self is activated as it measures itself in and against the world it surveys" (Renov 2008, 44). While there is a great deal of literature surrounding the personal essay film (Corrigan 2011), this thesis does not offer a discussion around the genre as such. It does, however, afford the opportunity to acknowledge that my engagement with the genre was informed by a set of female filmmakers: Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982), Agnes Varda's *Salut les Cubains* (1963), Barbara Hammer and Lynne Sachs' *A Month of Single Frames* (2019), and Melisa Liebenthal's *The Pretty Ones* (2016). Each of these films interweave personal and philosophical reflections, which I tried to emulate in *Phosphenes*. I was particularly inspired by Tran T. Kim-Trang's *kore* from *The Blindness Series* (1994), which deconstructs the blindness caused by AIDS, examining vision as purveyor of sexual desire and fear. Not only was the content of Trang's film compelling for my research, but the film's form also encouraged me to push the boundaries of genre all together. Taking inspiration from fiction filmmakers and being a mixture of documentary, personal, and experimental genres, *Phosphenes* may be defined as "hybrid cinema" (Marks 1999, 8).

Research Context

Decentring the Visuality of Cinema

"I want to see the skin of light" – Hélène Cixous

Cinema is celebrated not merely as visual medium, but as a medium capable of activating all the bodily senses. Yet "for the most", Vivian Sobchak, argues "carnal responses to the cinema have been regarded as too crude to invite extensive elaboration" (2004, 57). Consequently, film theory has tended towards ocularcentrism, whereby the visual qualities and intelligible effects are privileged over the film's sensory impact (Rushton 2009, 46). Breaking from ocularcentrism, both Nancy and Marks, focus on how in film viewing "the eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (Marks 1998, 332; see also Nancy 2001). There are many other notable film theorists, such as Sobchack or Gilles Deleuze, who foreground the body's cinematic possibilities beyond the visual engagement.[19] However, I have chosen to focus on Nancy and Marks as the parallels between their writing on film have not yet been explored in depth.[20] While scholar Laura McMahon has argued that Marks' film theory is at odds with Nancy's concept of touch (2010; 2008), I argue that Nancy's notion of touch draws out some of the nuances within Marks' work on haptic visuality.

To understand how Nancy positions touch in relation to film viewing, it is necessary to first grasp how he conceptualises 'touch' within his wider body of work. For Nancy, the

[19] Challenging ocularcentrism is very explicit in Sobchack's work, whereas in Deleuze' work it remains implicit. Deleuzian theory is however, employed by multiple theorists to examine the role of body within cinematic spectatorship. Laura Marks is a key example of this, along with Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (1993), Barbara Kennedy's *Deleuze and Cinema* (1925) and, Patricia Pisters's *The Matrix of Visual Culture* (2003).
[20]Note there are a couple of articles on Nancy that refer to Marks (McMahon 2012, Beugnet 2016) but none that closely explore the correlations between their work.

possibility of singular identity depends on the possibility of the individual being different from others, and thereby also related to multiple others (Perpich 2005, 77). Touch is crucial to this idea, as Nancy proposes that in touching another, I touch singular life, as I am brought into direct contact with my own being through another being's presence. To be a singular body is therefore to be with other singularities; to touch and be touched. But why not hearing, smell, sight, or taste? Such considerations are central to Jacques Derrida's *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (2000), which offers a reading of Nancy's philosophy and informs much of the scholarly discussion around Nancy's writing on touch. As Derrida demonstrates, for Nancy touching is understood as the sense of limit itself, belonging neither to the 'I' nor the other (Meer 2021, 68). By positioning touch as the *limit* to knowledge, Nancy seeks to break from ocularcentric logic that attempts to *know* the body and subsume the body into fixed categories of meaning.[21] Employing this concept of touch to theorise the body, Nancy posits we cannot ever know the body or even think of it as located in one place, as the body is "the very plasticity of expansion, of extension according to which existences take place" (Nancy 2008a, 67). Within Nancy's work, touch is not just explored in terms of the singular sense but instead plays a crucial role within his topological account of the body – a body that transforms through its sensory interactions.

The body's plasticity is a theme elaborated on throughout Nancy's work on film viewing. In his small book on Abbas Kiarostami (2001), and his essay on Claire Denis (2008c), Nancy centres his work around the double meaning of the French word '*pellicule'*, meaning both film and skin. In doing so, he compares the body's process of coming into presence to that of the image coming to the screen in cinema (2006, 56-7). Like the cinematic

[21] Nancy is certainly not the only thinker to draw attention to limitations attending ocularcentrism. In his seminal work *Downcast Eyes* (1993), Martin Jay identifies a turn in twentieth-century French continental philosophy against ocularcentric paradigms built upon the rational, self-identical subject of reflexive consciousness, who has mastery and dominance over the self and the world (Janus 2011, 184).

image, Nancy argues the body is not experienced as complete nor fully present but rather existing as the expanse or extent of the screen: the image "doesn't just show skin, but slips it into the plane of the image, it tends to confuse the screen with the skin" (2008c, 6). By comparing the body to the image coming to the screen, Nancy describes the cinematic image as a mode of presentation that is "simultaneously an exposure and a holding in reserve" (McMahon 2010, 75). It is precisely this process of exposing bodies and boundaries, that enables film to *touch* the viewer's body, it "caresses and ravishes" (Nancy, 2008c, 4).

Marks' writing on film is far more extensive than Nancy's, explicitly formulating a theory for how film touches the body. In researching haptic visuality, I was drawn to Marks' earlier work from the late 90s and early 2000s.[22] Marks' use of the term 'haptic' stems from its use in the early twentieth century, by art historian Aloïs Rigel, who examined the "gradual demise of physical tactility in art and the rise of figurative space" (Marks 2002, 4). Re-positioning this concept to examine contemporary cinema, Marks draws a distinction between "optical visuality" and "haptic visuality" (Marks 1998, 332). Offering the depiction of spatial depth in the tradition of Renaissance art as an example, Marks posits optical visuality privileges the representational power of images, "which addresses a viewer who is distant, distinct and, disembodied" (2002, 13). The distance produced by optical visuality lends itself to a type of cinema where images are more easily interpreted. By contrast, in haptic visuality the viewer is unable to gain this kind of distance as the viewer responds to "the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin" (Marks 2002, 4). In developing this point, Marks refers to Sobchack's film phenomenology, which suggests, "we do not see any movie only through our eyes"; rather, we "feel films with our whole bodily

[22] Marks later work focuses on experimental cinema from Arabic-speaking countries (2010: 2015), extending her discussion to examine the political potential of haptic visuality.

being" (2004, 63).[23] Although Marks explores how film appeals to each of the senses, as in Nancy's work, touch is particularly important, since touch is "located on the surface of the body" (1998, 331). By emphasising the centrality of touch within film viewing, haptic and optical visuality are not mutually exclusive; rather "in most processes of seeing both are involved, in a dialectical movement from far to near, from solely visual to multisensory" (Marks 1998, 332). Activating all the viewer's senses, haptic visuality evokes a form of synaesthesia, as the senses are not sealed off from one another but constantly touch one another.

