



## TENSION, TIME AND TENDERNESS Indexical Traces of Touch in Textiles

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The emergence of the new mass cultures of digital and virtual representation have enabled new enquiry into the significance of the role of the body in culture, and more particularly the significance of the hand in making culture. This essay suggests that semiotics is helpful to such enquiry, explaining why the trace of the hand within representation is capable of signifying memories of profoundly affective states. The semiotics of 'the textile' is needed in order to show how the specifically material meaning in textiles is founded on embodied knowledge and affect, and that these exist as indexical traces of the touch, handling and holding that are the presence of an absence of the body. This level of meaning is found in all concepts containing the linguistic root 'tain', or 'ten' (Latin, *tenere*, to hold), such as tension, tend, tendency, tenderness, and attain, maintain, pertain, entertain, and these refer meaning to the pre-symbolic material substrate of bodily emotional experience. The ideational content of this indexicality is discussed here in relation to the 'haptic', and to psychoanalytic theories of 'holding' and 'containment', and it is argued that textiles, through this indexical relationship to unconscious memory, convey meanings of complex pre-symbolic relationality. Semiotics facilitates the emergence of textiles as cultural 'object', which will enable a more sophisticated knowledge of its specificity as a cultural practice to emerge.

Textiles has developed a discourse in which consideration is given to the relationship between materiality and meaning, comparing the tension between matter and meaning in similar design practices in order to find the processes common to all practices that work with materials and to find the practice specific to textiles.<sup>1</sup> Similar discourses have already developed in art, literature, cinema, fashion, architecture, music and theatre, as these are cultural practices in which it is easier to differentiate 'form' from ideational 'content',





whereas in textiles form and content are either very close, or indistinguishable. The meanings of textiles have referred to their function, use, means of manufacture or technological history, so that whilst the semiotics of art, literature, cinema, fashion, architecture, music and theatre are now well established, the semiotics of textiles has yet to find articulation, both internally, with the other components of textile discourse, and in its relation to the semiotics of other systems of signification. Here the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce are both developed in relation to the specificity of materiality and meaning in textiles.

One reason for the relative absence of textiles from the semiotic field is the paradoxical status of cloth as simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible. It takes a specific kind of consciousness to enable textiles to achieve the status of a cultural object. Elsewhere, I have suggested that cloth and its component element, thread, have a cultural position that has endowed them with both an excessive materiality and an almost irrational immateriality.<sup>2</sup> Textiles have a privileged relationship to the senses and society, a relationship that is inscribed within the ritual, magical, superstitious and religious uses that articulate the meaning of cloth in culture.

A relationship of intimate proximity is created by the fact that bodies are universally adorned in fibre, and that the individual body is usually covered in cloth, which is for most of the time in contact with most of the surface of the skin, the body's largest and most sensitive organ. Related to this is the way in which human culture extends the pre-natal amniotic 'containment' of the body through the parental care that 'holds' the emerging self until culture itself takes on the role of providing the environment that facilitates subjectivity. This evolutionary strategy for survival results in the tendency of humans to 'ignore' their immediate environment, perceiving it as ambience rather than system. Much of the human ambient environment is textile, from domestic interiors to medical materials. These cultural facts overdetermine the relationship that textiles have to the haptic sense, and give rise to the curious phenomenon of cloth being experienced as simultaneously physically ubiquitous and conceptually absent. There are analogies in this logic of ubiquity causing a kind of 'invisibility', however. To explore the ways in which textiles have both matter and meaning it is useful to investigate a method that will enable us to determine the extent to which textiles can be considered as a 'language-like' structure, given that language is the predominant articulation of culture. It is through language that the differences between nature and culture are identified, and it is, according to structural anthropology, the founding state of culture itself. So we can start by considering textiles within the conventional 'science of meaning': semiotics. Should we take Saussure's semiology, or Peirce's semiotics, as our method? Let's try both, and observe the differences between these methods in order to see which yields more relevant meaning.

Saussure suggests that signifying systems depend on patterns of the com-





bination of signs, as well as the internal structure of those signs. The sign is a relationship between the signifier, which is the material substrate, and the signified, which is the ideational content. When material and ideational are connected, there is meaning. When signifier and signified are articulated, there is a sign. Few signs have autonomous meaning, and most depend on their relation to other signs within two axes of difference, the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic—or, in other words, the axis of selection and the axis of combination. This collection of differences between things, like the intervals in the resonances that make up musical notes, is the pattern that Saussure identified as the structure of meaning.

