

Touch / Don't Touch

Visuality, Tactility, and Music Video

1. Correlating

In times of global media cultures, distances seem to be disappearing. In the face of borderless flows of data and global migration movements, the conversation has shifted to concepts like *decentering* and *delocalization*—and to the claim that encounters with the Other are now a thing of the past. In his reflections on the constitution of today's cultures, Wolfgang Welsch, for example, recognizes a growing tendency toward networking and intermixing that renders binary attributions untenable. According to Welsch, the interpenetration of cultures ensures rapprochement instead of demarcation. In the face of comprehensive cultural exchange processes, states Welsch, “simply nothing is foreign anymore.”¹ Perhaps this is all a bit more complicated—because there is something alienating inherent in intercultural encounters and moments of contact. Ambivalences spread wherever the One meets the Other. The dismissal of an awareness of differences, the negation of the foreign, does not provide a convincing approach to the changing conditions of cultural negotiations. Rather, it is necessary to focus on those conditions that set differences and distinctions and that in turn make this process perceptible and observable.

The following considerations focus on the opposition of black and white, or put more precisely: on the encounter of black and white bodies. Special attention will be paid to the visible and touchable surfaces of these bodies, i.e. the skin and the sensory modalities of visuality and tactility associated

1 Wolfgang Welsch, “Transkulturalität. Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger Kulturen,” in *Hybridkultur. Medien, Künste, Netze*, ed. Irmela Schneider and Christian W. Thomsen (Köln: Wienand, 1997), 72.

with it. The field of music videos seems particularly suitable for this purpose. Firstly, it is a core characteristic of pop culture that it is interested in surfaces and is itself a phenomenon of the surface; secondly, music videos can also be regarded as designated surfaces of experimentation for media-technological innovations—such as aesthetic innovations in the digital sphere. Music videos are capable of making their medial formal character visible. They thus not only follow the conditions that constitute them but make them conscious and recognizable. New connections create new relations. They are not only called up by the images, but are themselves virulent within them: “What can be shown is shaped by the techniques of representation; these are not simply added to their content afterwards, enveloping it, but are constitutive to it.”² Media are not containers but structures of conditions; the nature of the medium itself is not ancillary but fundamental. As examples of this idea, the following will address two music videos that appeared in the 1990s and focus on the encounters of white and black bodies by means of digital staging techniques: “Black or White” (John Landis, 1991) and “Africa Shox” (Chris Cunningham, 1998). Before addressing these two examples, some premises will be clarified.

The contrast between black and white can be considered a paradigmatic opposition in Western culture to this day, one that has caused particularly sharp confrontations and demarcations. Already in 1952, Frantz Fanon had pointed this out in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon’s influential text will be used here to explore the form of an encounter that reveals diverse modes of contact at the moment of meeting. These modes imply various sensory modalities—whereby they do not exclude but comprehensively include each other, and thus also open up perspectives for media-theoretical questions of perception. In fact, Fanon’s remarks can themselves be understood as a zone of transition that addresses the meeting of gaze and touch as a multilayer figuration of mediation.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon addresses different forms of interference between the image of the self and the image of the other. In doing so, he is particularly interested in the question of the visual within the field of tension of ethnic difference and psychic identification. In the acts of seeing

2 Ulrike Bergermann, “Tastaturen des Wissens. Haptische Technologien und Taktilität in medialer Reproduktion,” in *Intellektuelle Anschauung. Figurationen von Evidenz zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*, ed. Sybille Peters and Martin Jörg Schäfer (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 319.