While Marks and Nancy both celebrate films that expose us to a "a meaning one is not mastering" (Nancy 2001, 44), they offer different examples of how cinema can achieve this. In reference to *And Life Goes On* (1992) Nancy argues that Kiarostami's film calls for an active mode of looking through operating on "two registers" (1999, 81). The first register is the "interrupted continuation, of movement" (1999, 81), which is achieved through utilising the car as the central object of the film, depriving the viewer of stillness or fixity. The second register being the "passage through the image, or to the image", which refers to shots of the televisions or images hanging on the wall that makes the viewer aware of "the gaze in general" (1999, 81). Examining a range of experimental films, Marks identifies common properties that can give images a 'haptic quality', including techniques such as changes in focal length, graininess, effects of under- and overexposure, low contrast ratio, optical printing, solarization, scratching the emulsion work or video decay (1999, 173). Neither Marks nor Nancy argue that these formal techniques necessarily make a film haptic in and of itself, but by challenging a normative visual engagement, they draw the viewer's sensory awareness towards film's hapticity.

[23] Marks also draws from Deleuze to develop this idea, repositioning his notion of time-image cinema in relation to corporeality (Marks 1999, 27). Like the haptic image – where this is a lack of things to see – Deleuze proposes that the 'thin' images of time-image cinema cannot be "formed without becoming mental, and going into a strange invisible subjectivity" (1997, 7). Marks on the other hand, argues haptic images are not formed without becoming bodily.

Intimacy is central to Nancy and Marks' conceptualization of filmic encounters. According to Marks, haptic images are "erotic regardless of their content, because they construct an intersubjective relationship between beholder and image" (1998, 341). Applying a Nancian reading, haptic cinema is 'erotic' as it makes explicit the 'I' and the foreign coming into contact. In Nancy's writing on Claire Denis' film *Trouble Every day* (2001), he suggests there is something "monstrous" (2008c, 46-7) about the images, as the image enters a relationship of rivalry with the viewer, a competition for presence. The eroticism of haptic cinema is therefore not just concerned with the object of vision remaining "inscrutable" (Marks 1998, 345) but also connected to the viewer coming to the surface of their own skin through their relation to an image that cannot be mastered. Nancy and Marks describe how this intimate relation "may be like a caress, though it may also be violent" (Marks 341, see also Nancy 2008c, 52-3). When vision is like touch, the image touches back, and thus, for Nancy and Marks, a certain violence always prowls at the edge of the image.

In her writing on Nancy's work (2010; 2008), Laura McMahon posits Marks' film theory (and Sobchack's) is embedded within the 'haptocentric' tradition, which Nancy's work breaks from. Drawing upon Derrida's writing on Nancy, McMahon suggests that Nancy's deconstructive model of touch seeks to avoid the haptocentrism linked to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological concept of touch, which "privileges immediacy and continuity" (2008, 31).[24] By contrast, for Nancy, touch is accompanied by a "*syncope*" (Nancy, 2008b); that is a rupture or discontinuity within my relation to my own body and the other's body (Meer 2020, 68).[25] Employing this model of touch, Nancy places emphasis on "the spacing, deferrals and intervals within touch" (2010, 74), which cannot be closed or transcended, irrespective of

[24] See in particular the chapter 'Intertwining – Chiasm' in Merleau-Ponty (1968).

[25] The word "Syncope" is best known for its medial or musical meaning. In medicine, syncope generally refers to a a loss of consciousness, whereas syncopation in music is an emphasis (or lack of emphasis) where none is expected. Invoking both meanings of the word, Nancy considers the ontological *interruption* presented by touch. It is worth noting, that his notion of 'syncope' is explored outside of his work on touch, the most depth exploration being *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus* (2008), which postions syncopation as akin to the *cogito* to deconstruct Kantian logic and reason.

how close I am. While Marks draws from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and uses language such as "an immediate bodily response to the screen" (1998, 338), read alongside Nancy, Marks is not easily defined by haptocentric thinking. Haptic visuality does not, as suggested by McMahon, imply perfect proximity in the sense of complete loss of boundaries. Instead, haptic visuality relies on the separation between the viewer and the image, as it "offers its object to the viewer but only on the condition that its unknowability remains intact" (1998, 347). As in Nancy's concept of touch, haptic visuality is as much about withdrawal as it is about contact; the haptic image possessing its own outside, differing and deferring, in "an elastic, dynamic movement" (1998, 347). By disrupting the coherence of the image's representational power, the haptic images create its own *syncope* between the viewer and the image. Haptic visuality therefore produces what Nancy would describe as 'spacing' and 'deferring', as the viewer cannot grasp the image nor be fully 'in' the image but becomes complicated through their 'outside' relation.

I was attracted to Nancy and Marks' work as they both conceive of an emergent field of visuality, where form is only starting to take shape rather than being fixed or settled. In this field of visuality, representation is piercing – it touches the body rather than being purely an optical experience. Employing Nancy's notion of touch, haptic visuality is not merely about presence and immediacy but discontinuity and rupture; where vision and touch are not closed off from one another but *interrupt* one another. Neither Marks nor Nancy is concerned with privileging touch over vision, but rather they privilege modes of cinema that draw our awareness towards what cannot be grasped through a purely visual relation. For my research, this idea of cinema is not only compelling in so far as it may awaken a different relationship to film viewing and making, but also, as we will explore through my film *Phosphenes*, it may awaken a different relationship to the body.

Mapping the Body in *Phosphenes*

"I can't tell what hand is your hand and what hand is my hand because we've been holding hands for a long time" – Cai (Interview Extract 1)[26]

'Using my eyes like hands' acts as the guiding metaphor for how I try to 'see' the body in *Phosphenes.* This mode of seeing does not try to gain a fixed, self-contained, image of the body but examines the porous nature of the body's boundaries. As a response to Nancy's question "Where am I? In my foot, my hand, my genitals, my ear?" (2013, 87), I structured the film around ten chapters that each consider the potential boundary points of the body: the lips and teeth facing towards the external and the internal; the hands and feet as the body's primary points of contact; the hair extending beyond the skin; the voice and eyes projecting and perceiving over distance; the bellybutton marking the body's past point of connection to another body; the veins bearing the visible mark of our internal circulatory system; and the skin, as the largest organ, spreading across the entire body, bringing us into direct contact with a world of tactility.[27] Whilst the viewer is not explicitly instructed on how to interpret these intertitles, the body's boundaries are continuously drawn into question through my voice-over, at one point asking, "Does my body end with my skin or does it extend to my voice?". As in Nancy's philosophy, *Phosphenes* does not seek to provide an answer as to where the body begins and ends, as the body is never "done with altering itself" (2002, 14).

[26] A transcript of all interview extracts not included in the film can be found in appendix 3.
[27] These intertitles are also a reference to Germain Greer's structuring of the *Female Eunuch* (1970), which examines the female body through the chapter titles, such as "bones" "curves" or "hair".

