
Bonus Tracks: The Making of Touching the Film Object and Skipping ROPE (Through Hitchcock's Joins)

By Catherine Grant

Skiping ROPE (Through Hitchcock's Joins)

AUDIO COMMENTARY ON/OFF

[Skiping ROPE](#) from [Catherine Grant](#) on [Vimeo](#).

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Touching the Film Object

AUDIO COMMENTARY ON/OFF

[TOUCHING THE FILM OBJECT?](#) from [Catherine Grant](#) on [Vimeo](#).

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Bonus Tracks: Transcriptions of Commentary

Transcript 1 (Expanded Version)

[Skipping ROPE \(Through Hitchcock's Joins\)](#) is a videographic assemblage, made by Catherine Grant, of all the edits in Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 *Rope*, together with adjacent dialogue.

[Serious minded criticism of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope*] may be considered almost definitively shaped by a ritual of recounting and assessing the director's desire to do the film, as he put it, 'in a single shot,' or at any rate, as nearly without the benefit of montage as the state-of-the-art allowed in 1948, when a camera held only ten minutes worth of film. [Yet this technician bias] has hardly managed to generate a single accurate account of the technique in question. [...] [For *Rope*'s] irregularities and inconsistencies [its film critics] substitute a programmatic perfection that better supports the dream of a continuous film [...] than Hitchcock's actual shooting practice. (D.A. Miller 119)]

Hello there. Welcome to the audio commentary for the videographical assemblage [Skipping Rope \(Through Hitchcock's Joins\)](#).

Ever since I began to experiment with audiovisual film studies exactly three years ago, I wanted to make the video you are watching right now. In fact, if I could only have conceived of scholarly work in anything other than a written format, I would have dreamt of making it a lot longer ago, probably back in 1991 when I first read D.A. Miller's essay on Hitchcock's film *Rope* from which you can read excerpts in this preface [and above].

In his essay Miller set out the difficulties with the procedure of 'telling' rather than 'showing' in film analysis, indeed what Adrian Martin calls, in [his contribution](#) to this inaugural issue of *Frames*, 'the necessary labour of description', once the 'ekphrastic' domain of words alone' [referring to Clayton and Klevan 2011, *passim*].

Miller had indicated that not only had numerous film critics misrecognised or misdescribed what they had seen of the editing in Hitchcock's film, perhaps befuddled by the director's own statement of his aim of doing the film 'in a single shot', but that these critics remained, possibly phobically indifferent to the film's 'narrative homosexuality' [Miller 148]. Of his argument that editing becomes an alibi and a wilful distraction for these critics, he writes

I have of course been implying that if technique is considered a

more engrossing question than the critical results even begin to warrant, and homosexuality a less interesting one [than] can plausibly be the case, the reason is that both questions have been unconsciously but definitively crossed with one another, so that technique acquires all the transgressive fascination of homosexuality, while homosexuality is consigned to the status of a dry technical detail. [Ibid.]

My video study of Hitchcock's joins in *Rope* may be considered almost definitively, and certainly *perversely*, shaped by its own technician dream: that of generating an accurate account in motion pictures of the minimalistic editing technique and related shooting practices of the 1948 film. This assemblage, created through postproduction rituals of excision and transition, entertains a phenomenological as well as critical possibility. It offers viewers the ability to experience linear moving image and sound juxtapositions in real, or *near real*, time. We can *feel*, as well as know about, the comparisons this video makes.

In other words, unlike written texts, this study doesn't have to remove itself from film-specific forms of meaning production to have its knowledge effects on us. And yet, like Miller's earlier critics, in assembling this audiovisual experience, I am once again crossing editing techniques with homosexuality, the latter ever more beguilingly and yet intensively exposed when its envisioning is distilled down to the moments around the cutting in Hitchcock's remarkable film.

Transcript 2 (Expanded Version)

[Touching the Film Object?](#), a video collage by Catherine Grant, offers a brief audiovisual exploration of issues of sensuous proximity, contiguity or contact in experiencing or studying films - what theorist Laura U. Marks called 'hapticity'. The music in the video is excerpted from [Robert Lippok and Beatrice Martini's 2009 collaboration 'Branches'](#) (available at the [Free Music Archive](#) under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License](#)).

Haptic criticism keeps its surface rich and textured, so it can interact with things in unexpected ways. It has to be humble, willing to alter itself according to what it is in contact with. It has to give up ideas when they stop touching the other's surface. [[Laura U. Marks, 'Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes' Framework" the Finnish Art Review, No. 2, 2004, pp. 79-82, 80](#)]

Welcome to the audio commentary for the video collage [Touching the Film](#)

Object.

As a longtime devotee of observing from a scholarly distance, I had never been grabbed before — or, indeed, ‘clasped’ or ‘fastened’ (the original meanings of the Ancient Greek verb [haptain](#)) — by Laura Marks’ notion of ‘haptic visuality’. But after I had made some [video essays about films](#), the desire to explore hapticity and its workings took hold. This is how this collage and this commentary came into being.

While I still believe that Marks’ concept could benefit from a more thorough thinking through in relation to *audiovisuality*, hapticity — a grasp of what *can* be sensed of an object in close contact with it — seems to me now to be very helpful in conceiving what can take place in the process of creating videographic film studies. It can also help us more fully to understand videographic studies as objects to be experienced themselves.