described by Fanon, the gaze of the white person not only testifies to the existence of the black body, but at the same time exposes it to the danger of dissolution. The effect of this desubstantialization consists in a transformation of the closed concept of the body, which is superimposed by a visually determined surface politics: "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?"³ What is striking in this statement is the visualization of blood as a distinct determinant of ethnic identity. This is remarkable insofar as biologicistic taxonomies long presupposed not the skin but the composition of the blood as the defining criterion of race—beyond evidence based on visibility. Mary Ann Doane notes: "The legal criterion for racial identity in the United States has historically been linked to blood rather than skin. The polarization of white and black ensures that there are no gradations in racial identity—one drop of 'black blood' effectively makes one black. Genealogy, a potentially invisible history, ultimately determines racial identity."⁴ Blood as a categorical criterion of racial identity is now shifted in Fanon from the interior to the exterior. The process of seeing functions here as an aggressive-transcendental tool of the oppressor who, by means of a codified gaze based on control, is capable of marking the black person as an object and thus reducing him to a surface-being. This has particular consequences for the perception of the body: "Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema."⁵ The principle of a "racial epidermal schema" refers to one of the basic constants of the repressive power of racism. The skin as an immediately visible organ becomes the site of alienation, a cover that, precisely because of its constant visibility, is constituted as a fundamental pattern of imagination of the discourse of domination. Fanon describes the subjection to the dissecting white gaze as an agonizing experience that the oppressed cannot escape: "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance."⁶

Fanon's remarks on the visually conditioned identification of the colonial Other have received new attention in the course of postcolonial studies. Thus,

3 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 112.

4 Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), 229.

5 Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 112.

6 *Ibid.*, 116.

many authors have subjected Fanon's "racial epidermal schema" to an in-depth examination and discussed skin as a primary sign of racial differentiation. Homi Bhabha, for example, has concisely highlighted this correlation. He assumes that "skin' in racist discourse is [...] a prime signifier of the body and its social and cultural correlates."⁷ Its color forms different markers that the skin carries outward as a guaranteed identity: "The difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural—colour as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural 'identity.'"⁸

It is not surprising that, in the context of colonialism, the observation of skin is tied to its visible color. Indeed, the beginnings of a scholarly interest in skin, as it developed in the middle of the seventeenth century, seem to have been taken up here again. The earliest research questions, with which skin first became an epistemic object, initially applied not to its organic nature but to its visibility, as Claudia Benthien demonstrates in a survey of the scientific history and anthropology of skin colors.⁹ While at the moment of being viewed skin appears as a type of enclosed covering and presupposes a perception-specific relationship of distance in the visual mode, this spectrum is expanded with the integration of a further component—namely the tactile. Benthien points to the fact that skin "can be experienced in the perception of the Other both through the proximal and the distal senses."¹⁰ Here, touching has traditionally been given far more attention than seeing:

As a sense organ, skin differs from the visually perceived to the extent that the skin being viewed always possesses the character of an object, while touch, which is also always a being-touched, concerns the suspending or questioning of the Self/Other boundary. From the perspective of cultural history, perception via the skin was marginalized in favor of distanced, optical observation of this skin from the outside.¹¹

Possibly this marginalization could be caught up by media developments—at least they could provide the occasion for newly problematizing the function of the tactile. Ulrike Bergermann, for example, asks

7 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 117.

8 Ibid., 114.

9 Claudia Benthien, *Im Leibe wohnen. Literarische Imagologie und historische Anthropologie der Haut* (Berlin: Arno Spitz 1998), 169–178.

10 Ibid., 12.

11 Ibid., 34.

whether the concepts we apply a priori to perception and ultimately to thinking are characterized by the primacy of the visual to such an extent that they must be reconsidered—whether because the experienceable is changing with new technologies and the selectivity of epistemological concepts would have to be correspondingly adjusted, or in the course of a reassessment of neglected senses that calls for methodological self-reflection.¹²

This is to be investigated—by looking at a situation of media upheaval that ostensibly still carries the visual within itself but which at the same time is already beginning to drive the tactile to the surface.

2. Contouring

When the music video for “Black and White” was released in 1991, it attracted increased attention—not least because it began to circulate new image forms with the use of morphing effects. The video is made up of four parts. It starts with a look at a suburban American family, whose son incurs his father's angry by consuming loud pop music. In the subsequent segment, Michael Jackson can be seen dancing and singing his song “Black or White”—surrounded by alternating dancers who, from their various costumes and settings, appear to be from different parts of the world. This impression of ethnic diversity is taken up again and heightened by a series of faces that emerge from and merge into each other by means of a morphing effect. One sees various skin colors and physiognomies whose alternation seems to occur seamlessly in one fluid movement. The next segment shows another morphing. A black panther morphs into Michael Jackson, whose jerky dance moves are now no longer accompanied by music. Screams and outbursts of violence follow, in the course of which several window panes are broken. Finally, Jackson turns back into the panther and leaves the scene. The last sequence consists of a cartoon sequence that shows Bart Simpson watching TV in the Simpsons' living room. “Black or White” can be heard again, to which Bart, dressed in a black Michael Jackson T-Shirt, dances enthusiastically. Just as at the beginning of the video, a son is provoking his father: Homer Simpson appears, complains about the noise, and turns the television off—which ends the video.