Operating as a marker of Nancy's notion that the individual body divides and relates to itself along the borders of other bodies, to touch and be touched forms the central enquiry of *Phosphenes*. To extrapolate on this, I conducted interviews between pairs, whose relationships range from mother and daughter to sisters, to couples. By conducting paired interviews between people with intimate relations to one another, I sought to expand on Nancy's concept that in love, the subject is "opened up, broken into" by the outside (Nancy 1991, 98). The interview recordings explore experiences of intimate touch within the context of partnerships and familial love[28]; a mother holding a child's feet, partners holding hands, or lips against each other. Implicit within *Phosphenes,* is the idea that love bears the unique capacity to engender touch with extra-ordinary powers; as Uma says, "we just extend, our bodies kind of extend to one another". Exploring Nancy's multi-sensory notion of touch, the film also examines Nancy's idea that another's touch produces a rupture in our relation to our own body; Sue-Ellen, for instance, describes her near-death experience as she gave birth.[29] Beyond this extreme example of the body's co-implicating identity, *Phosphenes* examines how we come to see our body through the bodies of others – Asha describing her sister as "a reminder of [her] body". Suggesting in my voice-over that recognising our own body in our family is the closest we come to 'seeing' our body, *Phosphenes* takes 'seeing' beyond the visual and considers how our haptic involvement with others forms the strange atmosphere we come to know as 'I'.

[28] It is worth noting the friendship was also a relationship I also wanted to explore, however due the various COVID-19 lockdowns this interview was not possible.

[29] Birth presents perhaps the most radical example of the body's *syncopation*. In Iris Young's words, "the birthing process entails the most extreme suspension of the bodily distinction between inner and outer" (2005, 50). As noted in *Phosphenes,* the colloquial expressions "innie" and "outie" to describe different bellybuttons nicely expresses how the body bears its own permanent trace of this suspension between the inner and outer.

Making Haptic Cinema

"Can eyes manage to touch, first of all, to press together like lips?" – Jacques Derrida

Blocking out the visual apparatus to properly experience "the sensuality of the kiss" (Chloe), is a useful analogy for understanding how haptic images speak to the viewer's body as a whole. To enact a haptic experience, *Phosphenes* challenges the optic in multiple ways. The first intertitle encourages the viewer to close their eyes; the people interviewed have their eyes closed; the interviewees, and the narrator remains unseen. Not only do I centre the film around the act of closing one's eyes, but I also employ multiple filming and editing techniques that decentre the film's visuality, moving *Phosphenes* into the realm of haptic cinema.

Influenced by Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), in making *Phosphenes,* I wanted to create a sense that the audio and the visual were interrupting one another, challenging the harmoniousness they generally hold.[30] In the two cases where I comment on the imagery, I seek to create "a tension between viewer and image" (Marks 1998, 341). In the opening, I describe how while I was at the beach shown in the image, I was imagining the conversations people might be having, but "it'd be much harder to do this without vision, eyes give so much safe distance." Rather than granting the viewer the safe distance described, the opening uses frozen images that are so zoomed in and blurred that the viewer is unable to gain a stable image. Although my voice-over describes the beach as a place where we get to see bodies, the bodies shown disappear into disjointedness, becoming like painted brushstrokes. At the end, I once again comment on the use of an image, but only to immediately undermine the

[30] The sense of 'interruption' between audio and image is established through the first minute of *Sans Soleil*, as while the voice-over speaks the screen remains black and when the image returns the voice falls silent.

image, stating, “images only ever give us a tiny glimpse of the body anyway.” Becoming covered over by coloured patterns similar to phosphenes, the viewer is encouraged to engage with these bodies through the presentation of an absence. According to Marks, haptic visuality activates an awareness of absence, as the viewer “is so intensely involved with the presence of the other that it cannot take the step back to discern difference, say, to distinguish figure and ground” (1998, 345). Rather than trying to resolve this absence, the voice-over re-enforces it, concluding, we never see the body as a complete image, but only as “skin, textures, shapes, phosphenes.”

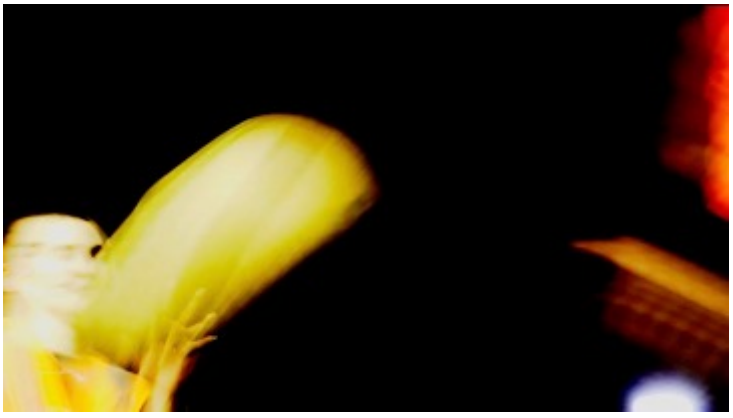
If haptic imagery offers a prestation of absence, how then does the haptic image touch the body of the viewer? To draw the viewers body towards the image, I wanted to create the feeling that the camera was being used like hands; bodies looming too close to the camera and becoming subsumed by colour.[31] By adopting this style of filming, *Phosphenes* presents

[31] This use of colour seeks to draw a relation to desire; a technique which is beautifully explored in Carolee Schneeman’s *Fuses* (1964-66) that uses colours to punctuate the imagery of her and her partner having sex, making the viewing experience “like watching the inside of a mouth, all lurid reds and soft blues” (Irving, 2020)

the body as it experienced in embodied, tactile interactions; as "a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body: colors, local shadows, fragments, grains…" (Nancy 2008a, 104). Although analogue film stock is more easily equated with having a haptic quality, the digital has its own set of "prohaptic" properties, which make explicit the "material presence of the image" (Marks 1999, 163). By using a high contrast and low brightness the digital imagery of *Phosphenes* pushes looking to the surface of images, as the quality of the image decreases, making pixilation more obvious. At the centre of *Phosphenes*, I layer images of glad wrap coated with an oily residue over an image of two hands touching. Not only does this layering obscure the hands, but it also invokes the other meaning of 'film', as a thin layer covering over something. Forcing the viewer to yield to non-mastering visuality, the haptic image produces a response similar to the physiological effects of hunger; the senses sharpen, "your skin prickles" (Wright 2015, 11). In moments where the viewer is offered a glimpse of a more identifiable figure, this hunger is heighted, as the viewer becomes more aware of how the other imagery resists easy consumption.

