

Wanda Strauven

Touchscreen Archaeology. Tracing Histories of Hands-On Media Practices

Lüneburg: meson press, 2021, pp. 260

Limina Award 2021

DOI <https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/20557>



The protagonist of the latest book by Wanda Strauven is an early cinema caricature: the clumsy countryman who, attending a film screening for the first time, jumps onto the stage and touches the screen. While Strauven is not the first to devote attention to this stereotypical character and to the films this figure inspired, most notably, *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edwin Porter, 1902), she is the first to identify in this trope one of those moments of rupture and discontinuity in the history of a medium that our tactile and interactive present can shed light upon.

According to the most notable historiography (Tom Gunning, Thomas Elsaesser), early rube films served as instructions for the use of a medium that had just established itself; faced with the ridiculing of a behaviour not to be imitated, the spectator learned the etiquette of the movie theatre. His or her education was part of that process of the institutionalization of cinema that aimed to distance the medium from its association with the circus and fair, and to establish it in the spaces of theatre, that is, of art. And, as in the realms of art, especially in museums, even in the movie theatre one had to learn not to touch the images: the screen was meant to produce a purely optical experience.

In Strauven's work, the rube is transformed

into a hero or a visionary, the standard-bearer of a relationship with moving images that belongs to the earliest days of a medium and that will persist into its future. This counter-history, which becomes a genealogy of our present condition as spectators touching screens in order to interact with images, is both fascinating and, most importantly, capable of explaining a fundamental aspect of postcinematic culture. Strauven presents her own archaeological method as a form of hacking into history, a process that involves loosening its joints, a "method" that lies between Wolfgang Ernst's archivist option, Erkki Huhtamo's cyclical histories and Thomas Elsaesser's meta-historiographic framework. Starting from the realm of filmology, where symptoms are revealed, Strauven's reflection becomes in part theoretical (what is the difference between tactile and haptic experiences?), in part historical (the role of manual operativity in precinematic devices) and finally mediological, focusing on a pedagogy of interfaces and their role in childhood (is manual interaction with screens like a form of playful learning?).

Due to this triple focus, *Touchscreen Archaeology* does not develop an archaeology of the sense of touch in its encounter with cinema, or the cinematic, or even of specific gestures and their reformulation in relation to evolving

screens, but rather works in a highly original as well as rigorous way on an archaeology of the praxis of touching images, or their supports; on an archaeology of a contact-based intimacy between the human and the iconic. One of the reasons why cinema – understood as a screen-theatre-spectator complex – is today experienced by the younger generations as an ancient medium, the best expression of the visual culture of a century now gone by, is its character as an apparatus that creates distance between the images and the spectator, confirming the predominance of the eye over the other senses. Today, the intimacy between our hand and images is total, as Strauven demonstrates by listing a series of operations that our fingers perform on digital screens to point, pinch, scroll, swipe or just move the images; to be a digital native means above all to think of images as virtual objects with which to operate, to browse them through manual techniques – such as the “cosmic zoom” of contemporary cinema, which allows radical changes of scale without blurring.

In the final chapter, Strauven proposes calling the iconicity of today's visual culture “image+”: the term is picked up from the language of image processing software and alludes to an iconic form that works beyond its visual appeal, inducing hands-on operations. Contemporary images are thus the support and starting point of an operation that aims at an active construction of the visible, but also of an experience that hinges on other senses, first and foremost touch. This without touch being the ultimate objective; the sensation the skin feels when touching the surface of a screen (which is always identically smooth and neutral) does not imply production of meaning. Rather, as the author states, *con-tact* is the aim, understood as the result of multiple agency, only partly assumed by the human subject, partly by the affordances of the images, concretely capable of triggering actions. Strauven doesn't go so far as to consider immersive technologies, but in the environments of the extended worlds the *plus* quality of the images is clearly evident,

and *Touchscreen Archaeology* provides key insights for analysing this.

Rather, this volume is focused on cinema, which might seem poorly suited to hosting the image+. On the contrary, Strauven's archaeological research demonstrates that what the medium became in the 20th century was not inscribed in its DNA and did not correspond to the codes of its “development”. Cinema history started under the sign of the tactile (from flipbooks to phenakistoscope, from zoetrope to praxinoscope), took a long detour, and finally returned, with the digital, to the path it had taken more than a century ago. Consequently, postcinema can, or perhaps must, turn into a sensorial bricolage experience, employing all the playful-philosophical potential already typical of optical toys, to which Strauven dedicates important pages.

Finally, one of the most intriguing results of Strauven's research is the “subversive” potential of the contemporary tactile mediascape, which constitutes the re-emergence of an idea and praxis of the screen linked to historically subordinate figures, first and foremost women. Indeed, among the prefigurations of the touchscreen are the fire screen and the folding fan, which was used as a form of visual media by 19th-century gentlewomen but required some manual dexterity, being an illustrated object to be leafed through, a handbag-sized tactile surface (Giuliana Bruno calls it “the ladies' own private cinema”). But there are also non-auratic art forms, such as the cabinet of curiosities (*Wunderschrank*) an (almost) portable closet-screen, that links wonder to touch and to the pleasure of handling the extravagant object; and, finally, there is the Futurist “Tactilism” with Marinetti's Tactile Tables, an early transformation of the screen from surface to interface, which Strauven suggests should also be recovered for pedagogical purposes.

The simpletons, the boorish, the foolish (like Welles' Don Quixote), and even children, have always sensed with their own bodies that the

surfaces on which images are inscribed are available to be acted upon and offer themselves to the hands before the eyes. Reading this volume today, after years of pandemic and the demonisation of touch as a synonym of contagion, infection, transmission, helps to rehabilitate all its creative power and to hand it over to the new generations, fostering their spontaneous rethinking of a medium that remains at the foundation of contemporary visual culture.

Barbara Grespi
[University of Milan]