12 Bergermann, “Tastaturen des Wissens”, 301.

The statement announced in the lyrics—"It don't matter if you're black or white"—seems to also be stated by the video's images and spread throughout them. "No matter," no solid substance be detected as a ground or basis. Is this about the undermining, the dissolution and erasure of difference? The celebration of a perfectly formed formlessness? This position has been argued several times over in the discussion of morphing, paying particular attention to the idea of the transformative. Ron Alcalay applies it to both the level of production and of reception and explains:

[Morphing] captivates audiences because it appeals to our belief in the idea of a transformational identity. Morphing combines cinema and computing to create lifelike images which confront the viewer with spectacles of unstable identities, and plays upon assumptions of fixed, bounded, or essential identities. Entrenched differences in race, sex, age, etc., give way to a continuum of identities that creates images of those who may identify with more than a narrow group. Morphing makes these alternative sites of identification visible and hence available.¹³

Making a similar argument, André Nusselder links the fascination of the digital with a new potential for gestalt formation: "So what fascinates us in digital media is their capacity to create new gestalts out of discontinuities and heterogeneities (such as the morphing of different people into one gestalt, as in Michael Jackson's video clip 'Black or White')."¹⁴ In contrast, Vivian Sobchack has pointed out the fact that the notion of the "one gestalt" does not only hold fascination but also discomfort: "In the name of an ill-conceived multiculturalism, the music video collapses both difference and otherness into self-sameness as we watch a range of human faces distinctly marked by their differences and otherness morph one into the other in a reversible chain not of resemblance but of smiling similitude."¹⁵

This takes up a fear that Jean Baudrillard had already described as a core characteristic of the 'video stage'. In "Video World and Fractal Subject", Bau-

13 Ron Alcalay, "Morphing Out of Identity Politics: *Black or White* and *Terminator 2*," in *Bad Subjects: Political Education for Everyday Life*, ed. The Bad Subjects Production Team (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 135–136.

14 André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 87.

15 Vivian Sobchack, "At the Still Point of the Turning World: Meta-Morphing and Meta-Stasis," in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 139.

drillard speaks of the “endless assimilation of man to himself”¹⁶, of a multiplication that threatens to undermine, even destroy, the distinctive: “Therefore, we are dealing with another dimension of difference. It is no longer the difference between one subject and another, but the endless differentiation of one and the same subject. [...] We are no longer alienated by the others or from the others, but from our countless possible clones. This means, however, that we are no longer alienated at all.”¹⁷ Alignment does not appear here as a moment of liberation but as a type of unsettling assimilation. The undermining of difference seems threatening because it breaks open previously stabilizing distinctions. In fact, it announces a medial stage that is markedly different from others. Whereas film editing once still provided a sense of closure and separation, the image of the digital now seems to lose its limitations. Vivian Sobchack stresses: “The digital morphing of disparate bodies in ‘Black or White’ [...] that unifies these bodies is not merely analogous to cutting them together on an action [...]. Thus the morphing sequence develops with neither a significant beginning nor an end.”¹⁸

As a music video, “Black or White” is first and foremost a part of television; more precisely, music television, for which it was produced. In contrast to film, which has a beginning and an end, television is characterized by uninterrupted perpetuity: it runs on and on, it never ends. The images of television do not cohere like those of film: “Consequently, television has developed montage not as a cut or from the cut, but as a transition.”¹⁹ With television, images flow into one another; its priority is not clear cuts but transitional blurring. The proliferation of channels and the multiplication of formats are not inconsequential for the aesthetics of the televisual image. The music video “Black or White” could hence be viewed as a reflection on the principle of transition—at least it seems to be able to appropriately mediate what it shows by means of its narrative: “The bodily image of the indeterminate hybrid—much like Jackson’s facial surgeries—exists devoid of distinct origins [...], while the act of morphing strives for continuity and smoothness, thereby easing us into

16 Jean Baudrillard, “Videowelt und fraktales Subjekt,” in *Philosophien der neuen Technologie*, ed. Jean Baudrillard, Hannes Böhringer, Vilém Flusser, Heinz von Foerster, Friedrich Kittler, and Peter Weibel (Berlin: Merve, 1989), 113.