My experimentation with slow shutter speed was inspired by director Wong Kar Wai and his cinematographer Christopher Doyle, particularly the film *Chunking Express* (1994). In the opening of *Chunking Express*, the camera is set to a low shutter speed, which amplifies

the sense of movement through a crowded space where you are unable to process all the sensory information available.[32] Seeking to create a similar bodily sensation, *Phosphenes* experiments with a low shutter speed in multiple scenes, with the lowest shutter speed recording people in football training. This scene aims to create a sense of constant deferral, where a body is never fully present as the images capture the multiple transformations a body undergoes within a single movement. These images point towards the body's ongoing process of coming to presence, as bodies are not full, nor filled space, rather they are open space (Nancy 2006, 16). The interview recording that follows the images of the football scene, also speaks to this idea, with Brigit describing, "right now I'm trying to remember my body. Where does it start, where does it end?". Rather than the low shutter speed acting to merely abstract the body, it makes explicit the porousness of the body's boundaries, as the outlines of bodies overlap, approaching each other asymptotically.



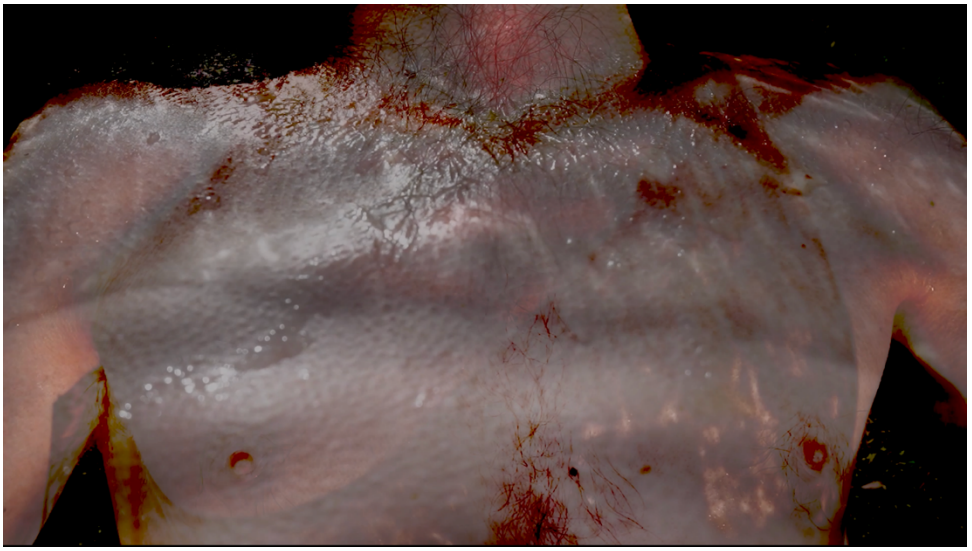
Influenced by the framing employed in the films of Abbas Kiarostami, another technique I experiment with is the deliberate exclusion of crucial elements of an image. Kiarostami's films often include shots that cut the speaker from the frame and focus on the

[32] Fitting for our discussion of the body's haptic interactions, in the first lines of *Chunking Express* a voice says: "We rub shoulders with each other every day. We may not know each other but we may become good friends some day." (Wai 1994, 00:01:50-9)

interlocutor, or vice versa (e.g. *Ten* [2002]). For Nancy, Kiarostami's cinema embodies an ethics of looking where "looking just amounts to thinking the real, to test oneself with regard to a meaning one is not mastering" (2001, 38). In *Phosphenes*, I seek to mobilize this mode of looking through the cropping of images, such that only a small slither, or line of colour is left. Rather than inviting identification with a single figure, this type of framing produces a relationship of mutuality, where the viewer is encouraged to "engage with the traces the image leaves" (Marks 1998, 341).

While working on the sound for *Phosphenes*, I was diagnosed with glandular fever and one of the side-effects of this was that my heartbeat became a lot more audible. As described in the story of Nancy's heart transplant, the healthy, working heart is normally "as absent as the soles of [one's] walking feet" (2002, 15-16). Becoming more aware of my body's internal rhythm was therefore a strange and unfamiliar experience. The recordings of lungs, the gut and the heartbeat that traverse the film, are designed to evoke this experience of bodily 'encounter', allowing the internal body to elliptically speak with the 'external' voices. At the very end of the film, a moment of silence follows as the sole heartbeat disappears. This

ending seeks to leave the viewer in a place of anticipation as they are returned to the rhythms of their own body.



In Marks' exploration of the way haptic imagery appeals to embodied memory, she draws from Henri Bergson's phenomenology. Bergson posits that 'perfect' or 'complete' memory does not exist in the body, but it is through the body that memory is activated (1988,179). In *Phosphenes* I am not attempting to restore tactile memories, but instead map how tactile memories exist within the body in a way that transcends visual representation. Towards the end, I explain through the voice-over that to remember touch, the visual replaces the tactile memory it aimed to preserve. The vision for this section of the voice-over offers tiny snippets of bodies in black and white. Disappearing just before the viewer can make out their form, I seek to draw the viewer's awareness towards the "mournful quality [of] the haptic images", where "as much as they might attempt to touch the skin of the object, all they can achieve is to become skinlike themselves" (Marks 1999, 192).[33] According to Marks, in

[33] By failing to touch skin of the object, the haptic image instead seeks to return the viewer to their own skin. I explored this idea in my film through the motif of 'phosphenes'. While there are multiple representations of phosphenes, if the viewer were to simply close their eyes, they would be able to 'see' phosphenes a lot more clearly.

failing to touch the skin of the object, the haptic images may represent the difficulty of remembrance (1999, 193). I explicitly explore this idea in the final section of the film, as my voiceover connects the inability to remember touch to the mournfulness of losing an intimate partner. My voice-over asking, “Is it possible to preserve the memory of someone's touch?”. In response to this question, I invite the viewer to consider how touch is persevered within the body, transforming the body in ways that resit memorability. The final image of the film offers a depiction of memory’s inscription on the body; markings cover the flesh, obscuring the body from view.

Drawing from Marks, who exaggerates the distinction between the optic and the haptic “in order to make a point” (1998, 341), *Phosphenes* draws attention to the differences between our optic and haptic engagements with the body. The exploration of visual mastery in *Phosphenes* speaks from an awareness of the destructive potential of vision. In response to my own experience and the critical work (Weiss 1999; Bordo 1993) surrounding the distortions in body-image experienced by those with an eating disorder, my voice-over states:

“I think our eyes cause the greatest alienation from our body”. By unsettling vision’s

tyranny, my voice-over asks the viewer to consider the affirmative potential of cultivating a non-mastering visual engagement with the body, where the "eyes can become secondary". Throughout *Phosphenes,* I draw attention to how vision tends to disappear in moments of physical intimacy: the eyes become unfocused at the moment of an orgasm and how we tend to kiss with our eyes closed.[34] For an orgasm to occur at all, implies making oneself vulnerable, as opening oneself to the body is to relinquish the will to gain full mastery over it. Non-mastering visuality thus becomes essential, as in Nancy's words, "Ecstasy shatters the image of itself (the image of self and the proper image of ecstasy)" (2008c*,* 8-9). For Nancy, this *syncopation* in self-image is what gives rise to new intimacies with the body.[35] Reflecting on my own new-found intimacies with the body, the final lines conclude: "using my eyes like hands, my body feels close."