In the old days, the only people who really got to *touch* films were those who worked on them, particularly film editors. As Annette Michelson (1990) and others have argued, the democratization of the ‘heady delights’ of editing (Michelson, 1990: 22) was brought about by the introduction of video technology in the 1970s and 80s. Now, with the relatively wide availability of digital technology, we can even more easily share ‘the euphoria one feels at the editing table [...] a sharpening cognitive focus and [...] a ludic sovereignty, grounded in that deep gratification of a fantasy of infantile omnipotence ’ [Michelson, 1990: 23].

But, are there other ways in which ‘touching film’ is just a fantasy? In videographic film studies, do videographers actually touch or handle the real *matter* of the film? Or are we only ever able to *touch upon the film experience*? Do video essays only make objects of, or objectify, our film experiences, our insuperable memories of them, our own cinematic projections?

These questions may not flag up significantly new limitations. Film critical video essays do seem to work, it seems to me, in the same ‘intersubjective’ zone as that of written film criticism. [As Andrew Klevan and Alex Clayton argue of this zone, ‘we are immersed in the film as the critic sees it, hence brought to share a deeply involved perspective’ (2011: 9)].

Yet, in videographical criticism, is there not a different intersubjective relation, a more [transitional](#) one, to the physicality or materiality of the objective elements of films that the video essays reproduce? Like written essays, video essays may well “‘stir our recall”’ (Klevan and Clayton, 2011: 9) of a film moment or sequence, but they usually do this by

confronting us with a replay of the actual sequence, too. How might this difference count?

If nothing else, this confrontation with, or, to put it more gently, this inevitable re-immersion in the film experience, ought to make videographic critics pursue *humility* in their analytical observations with an even greater focus, make them especially 'willing to alter [their analyses] according to what [they come into] contact with [...] give up ideas when they stop touching the other's surface' ([Marks, 2004: 80](#)).

A further, built-in, random element in non-linear digital video editing — the fact that this process frequently confronts the editor with graphic matter from the film [e.g. thumbnails] that he or she may not specifically have chosen to dwell on — may also encourage a particularly humble, usefully (at times) *non-instrumental* form of looking that Swalwell ([2002](#)) detects in Marks' notion of hapticity.

[As Marks writes, 'Whether criticism is haptic, in touch with its object, is a matter of the point at which the words lift off' ([2004: 80](#)). Haptic criticism must be what happens, then, when the words *don't* lift off the surface of the film object, if they (or any of the other film-analytical elements conveyed through montage or other non-linear editing techniques and tools) *remain on* the surface of the film object, as they often do in videographic film studies. In addition to this, video essays on films may often be an especially '[superficial](#)' form of criticism, frequently using slow motion or zoom-in effects to allow those experiencing them to close in on the grain or detail of the film image.

With so many words, or other filmanalytical strategies, simultaneously available to be sensed on the surface of the image and, in terms of sound strategies (such as voiceovers or other added elements), seeming to emanate from it, videographical film studies may be curiously haptic objects, then. It is useful to remember that the art historical concept of haptic visuality emerged from the scholarly and artistic traditions of [formalism](#), which made procedures such as [defamiliarization](#) central to their practice. Defamiliarization — the uncanny distancing effect of an altered perspective on (such as a hyper-proximity to) an otherwise familiar object — may be one of the greatest benefits of the particular hapticity of videographical film criticism.]

Finally, does [TOUCHING THE FILM OBJECT?](#) practice what it preaches? Or, does it only practice one of the things it preaches? It isn't, primarily, a piece of haptic film criticism produced in close contact with the film. Instead, it's a film-theory object which 'grabs' from it, transforms what it grabs, and lifts off, or not, from there.

Persona doesn't exactly disappear, though, either from the literal or metaphorical frames of the collage. Like many of Ingmar Bergman's works, this 1966 film treats (and inhabits) the perilous zone of borderlines between one person and another, its characters act out extreme forms of [projective identification](#) and [introjection](#). Indeed, *Persona* explores some of the real psychological dangers of 'hapticity', of not being able to separate, or to see others detachedly - 'optically'. Some of those perils still find themselves evoked in the elements I selected for inclusion.

[But, by selecting one sequence from others, by slowing it, and by replacing the film's soundtrack, the video collage does mitigate those dangers. It suspends them in order to close in on a visual track which simultaneously presents a 'haptic image' (the blurry, interchanging faces - made more haptic, possibly, by the slowed motion and zoom in) and an 'optical', or more clearly defined one (the [Rückenfigur](#)-esque image of the boy, who is himself pictured *having* a haptic experience). The combination of these images may well hint at Laura Marks' (and my) ideal critical frame. Marks writes,

'I take advantage of this moment to beseech those who are newly encountering haptic thinking to keep alive the dialectic with the optical! [...]The goal of haptic and sensuous criticism is to enhance our human capacities, rather than entirely replacing critical distance with haptic intimacy. I suggest we embrace and cultivate all our perceptual and cognitive and feeling capacities, keeping in mind the meanings that motivate them' ([Marks, 2004](#): 82).]

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