17 Ibid., 113–114.

18 Sobchack, “At the Still Point of the Turning World,” 142.

19 Lorenz Engell, “Fernsehen mit Gilles Deleuze,” in *Der Film bei Deleuze. Le cinéma selon Deleuze*, ed. Oliver Fahle and Lorenz Engell (Weimar/Paris: Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität/Presses de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1999), 472.

the idea of indeterminacy, while allowing for a certain kind of narrative logic to unfold before our eyes as we watch one thing become another. Flow is the narrative.”²⁰

In flow, television comes into its own.²¹ Here, it is no longer a matter of clearly distinguishable programs but a continuous flow, a seamless series of elements fading into one another. Within this medial fluidity, skin, as a demarcating surface of the body, seems to be more of a continuum than an enclosed entity: a malleable layer, a flexible membrane. Does it matter what color it is? “It’s not about races; just places, faces,” the song’s lyrics say, and less later: “I’m not gonna spend my life being a color.” The endless mutability of the digital seems to point more toward a *de*-differentiation than a differentiation. Is this a matter of making grand utopian gestures? Andrew Blauvelt states: “The mutable nature of digital media, including, and especially, morphing technology, allows us to envision the seemingly impossible (social harmony), visualize the ineffable indeterminate (not-man/not-woman, not-black/not-white), and flirt with the thrill of fantasy or terror (to be the other).”²² The crossing of borders is not only connected with all-embracing hopes, but also with the greatest fears. What “Black or White” tries to wipe out is brought into focus in “Africa Shox.”

3. Colliding

Like the first example, “Black or White,” the second music video, “Africa Shox,” makes use of digital forms of staging—however, here the focus is not on smooth transitions, but on collisions and breaks. The basic structure of the video can be divided into four sections. At the beginning, the dark-skinned protagonist of the events is introduced—and, with him, the problem of visibility, because, at first, he can hardly be made out. In the darkness of a backyard on New York’s Wall Street, a man crouches between garbage cans, only becoming visible the moment he stands up. Furthermore, it is noticeable that

20 Andrew Blauvelt, “Unfolding Identities,” in *The Education of an E-Designer*, ed. Steven Heller (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 119.

21 On the concept of flow as a characteristic specific to television, see the chapter “Programming: Distribution and Flow” in Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003), 77–120.

22 Blauvelt, “Unfolding Identities,” 120.

he moves groping at first, then staggering. This is obviously related to the fact that the man's gaze is clouded: his glassy eyes seem to offer no support on the way out, which is characterized by a constant stumbling and stumbling. On his path, which in the second section traverses the streets of Manhattan, a momentous collision occurs. The character, looking for someone to help him, stretches his arm out—and loses it the very next moment. This loss is initiated by an encounter with another person, a white character. It happens—and this is the unsettling element of it—almost casually, as if *en passant*. The actually irritating aspect, however, is that this physical mutilation has no organic characteristics. No blood flows from the maimed body nor from the amputated extremity. Rather, it gives the impression of an insubstantial hollow mold that splinters off from the body to ultimately break open and shatter into pieces as it hits the ground. Following this, the protagonist increasingly loses further limbs, and always in the same way. The third section then shows the man in a parking garage, where he runs into a group of breakdancers. But even this enclosed space does not offer any protection or is able to stop the process of his limbs breaking off. In the last section, the injured man, who can only move with difficulty, namely by hopping on his single remaining leg, gets back to the street, where he is hit by a taxi. This process, too, seems to take place almost imperceptibly: neither does the car slow down nor does a corpse remain on the street. Instead, all that can be seen are flying splinters and fragments that no longer allow any conclusion about the original form.