The COVID-19 lockdowns meant that I had to rely on my own body for a lot of the shots in *Phosphenes*, forcing me to continuously create new ways of defamiliarizing my body. One way in which I did this was by experimenting with 'blind' filming – filming my own body without being able to see what I was filming. These experiments with blind filming capture a key element of what I explore through *Phosphenes,* that is, my desire to *see* the body without reaching for full vision or mastery over it. In Derrida's philosophy invisibility always haunts the visible, making blindness a precondition for seeing oneself (1993). For Nancy, the body is an example par excellence of this paradox at the heart of being, at the same time being that which is most near us to, and yet unownable and concealed. The use of haptic imagery in *Phosphenes* examines this paradoxical identity of the body, as the viewer is

[34] This reference to optical effects of an orgasm, is also mentioned within Trang's *kore* (1998), forming a direct intertextual reference between the films.

[35] This idea is elaborated on through Nancy's essay "L'Intrus" (2002), which examines his experience of a heart transplant. The pathos of Nancy's story lies not in the 'intrusion' produced by the failed heart, but in the way that the intrusion allowed for a new intimacy with his body, as the body's strangeness is "at the heart of the most familiar" (2002, 4)

encouraged to experience non-mastering visuality as a precondition for seeing the body. Haptic images may therefore generate a cinema of "seeing blindness" (Lippit 2016, 86), a cinema where invisibility and visibility are not antitheses of visuality as such, but instead reveal one another.

No More Talking Heads: Haptic Interviews

"Ears, where are your eyelids?" - Pascal Quignard

While there is an increasing number of scholarly works that examine film as a channel through which we experience or interact with other bodies (Sobchack 1992; Marks 2000) there are few that focus on how the body is positioned or articulated within the making of films, for example within an interview. I first began to reflect on the role of the body within an interview after I experimented with answering my own interview questions. In trialling my questions, I found that when I tried to answer them sitting on my bed, I could hardly say anything. Yet when I tried answering them walking down the street responses became easier. To get people to speak about their bodies, I decided to experiment with pushing the boundaries of a conventional 'talking head' interview. According to Irina Leimbacher, the 'talking head' approach to interviews, implicitly re-enforces a mind/body split, as the body is cut out and the focus is placed on the signification of the words spoken (2017). In contrast, my interview technique emphasises the centrality of the body within any act of articulation. I call this technique 'haptic interviews': interviews that attempt to activate a more tactile relation to the body by asking the interviewees to close their eyes.

Understood on a physiological level, there have been numerous studies on how closing our eyes helps memory by reducing cognitive load and enhancing visualisation (Vredeveldt, Hitch and Baddeley 2011). Given that vision dominates how we engage with the body (Weiss 1999, Kyrölä 2014), by temporarily breaking from the visual field, it was my hope that the haptic interviews would produce a new set of reflections on the body. My choice to ask people to close their eyes was strongly influenced by Marks' writing on haptic visuality, which "implies making oneself vulnerable to the image, reversing the relation of mastery that characterizes optical viewing" (1998, 341). Examining this concept of film viewing, I was interested in how non-mastering visuality may shape an interview. To explore this in more depth, in this section I refer to parts of the interviews that were not included in the film.[36] For the interviews I spoke with four different pairs: heterosexual partners, queer partners, sisters, and a mother and a daughter. While I did not originally plan for the voices to be predominately female, given the personal tone of the film and that I identify as female, this outcome appeared fitting. Everyone I interviewed was within my immediate network of friends and family, which proved useful given the vulnerability involved in closing one's eyes.

At the end of each interview, I asked "How has having your eyes closed affected how you talk about your body?". Jasper described feeling more connected to his body; "I'm able to be aware of every single part of my body when my eyes are closed" (Extract 2). Whereas Chloe described the fear involved in closing one's eyes as "to close your eyes is to really acknowledge your body and sit with how your body feels" (Extract 3). In contrast, Uma said that closing her eyes made her feel "more in her head" (Extract 4); and Bridgit noted "I just feel like my head is the only thing that exists" (Extract 5). Regardless of whether people felt

[36] Transcripts of the selected interview extracts can be found in appendix 3.

more connected to their body or disconnected, it was clear from each response that closing one's eyes altered how people related to their body and hence how they spoke about it. In Cai's words: "it's nice to have to examine with my actual body what it is and what it feels like instead of looking at it through the eye's perspective" (Extract 6).

We rely heavily on the visual to read and interpret our interlocutor. To examine how closing one's eyes impacted the embodied interactions, I asked: "How has closing your eyes affected how you relate to each other's bodies?". In most cases people said that closing their eyes made it easier to listen to each other. Chloe described:

> "I've been able to really focus on what Asha's been saying (…) and feel how I react to it and especially when she was talking about Mum's touch on our feet, I could really feel that sense of comfort. Whereas if I was looking around, I think I would lose sense of that feeling and I would remember that moment but less, it would be less feeling." (Extract 7)

This response forms a strong correlation with Irina Leimbacher's notion of "haptic listening" (2017), a concept strongly influenced by Marks. Haptic listening involves an attentive attunement, which does not just engage "ear to mouth and mouth to ear", but also "as one human body listening to, resonating with, another" (2017, 299). In Chloe's response, she explains that by closing her eyes, she was more able to connect to a tactile memory. In this sense, she had a more haptic engagement to her sister's voice; noticing how her sister's words made her *feel* in her own body. Referring to Nancy, Leimbacher describes how in haptic listening, one does not focus so much on linguistic meaning but "the opening of meaning" (Nancy 2007, 27) expressed through the voice's textural non-semantic qualities

(Leimbacher 2017, 289). By blocking out the visual, the interviewees were more able to attend to the embodied expression, Asha commenting "I can hear myself, maybe, with more clarity than I usually can, I'm more focused on each word that I'm using, um, its quieter" (Extract 8). From my own observations on embodied expression, I noticed that in contrast to interviews I had conducted in the past, participants took a lot more time to contemplate the questions before speaking. I also noticed that by closing their eyes, the voices of the interviewees became slower and softer, creating a beautiful calmness and intimacy in the tone of the film; almost lulling the viewer.

My approach to the haptic interviews developed and grew as I spoke with each interviewee about their experience of the interview. At the end of the first interview, Jasper and Uma described how they would have found it helpful to have done an exercise at the beginning of the interview to connect to their body. Responding to this feedback, I began the rest of the interviews with a body exercise that invited participants not only to connect to their own body but also to each other's body.[37] In line with my performative approach to research, this exercise also gave me the space to connect to my own body and my embodied relation to the interviewees before asking my questions.

My questions encouraged the interviewees to articulate not only how they perceived their own body, but how their perception of their body was informed by their relation to each other. While some of my questions were planned, they were predominately formed on the spot and in response to what was shared. The different relations between people altered the direction of the interviews and how people spoke about their body. For example, the interview with the mother and daughter focused predominantly on the past, recollecting their

[37] To view the transcript of this opening exercise, refer to appendix 2.

memory of each other when they lived together, whereas the interviews between partners was far more focused on the immediate intimacy they share with each other. These differences between how people spoke about their body can be seen to expand on the Nancy's notion of the body's relation identity; forming in connection to who we are exposed to. For the final question, I invited the interviewees to ask each other a question about their own or each other's body. This technique was designed to produce questions that directly reflected the individualised bodily knowledge the interviewees had of one another. To make explicit that it was not just my own body guiding the questions, the opening interview question of *Phosphenes* is asked by one of the interviewees.

The haptic interviews were a critical aspect of how the film enacts a haptic viewing/listening experience for the audience. From the beginning, the viewer is made aware that these are not conventional 'sit-down' interviews as they overhear my instruction that the interviewees close their eyes. The interview's unconventionality is re-enforced when later I ask, "what are you touching right now?", and Cai responds, "we're laying down in a bed right now". By offering these small pieces of information, the film continuously reminds the viewer of what they are unable to see. This pattern establishes the relation of mutuality identified with haptic visuality, as not only are the interviewees unable to see each other, the viewers are also unable to see who is speaking. Without being able to visually interpret the speaker, the viewer is encouraged to cultivate haptic listening, attending to the nuances of "embodied expression as much as to lexical meanings" (Leimbacher 2017, 293). In editing the audio of the film, I choose to leave some moments where I take an audible breath between speech, and in doing so, ask the viewer to attune the ear to the bodily sounds normally edited out of a film. As Kim Munro suggests, by foregrounding "listening as both a methodological process and as an audience experience" (2018, 280), documentary makers may allow new

voices to be heard. The haptic interviews therefore not only experiment with embodied approaches to interviewing, but also give voice to new modes of speaking with one's own body and another's body.

Pharmakon: Voicing the Body

"But the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered!"

– Paul Cezanne

In recent years, I've become better at speaking about my body, which has relieved me of some of my body anxieties. Yet I have always found that in speaking about my body, I feel I'm translating my experience rather than representing it. In creating the voice-over for *Phosphenes*, two difficulties presented themselves. On the one hand, language seemed bound to fail in representing bodily experience, yet on the other hand, I knew the process of trying to put my bodily experience into words was worthwhile. As Nancy puts it, a "twofold failure is given: a failure to speak about the body, a failure to keep silent about it" (1992, 57).

Although the body is never identical to signification, for Nancy, it is not a matter of merely abandoning intelligible language to discuss the body (2008a, 9). But "how, then, are we to touch upon the body, rather than signify it or make it signify?" (Nancy 2008a, 9). The answer to this question lies in Nancy's use of the word 'touch'. Here Nancy uses the word in the literal sense *and* the figurative sense, meaning 'to think' or 'speak of'. Turning away from the verb 'to grasp', which Nancy links to Hegel's dialects, Nancy turns to 'touch' to conceptualise a mode of thinking and writing that interrupts the possibility of complete representations. For Nancy, touch presents a *syncope* as one comes into contact with that

which remains separate – the corporeal and the incorporeal, the writer and the text, the writer and the reader. Rather than attempting to overcome *syncopation*, for Nancy, it is this paradoxical notion of touch – as both withdrawal and exposure – that grants us an opening for us to speak of the body, as "this interruption of sense has to do with the body, it is body" (2008a, 125).[38]

As I wrote the voice-over for the film, I was acutely aware of how my words might be perceived by others, far more so than in this thesis for instance. Writing the voice-over and then eventually recording my words, felt like a direct, embodied address, as for one thing, my own voice was the mode through which the words were communicated. Creating the voice-over therefore led me to conceptualise my embodied experience in new ways, as I was forced to make my feelings communicable. Taking a Nancian reading of this, the writer is touched by something outside, something separate from the writer and her discourse (2008a, 17). In this respect, writing the voice-over produced a similar experience to what I explore thematically in the film: the experience of becoming closer to my own body as a result of another's touch. In Nancy's words, the lover's touch is like "a blade thrust in me, and that I do not rejoin, because it disjoins me" (1991, 98). Addressing myself to the eyes and touch of the viewer, my own words became a 'blade', disjoining and rejoining me.

My attempt to articulate embodied experience can be compared to what Marks describes as, "the attempt to translate to an audiovisual medium the knowledges of the body, including the unrecordable memories of the senses" (1999, 5). In writing the voice-over, I was constantly challenged by how I might approach the body's many silent registers that could not be translated into words. To access these registers, I experimented with different approaches to

[38] For Nancy, this idea of interruption summarises his work on the body, stating: "Touching on the interruption of sense is what, for my part, interests me in the matter of the body" (2008a, 125).

writing. After each interview, I kept a reflective journal entry on how I responded to the interview, focusing on how my bodily experience compared to those interviewed. I then experimented with practicing haptic listening, by listening back to the audio recording with my eyes closed. Finally, by transcribing the interviews, I registered a new set of ideas that emerged from looking closely at the language used within the interviews. Given that memory functions "multisensorially" (Marks 1999, 22), these different approaches to writing may be viewed as activating different aspect of my body's memory. The final voice-over was therefore a synthesis of the different reflections produced by my experiments with 'touching' the body through language.

To find the 'right' words for the voice-over, I would read the written text aloud and adjust the words depending on how they sounded. Becoming more aware of the tactile quality of the words inside my mouth, raised broader questions concerning the role of voice within *Phosphenes*. In a film that explores embodied relations between people, choosing to only include the audio recordings radically alters how the body is explored within the film. At one point the film directly draws attention to the question of 'voice' by asking, "Do you think the voice is a part of the body?", to which Cai responds, "this voice that I speak in is just an instrument my body has created in order to communicate with others". The idea of the voice being the body's instrument became a pivotal element of the film; the voice being how the viewer comes to know the central bodies of the film. The goal was not to produce a myriad of 'disembodied voices', on the contrary, I view the voice as particularly apt for exploring the porousness of the body's boundaries. Voices pass through the bodies, entering the body in ways that blurs inside/outside distinctions. The body, Nancy says, is itself like an echo chamber; sound cannot be blocked out or ignored: "this sonorous, sonorized body undertakes a simultaneous listening to a 'self' and to a 'world' that are both in resonance" (2007, 43).

Using my voice-over as the guiding thread, *Phosphenes* seeks to produce a type of listening that happens at the border of my body and the viewer's body, belonging to neither one side nor the other.

Conclusion

"I felt my life with both my hands" – Emily Dickinson

Nancy passed away in the middle of writing this thesis. Quoting his words became marked by a sense of absence. Yet in touching us with his words, Nancy's body is continuously made present through the bodily processes of the reader. This potential to touch from afar is my hope for *Phosphenes,* as the film's haptic imagery relies on the presencing of the viewer's body to complete itself. For both Nancy and Marks, the viewer's experience of 'being-with' an image is never an aggregate nor a totality, but a co-appearance marked by moments of interruption, discontinuity and withdrawal. Rather than turning away from the visual, both Marks and Nancy demonstrate that it is precisely through touch interacting with vision, that film viewing may bring us closer to an understanding of each.