As disturbing as these events may seem, they are markedly reminiscent of Fanon's reflections on the structure of the colonial gaze relationship. Fanon speaks of the "countless facets of my being,"²³ that he considers the consequence of a white regime of the gaze; of a body "burst apart" and made of "fragments,"²⁴ which remain as the effects of a destroyed self. It almost seems as if director Chris Cunningham were illustrating the ideas developed by Fanon in order to ultimately come to a similar result: "The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man."²⁵ The relationship of the gaze would not then be a reciprocal one; the black man, due to his unlimited racial visibility, would remain condemned to subjecting himself to an overpowering white apparatus of the gaze and surrender himself to the point

23 Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 114.

24 *Ibid.*, 109.

25 *Ibid.*, 110.

of losing himself. Does Cunningham's video, therefore, concern critical reflection on colonialism and its consequences, a situation of the colliding of various cultures that is still having an effect on the present?

This is possible, but perhaps it also concerns something further. Unlike in "Black or White", Cunningham's video makes clear that the skin is not a shell under which the substantial lies hidden, but that the skin itself is the substantial. Against this background, the pointedly presented motif of the skin in the video can again be tied back to television in its double function of visibility and tactility. If one follows its etymological elements, television seems to involve distance, not proximity. Nevertheless, it has something to do with touching—such as in regards to the remote control, or more accurately put, in regards to the buttons on the remote control. In itself a highly fleeting action, touch comes into its own with the push of buttons on a remote: "The moment of switching—the push of the button—[...] marks and produces the difference between before and after, actuality and virtuality. It is the point at which parallel programs converge and the events on the screen are synchronized with those in front of the screen."²⁶ Therefore, there seems to be a unique form of touch inherent in television, a moment of encounter at least, which makes both the sharp distinction of media of proximity and media of distance, as well as that of visibility and tactility, appear unproductive. Something comes together here that does not belong together according to the usual models of categorization. It involves a type of contact in which seeing and touch no longer serve separate registers but work together. With this, media theory questions can also be posed in a different way. For as little as television can be conceived of as the medium of panoptic observation, so too does a media theory perspective still indebted to the primacy of the visual seem to be capable of doing justice to the situation described above—especially not when video platforms like YouTube or Vimeo, along with television, are also opening up new forms and surfaces for touching and clicking.

For this reason, Cunningham's video can also be considered as an exemplary moment of transition, in which the meeting of gaze and touch become conceivable as an encounter mediated by media aesthetics. A conception that would solely concentrate on the visual, then, would fall apart due to its fixation on the gaze. Because at the core of the video, there is a type of otherness that is not solely founded on its visibility. This does not exclusively involve the

26 Lorenz Engell, *Thinking Through Television* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 39.

visual perception and interpretation of the skin of a counterpart as the skin of the Other perceived by the gaze but involves something further, something working with and within this. Put another way: it involves a body surface whose foreignness is not primarily a result of the distance of observation but an irritation that occurs in the mode of touching and being touched. The unsettling fragmentation shown in the video does not occur due to a hostile look from someone but *en passant*, bumping into each other, in other words, at the point the bodies come into contact at the moment of touch. This does not mean that the visual should be negated or completely done away with; rather, one must now take into account a different vanishing point, an expanded zone of encounter. The following will address further implications of this vanishing point.

4. Contacting

In his study *The Skin-Ego*, Didier Anzieu develops a model that attempts to counter the concentration on the visual as the primary access point of all (self-)perception.²⁷ The work's core idea is to shift ego-genesis from a purely imaginary scenario into the realm of the somatic, for unlike Lacan, Anzieu does not conceive of the (mirror-)image as a determined site of subject constitution but ascribes to physical self-perception a prior role as creator of the ego-function. Anzieu points out that of all our senses, the sense of touch develops first, beginning at the embryonic stage. After birth as well, it is first the tactile, then the auditive, and only then visual perception that determines the infant's experiences. Furthermore, Anzieu emphasizes that in the embryo, skin and brain are formed from one and the same membrane, the ectoderm, and that both are, by their very nature, surfaces that constitute the subject in mutual reference. Thus, Anzieu asks: "What if thought were as much a matter of the skin as of the brain? And what if the Ego, now defined as the Skin-ego, had the structure of a wrapping?"²⁸ In relation to the ego-experience, the skin has a special mediating position, because as a tactile sensory organ, it organizes the data of the external world and transports them, in the form of pain and temperature sensations to the internal world, where they are processed psychologically, for example in the form of emotional mechanisms of