My experimentation with haptic interviews draws attention to the central paradox of haptic visuality – to intimately see the body, we may need to break from the visual. Yet bodily experience and memory can never be fully translated, and thus haptic cinema emerges as the perfect medium for producing our strongest mistranslations of the body – translations that do not attempt to conceal what is lost, but rather allow these gaps in translation to point towards that which exceeds the visual image. In writing the voice-over, I was faced with the

challenge of placing my own body within a system of written signification. Yet rather than appealing to ocularcentric logic that attempts to 'grasp' or represent embodied experience as something 'complete', I attempted to 'touch' my body; engendering an approach to making that began with the inexplicable bodily response and developed from there.

There are two key outcomes of my research. Through the making of a short film that explores our haptic engagement with others, my practice-based research drew Nancy and Marks into conversation with one another. My practice-led research on the other hand, employed Nancy and Marks to develop a haptic approach to filming, interviewing, and writing. Both outcomes led to the finding that by challenging a mastering, objectifying gaze, haptic cinema offers an enhanced potential for us to see our own body's porous identity. In this respect, the 'unknowing' associated with *agnosia,* may in fact be what gives rise to new forms of knowing and sense-making. While Nancy's and Marks' explorations of cinema do not (and could not) offer a methodology for making my film 'haptic', they offer something far more useful; they affirm the affective potentials of films that require an active, embodied mode of viewing. Just as *Phosphenes* explores how we come to see our body through the eyes and touch of another, the viewer may come to see their own body through the eyes and touch of the film.

Nietzsche has Zarathustra declare that "this most honest being, this ego – it speaks of love and it still wants the body, even when it poetizes and fantasizes and flutters with broken wings" (2006, 21). It is this broken voice that I would have speak, in place of a voice that silences a body it cannot master. Like the lover's caress, haptic imagery remains un-masterable in order for it to communicate itself. Communicating in this way, *Phosphenes* depicts my own movement towards my body; eyes closed, and arms outstretched. While it is

possible to come to this position on one's own, love demands the body opens itself. This openness that lies at the heart of loving, propels one into a more intimate relation with the body. With the lover's hand, held open and reaching, the skin turns on itself, meeting its own image. *Phosphenes* leaves impressions of this encounter between two bodies, forming a palimpsest that can only ever bear the traces of its original form.

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Appendix 1

Transcript of film

Intertitle: '*The viewer is encouraged to close their eyes at any point throughout this film'*

S: Ok so I'm gonna get you to close your eyes for the interview.

U: For the whole thing?

S: Yep.

U: Ok cool.

J: Um I'm going to put something over my eyes because I'm so not going to be able to do that.

Title: *Phosphenes*

Intertitle: *Phosphenes:* the colours, lights or shapes that you see when you close your eyes tightly or press them with your fingers

V-O: *Jasper and Uma were the first people I interviewed for this film. They were also standing with me at this beach. Jasper and I were imagining the different conversations the people on the beach might be having. It'd be much harder to do this without vision, eyes give so much safe distance.*

Early on in making this film, I came across this quote from Goethe: 'The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress'

Intertitle: '*The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress'*- Goethe

For this film I tried to use my eyes like hands, coming as close to the image as possible. The beach seemed like a good place to start as there's not many places where we see so many bodies. In another interview I did with two sisters, Asha, described how she's always looking for moments where she forgets her body and the beach is one place that happens. I'm also always looking for those moments, but to make this film I had to do the opposite, I asked people to remember their body.

Intertitle: Teeth

M: The happiest time in your life? The saddest time in your life?

S: Well, no just to do with bodies, so I'm just for you, I'm just trying to think about what… Ummm, so, when you were a teenager Mum and they pulled out all your teeth, I think when you were 14 weren't you?

M: Pulled out at all my teeth? Mmm 16.

S: Oh, you were 16? So, tell me about that experience.

M: It was terrible, I had to go to work for 3 months, for the gums to harden up, and at the age of 16 without any teeth in your mouth, it was a pretty big bad thing because it meant I wasn't able to go dancing or anything like that as a teenager.

V-O: *Sue-Ellen's question for her mum made me think about how much memory each part of the body stores. Can my body remember the feeling of being born? Touch is the first sense a foetus develops. Our touch receptors begin in the face, mostly on the lips and nose and then over several months, they develop in our palms and the soles of our feet. Our first memories of our parents are memories of touch.*

Intertitle: Feet

C: I think like, umm with my mother I was, you know I have this like, I think what I find the most comforting touch in the world is when someone like hold my feet with really warm hands. And I think she used to do that with me when I was younger because my feet would always be really really cold especially when we were living in England. And she would just, we would be lying on the couch, and she would hold my feet and it would be really comforting and calming. And so, I think there was like moments of warmness and touch.

V-O: *Chloe keeps very still throughout the whole interview, but Asha keeps joining her fingertips to each other, she said it was to keep reminding herself that her body was there. She also described that having a sister reminds her of her body.*

A: I was just saying to Chloe before that her hair grows faster than mine, um so in that sense you know Chloe is, the person in the world who looks the most like me, shares the most, you know, we share the same genes, we, um she's a reminder of my body, um she's reminder of my skin colour, of my ethnicity, um of my femininity.

V-O: *Maybe recognising our body in our family is the closest we get to really knowing our body. I've always been able to see my mum and my grandma in my hands.*

Intertitle: Hands

S: Can you describe what you're touching now?

CB: Mm-hmm. Um, I'm holding both of Bridgit's hands.

(both laugh)

CB: Um, I don't know, holding hands is so subconscious and strange, we hold hands a lot.

B: Yeah

CB: And, yeah it just feels really good. And I don't know why but I think we're quite physical touch oriented. Even when we just like lay down or something, like we're laying down in a bed right now but like I'll like put my leg on Bridgit's or like vice versa. I don't know, it's just like I really enjoy like through like touching someone else's body like knowing they are there.

B: Yeah. And feeling a lot of love through like small actions. Like I feel like you can be in a really like loud or crowded space, and everything is happening but you can be holding like someone's you love's hand, and just like a small rub from their palm or whatever, just like brings you back to like your space and your body, and like you being next to them and feeling like I don't know connected and like loved.

V-O: *Only I can see all of Cai and Brigit's smiles because they both have their eyes closed. But by closing their eyes they're probably aware of things I'm not. Vision is so dominating, it's the one sense we have to block out completely to go to sleep.*

Intertitle: Lips

S: Why do you think we kiss with our eyes closed?

C: I think to, um to fully experience the sensuality of the kiss. And I think um, like we, both Asha and I felt and said or described, when you close your eyes there's less distraction and your mind isn't firing by all this stimulation that you're seeing visually um and so you're able to focus on physical touch and sensation a bit easier.