27 See Didier Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, trans. Naomi Segal (London: Routledge, 2016).

28 Ibid., 10.

approval or defense. As a channel of information, skin thus represents an important pass-through for both the physical and the psychic constitution of the subject. In addition, the skin has the significant function of a container, since, as a medium of visual representation, it offers a surface structure into which the forms of identificatory subjectivity can be inscribed: "The Skin-ego is the original parchment that acts as a palimpsest, preserving the crossed-out, scratched-through, over-written drafts of an 'original' pre-verbal writing made of traces on the skin."²⁹

This concept of skin as an inscription surface has been repeatedly addressed within cultural theory. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf, for example, assume a "scar script" that is spread along the body's surface as a legible experience of the body.³⁰ Barbara Duden's project of a cultural history of the body also emphasizes historical moments of encoding that participate in the construction of each specific constitution of a bodily shell.³¹ Skin, however, not only serves to manifest inner impulses to the outer world; it is simultaneously the medium of tactile body contact, where the perception of Self and Other come together in the mode of touch. The effect is a multifaceted one: on the one hand, skin forms a seal against one's environment that surrounds the self as a protective or constricting shell, whereas, on the other hand, it is permeable in the sense that it is basically capable of transporting sensations. Touch represents an additional ambivalent process of duplication, since it stands for the reciprocity of palpation and sensing, which come together in mutual physical contact. Elizabeth Grosz characterizes this physical process as "double sensation" and explains: "The information provided by the surface of the skin is both endogenous and exogenous, active and passive, receptive and expressive, the only sense able to provide the 'double sensation.' Double sensations are those in which the subject utilizes one part of the body to touch another, thus exhibiting the interchangeability of active and passive sensations, of those positions of subject and object."³²

29 Ibid., 114.

30 Cf. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf, "Lektüre einer Narbenschift. Der menschliche Körper als Gegenstand und Gedächtnis von historischer Gewalt," in *Transfiguration des Körpers. Spuren der Gewalt in der Geschichte*, ed. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf, 1–7 (Berlin: Reimer, 1989).

31 Cf. Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: A Doctor's Patients in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1991).

32 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 35–36.

In contrast to the visual impression of skin, which arises when observed from a distance, the tactile impression of skin is that of an organ of sensation, being exposed to a confrontation that it cannot escape. In one sense, tactile contact forms the intersection between the self and Other and thus stands for a type of ambivalence that Dieter Mersch characterizes as “self-doubling.”³³ What is crucial in this context, according to Mersch, is the fact that the tactile functions as a sense without distance, as an overcoming of difference which is proliferated as an inevitable transgression of boundaries:

Consequently, the tactile is primarily a sense of indifference; it does not tolerate withdrawal. Its format is diffusion, the dissolution of boundaries. Interior and exterior, like subject and object or Ego and Other, flow relentlessly into one another: I touch a surface just as much as it touches me. By contrast, the gaze ‘distances’ even when fascinated; what we feel moves instead to the body, we touch it with our own physicality. The whole structure of tactility follows this logic, which can also be described as a structure of self-doubling, in the sense that, in touching something, we are simultaneously toucher and touched. We not only reach for a thing, an object, a body, we are also approached [*angegangen*] by what we touch—with all of the connotations of ‘approach’ [*Angang*], of affect.³⁴

Skin thus becomes, as it were, a medium of conjunction that questions difference itself and opens up its own terrain of non-delimitation.

The relationship between vision and tactility has been addressed frequently in media theory. Hartmut Böhme, for example, points out the fact that vision can in no way be declared as a sense exclusively defined by distance but that seeing is an act closely tied to touch and contact. In his plea for epistemologically combining both of these modes of perception, Böhme asks: “Could it be that vision is a type of derivative touching? Do we not immediately know what it means to contemplate something [*ins Auge fassen*, literally “grasp into the eye”], to lose sight of something—just as one loses something touched by the skin in one’s hand so that one no longer has

33 Dieter Mersch, “Taktilität und Entgrenzung,” in *Haut (Konkursbuch 41)*, ed. Christine Hanke and Regina Nössler (Tübingen: Konkursbuch-Verlag Gehrke, 2003), 236.

34 *Ibid.*, 235. Note on translation: The transitive verb *angehen* in German can also have a negative connotation, such as “attack” or “tackle.”

contact with it.”³⁵ While the long-defended privileging of the visual sense of distance in the history of theory implied a “repression of the lower senses,”³⁶ and while this orientation toward vision “has long hindered the elaboration of a theory of perception that does justice to phenomena,”³⁷ Böhme sees the possibility of a new theoretical approach in the electronic age. Thus, “only today, when the deluge of images in the media inundates not only the individual but the entire globe, do advanced media theorists consider whether visual media are not, in fact, media of touch. One can already notice the fact that touching and feeling will be the next point of attack in the electronic colonization of the senses.”³⁸ Even though Böhme does not name any of these “advanced media theorists,” it is possible to draw conclusions about the most concise approaches of a medium-specific type of tactility. For example, Marshall McLuhan’s concept of technology as an extension of organs, as an extension of human senses and nerves through media, has been highly influential. Within this conception, McLuhan elaborates his understanding of multisensory perception, a type of comprehensive perception that involves all of the senses. The tactile, accordingly, cannot be reduced to a single organ but is a result of the combination and mutual intertwining of all the senses:

Our very word ‘grasp’ or ‘apprehension’ points to the process of getting at one thing through another, of handling and sensing many facets at a time through more than one sense at a time. It begins to be evident that ‘touch’ is not skin but the interplay of the senses, and the ‘keep in touch’ and ‘getting in touch’ is a matter of fruitful meeting of senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell.³⁹

Sensory sensations, according to McLuhan, are characterized by their transferability, by a form of vicissitude from which the perception of the world emerges. Only through this interplay of various forms and facets of sensory impressions can “getting in touch” at all be made possible.

35 Hartmut Böhme, “Der Tastsinn im Gefüge der Sinne. Anthropologische und historische Ansichten vorsprachlicher Aisthesis,” in *Tasten (Schriftenreihe Forum 7)*, ed. Uta Brandes and Claudia Neumann (Göttingen: Steidl, 1996), 201.

36 Ibid., 206.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 60.

Following Marshall McLuhan's theses about the extensions of the human sensory system, Derrick de Kerckhove has developed his concept of the "Skin of Culture" of the electronic age⁴⁰ Kerckhove's understanding of a medially organized skin is informed by McLuhan's statement: "After centuries of being fully clad and of being contained in uniform visual space, the electric age ushers us into a world in which we live and breathe and listen with the entire epidermis."⁴¹ The organic context of functions stated by McLuhan is summarized by Kerckhove in a model that focuses on the surface of the medium, on design as the resonance of technological innovation. Kerckhove explains: "Design often echoes the specific character of technology and corresponds to its basic pulse. Being the visible, audible or textual outer shape of cultural artefacts, design emerges as what can be called the 'skin of culture.'"⁴² Kerckhove's advocacy for an understanding of perceptive experience based on tactility presents a further link to McLuhan's ideas. Similar to McLuhan, Kerckhove assumes that the connection of sensory perception with technical media is inextricable and that the complexity of these connections cannot be made comprehensible by reducing it to only one sense. Accordingly, the conception of a visually organized culture is to be replaced by that of a tactile connection characterized by worldwide systems of networks: "The physical sensation of being somewhere specific is a tactile experience, not a visual one. It is environmental, not frontal. It is comprehensive, not exclusive. My point-of-being, instead of distancing me from reality like a point-of-view, becomes my point of entry into sharing the world."⁴³ Kerckhove stresses the fact that a culture based on visuality suppresses the fullness of sensory perception. He sees the possibility of a stimulation of the tactile faculty, however, in the development of new computer technologies. Thus, Kerckhove speaks of a "new tangibility," of a "global proprioception"⁴⁴ that could be ushered in by computer-based network creation and states: "Every system of interaction between body and machine is a modification of the ability to be able to touch and to be touched.

40 Derrick de Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality* (London: Kogan Page, 1997).

41 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 122.

42 Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture*, 154.