At the moment of an organism, the pupil of the eye becomes dilated, and our vision becomes unfocused. But normally our eyes are already closed. For most people, it's also hard to stop sound escaping the lips.

Intertitle: Voice

S: Do you think our voices are a part of our body?

B: Mmmm. I view mine as a part of my mind, for some reason. I don't view it as a part of my body

CB: No, I don't know, I feel like our inner voice that we don't use to communicate with each other, like our, our inner voice that feels like a part of my body. But no one can hear that voice except for me. And it sounds different to my speaking voice.

B: Does it?

CB: Yeah, yeah the voice I talk to myself with yeah.

B: Really?

CB: Yeah, it has a whole different voice.

B: What's it like?

CB: Um, I don't really know how to describe it other than that it is the voice that feels like my voice. This voice that I speak in is just an instrument that my body has created in order for my body to communicate with others.

V-O: *When I tried closing my eyes to record this, my voice slowed, it became more like a stranger's voice. When I close my eyes, the boundaries around my body also become blurrier: does my body end with my skin or does it extend to my voice?*

Intertitle: Eyes

B: I reckon, if I had my eyes open, I would probably remember my body better but maybe that's like just a mind's perception of the body but like right now I'm trying to like remember my body, and I'm like what does it look like, I'm like where does it start where does it end?

V-O: *Iris Young said that giving birth suspends all bodily distinctions between the inner and outer. The shapes of our bellybuttons, innies and outties, bear this reminder*.

Intertitle: Bellybutton

SE: Well, you have your baby and the placenta has to come out and when the placenta comes out, a very small percentage of women, as the placenta comes out it ruptures some vessels and you keep bleeding and you die. Like I said goodbye to everybody because I fainted because I'd lost so much blood and then I had to have an IV of 3Ls of blood, because I would have died otherwise.

V-O: *When I spoke to my 16-year-old sister about the body's boundaries, she said, if you experience unwanted touch, you know your body's boundaries have been crossed. Touch from someone we love can also make us aware of our body's boundaries. Obviously in a completely different way. When I'm held by someone, I think I can feel my own body better than when I'm on my own.*

Intertitle: Veins

S: Do you feel like your own relationship to your body has changed since being together?

U: Mmm yeah I think that, I don't, yeah I feel like I don't contemplate my body as much or physically try and, and I'm not as critical of it in a relationship as I used to be. Probably just because I forget about it in a way because I'm just like a body, we just extend, our bodies kind of extend to one another. Not all the time, but they're overlapping almost sometimes.

J: I think someone else loving your body makes you, over a period of time, for me anyway, has made me, has made me love my own body more.

Intertitle: Skin

When I was with my partner, my feeling of being in my body completely changed. It's like my body could finally just be a body. Rather than something to be reshaped. I think our eyes cause the greatest alienation from our body. But touch is so immediate and intimate, our eyes can sometimes become secondary.

It's much harder to translate our experience of touch into words than the things we see. Even when I think about touch or try to remember it, I need to visualise it. Is it possible to preserve the memory of someone's touch?

Now that my partner and I are no longer together, I can feel my eyes becoming more awake to my body, but they're not as unkind as before. Maybe in this sense, touch does have some permanency.

I choose to end this film with this image of bodies. I almost didn't want to show any images of bodies all in this film because I thought that might help us to see them better. But images only ever give us a tiny glimpse of the body anyway.

Using my eyes like my hands, the body is never a complete image. The body becomes skin, textures, shapes, phosphenes. Using my eyes as hands, my body feels close

Appendix 2

Transcript of Warm Up Exercise

Close your eyes

I'll start off by getting you to connect to your body.

Hearing my words, imagine you are listening through your skin

Draw your attention to your breath, notice your inhale and exhale

Now take a few deep breaths, try to become aware of the breath passing through the body, the air traveling down the back of the throat, passing through your voice box and into your windpipe.

As you exhale, try to release any tension you might have

Draw attention to your toes, your feet, ankles, slowly work all the way up

Try and relax your face, particularly your eyes, allowing them to become heavy

Notice if there is a part of your body that you feel particularly connected to

What is that part of your body is touching?

Think about why you feel connected to that part of your body

Can you visualize it?

Is there any part of your body touching each other?

Visualise one part of the other person's body

I'll get you to know describe that part of their body

(Proceed to Questions)

Appendix 3

Interview Extracts Transcript

Note that bolded text is what was quoted in the thesis and the surrounding text has been provided to contextualise these quotes.

Extract 1:

Cai: **I feel like I can't tell what hand is your hand and what hand is my hand because we've been holding hands for a long time**

Extract 4 and 2:

Sofie: Does having your eyes closed affect how you talk about your body?

Uma: I think it makes you more, I mean I can't compare it to anything else, but I think it makes you feel more contemplative, I don't know. **I feel more in my head** in a way, with my eyes closed. Or maybe, what do you think Jas?

Jasper: **I'm able to be aware of every single part of my body when my eyes are closed**. I can feel my kneecaps and the ends of my toes. The soreness in the balls of my feet from walking, the tightness in my hips, I feel the tenseness in my legs, and I'm up to my shoulder and the soreness behind my eyes. Whereas with my eyes open I only just seem to feel the immediate feelings of my body. Rather than all the little bits.

Extract 3:

Chloe: I think I've always found closing my eyes, in the past really difficult. I think it's because I felt quite disconnected from my body, and **to close your eyes is to really acknowledge your body and sit with how your body feels.** And so throughout this it's, you know a good practise to um, really acknowledge the reactions within your body, how its sitting, how it's how it's trying to kind of communicate with you.

Extract 6 and 5:

Sofie: Do you think closing your eyes has changed how you speak about your body or relate to your body right now?

Cai: Probably because I feel like if I had my eyes open, I would be looking at my body and I would be using my eyes as a tool to examine it and what it is, whereas **it's nice to have to examine with my actual body to examine what it is and what it feels like instead of looking at it through the eye's perspective, so yeah.**

Bridget: I reckon, if I had my eyes open, I would probably remember my body better but maybe that's just a mind's perception of the body but right now I'm trying to remember my body, and I'm like what does it look like, I'm like where does it start where does it end. But maybe I'm just not very practised at being super present in my body so it's like right now I just feel so up here in my brain, **I just feel like my head is the only thing that exists** and my body is just kinda chillin.

Extract 7:

Cai: **I think similar to what Asha said, I think I've been able to really focus on what Asha's been saying**. Um and find clarity without distraction **and so within that feel what Asha is saying as well, and feel how I react to it and especially when she was talking about Mum's touch on our feet I could really feel that sense of comfort. Whereas if I was looking around, I think I would lose sense of that feeling and I would remember that moment but less, it would be less feeling.**

Extract 8

Asha: **Yeah I think that closing, having our eyes closed, talking has made me focus on my words, I can hear myself, maybe, with more clarity than I usually can, I'm more focused on each word that I'm using, um, its quieter**, I feel um, like I'm forgetting about my body a bit.