43 Ibid., 178.

44 Derrick de Kerckhove, "Proprioception und Autonomation," in *Tasten (Schriftenreihe Forum 7)*, ed. Uta Brandes and Claudia Neumann (Göttingen: Steidl, 1996), 334.

With these machines, we again find our way back to the elementary tangibility of our bodies.”⁴⁵ Kerckhove sees the temporary peak of the medium-tactile in satellite technology, which continues the extension of man in the form of a new global shell: “The computer-based body transcends the traditional limitations embedded organically in the skin. Our new skin is the Earth’s atmosphere sensitized by its satellites.”⁴⁶ A continuation of the idea of a computer-based organic expansion can be found in Paul Virilio, who conceives of the possibilities of interactivity between man and machine as a new perspective on the tactile. In the context of cybersex, Virilio speaks of a “touching at a distance, which in our day will ultimately complement the classical perspectives inherent to the sense of sight and hearing.”⁴⁷ The extension of man to an electronic shell, according to Virilio, carries with it the promise of potential invulnerability and would modulate the sensory-perceptive surface of perception into a matrix that would enable the seamless connection of man to the network of telecommunication.

It almost seems as if the age of globalization has erased all distances and enabled us to be in touch with the world. Nevertheless, it would be insufficient to consider the level of media encounters as a possibility of a liberation from all boundaries. While the video for “Black or White” still seems to be looking to substitute separation and distance with nearness and fusion, the video for “Africa Shox” is hinting at something quite different. Here, the desire to enter into contact fails, because it itself is full of contradictions: the result is not a comprehensive understanding but a violent collision. Lorenz Engell offers the following for consideration: “A description of media under the guiding principle of groping, touch, and sensual proximity will [...] predominantly bring to light instabilities and processes of change, including catastrophic ones.”⁴⁸ And are these instabilities not also already inherent in the notion of skin as a surface between the self and the world, reminding us that the relationship between interior and exterior does not follow any rigid demarcation but can

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 333.

47 Paul Virilio, “Cybersex. Von der abweichenden zur ausweichenden Sexualität,” *Lettre International* 32 (1996): 75.

48 Lorenz Engell, “Sinn und Sinnlichkeit (Turm und Taste). Über Fern- und Nahmedien,” *Ausfahrt nach Babylon. Essays und Vorträge zur Kritik der Medienkultur*, ed. Lorenz Engell (Weimar: Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 2000), 324.

only be thought of as a porous zone of transition and uncertainty? As a plane at whose borders all encounters experience their respective (im)possibilities?

Let us briefly return to the starting point of our considerations. Frantz Fanon's concept of the "racial epidermal schema" provided central insights into the relationship between skin and contact. It is not surprising that these insights are tied to the observation of non-white skin, for, according to Claudia Benthien, the "problematic of the modern-era subject being 'in' a specific skin, and of problematizing this, is nowhere found so radicalized as in relation to 'racial' skin."⁴⁹ As examples of the skin's ability to be staged and identified as form and surface, two music videos were presented: "Black or White" and "Africa Shox." The focus on these two videos was to observe a relation of visibility and tactility made recognizable by and through the skin—and to ask whether and how this relation can be brought together with different modes of media perception. It was presupposed that sensory perception is not something natural or ahistorical but adapts itself to new media, forming itself according to their requirements. Along with this, we assumed that the ocular-centric paradigm, thinking in visual terms, may have possibly reached an end point. This was investigated along a consideration of the medium of television, which seems to be putting the concept of the tactile back on the map—at least it could occasion a redefinition that revalues and reassesses touch as a media mode of proximity. This approach is not limited to television but could also take into account other technological developments—as in McLuhan's and Kerckhove's reflections on multisensory technologies and worldwide networks. The tactile seems to have found new loci in the medium of touch and switch, so much so that we can then question "what stakes haptics have in the visual primacy of evidence."⁵⁰ It is possible that the encounter zone of visibility and tactility could become a medial form of contact in its own right—and possibly the aesthetics of physical contact in music videos could be pointing us to this.

49 Benthien, *Im Leibe wohnen*, 215. Note on translation: I have translated "being 'in'" from the word Benthien uses here, *stecken*, a highly concrete term for something to be located in something or somewhere else.

50 Bergermann, "Tastaturen des Wissens", 319.