One of the most interesting uses of Saussure's work to analyse the meaning of material was made by Roland Barthes in his essay on plastic, published in his *Mythologies*.<sup>3</sup> In the book's introductory essay, 'Myth today',<sup>4</sup> Barthes argues that Saussure's method of analysing language-like systems within a general theory has relevance for a range of contemporary popular cultures such as television, advertising, cinema, toys, garments, vehicle design, architecture, photography and so on, showing how the structure of meaning in representation contains within it the structure of ideology, as the 'first order'; signification of denoting carries a 'second order' signification of connoting. Barthes's essay on plastic materials explores the introduction of these, the new materials, into daily life in France, and he finds a mythology of the new scientifically derived substances located in a history that dislocates plastic from its industrial manufacture, and where the connotations, or 'second order' signification of the feel, look and names of plastics are discussed as generating meanings of both modernity and timelessness. Although a literary scholar by training, Barthes's passion for the mythologies of contemporary culture enabled him to make some sense of design practices. Later, Barthes's analysis of dress in *The Fashion System* explored the semiology of sartorial style.<sup>5</sup> But the culture and practice of textiles remains uncharted territory for semiology.

Fifty years after Saussure's lectures were collected and published they generated a conceptual revolution in European thought, a movement of 'structuralism' that reached every area of science, theory and philosophy. For example, uses of Saussure's work include Claude Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology of myth, Jacques Lacan's concept of the psyche as signifying system, and a whole movement within literary theory, from semantics (Emile Benveniste) and poetics (Roman Jakobson) to narratology (Vladimir Propp) and genre studies (Todorov on fantasy). Emerging in Western Europe after the expulsion of Russian Formalists during the Stalinist reaction against the movement, the structuralism inherent in European theories of culture soon spread throughout the Anglophone world. Although semiology offered no specific method for investigating the structure of the image, cinema was one of the first cultural forms to attract a serious, sustained semiological approach, because of its status as part of a twentieth-century popular culture of urban





modernity, and its proximity to the narrative structures of myth.<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the limitations of studying design as a signifying system, rather than as a process or practice, the structuralist method of analysis offers an important perspective that augments the largely descriptive, empirical, historical approaches that have constituted the theory of textiles to date. Textiles have been studied extensively, from the anthropological perspective of material culture, from the social historical perspective of both the history of technology and the history of labour, and from the perspective of design history as aspects of fashion or costume history, or furnishings of interiors. There is, however, a need for sustained inquiry into the meaning of textiles as ambient environment and signifying object, and as a cultural language, and it is to this inquiry that semiology can contribute.

How, in Saussurean terms, might we understand the 'language of textiles'? It may be useful to use Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* to differentiate between textile as a generic noun, as in 'textile thinking', and the specific uses of textiles in the plural which, like the infinite variety of language use in *paroles*, are always multiple. The meaning of fabrics will always include reference to the means and methods of their manufacture, because textiles display the evidence of their tactility in the structure or surface of the material. This transparent evidence of the signs of the method of their making, ranging from the earliest hand-made felts and non-woven cloth to elaborate, computer-aided Jacquard weaves, digitally printed surfaces, and polymeric electro-conductive fibres integrated within cloth, has resulted in the discourse of textiles being primarily technical or historical, and in both cases essentially descriptive rather than analytical.

### Tension

Flat-weave fabrics include a range of different ratio arrangements between warp and weft yarns, and a range of different looms and technologies of production. The difference between various cloths with pile, from velvet, brocade and corduroy to flocking, generates meanings that relate to texture and touch. The flat-weave satins produce meanings that relate to smooth surfaces, sheen and sight. The meaning of each fabric depends on its relative place within a system of paradigmatic choices, say between flat-weave denim or velvet, and choices within a system of combination, such as denim in combination with PVC, or silk, lace, fur or knit, for instance. Many of these aspects of particular fabrics have been discussed by Barthes in *The Fashion System*, and although fashion clothing is the largest single manifestation of fabric in the world today, the semiology of textiles needs to extend beyond garments into other uses of cloth, and into other levels of meaning and abstraction.

What about the meaning of 'stitch' for example? The stitch, as sign, would depend on the relationship between its functional quality and the ideas that it connotes. This meaning will depend on the type of stitch used, considered





as one of an innumerable series of different kinds of stitch. And the meaning will also depend on the relationship that the stitch has to other elements in the sequence of combined features. For example, a garment—say a jacket—may have a number of different types of stitching. Buttons are stitched; buttonholes edged, visibly, by machine; seams, lining and hems are stitched invisibly, by machine; and there may be a hand-sewn saddle stitch running along the outer edge of the lapels and collar.<sup>7</sup> Each type of stitch derives its meaning in part from its function, such as securing the button to the fabric, sealing the edges of the buttonhole neatly, making a strong but invisible seam or hem, or providing a neat line of hand-stitching. In addition to its functionality, however, the stitch derives its meaning from its selection within a range of types, such as the difference between the ways in which buttons are attached (a toggle of wood secured with cotton cord twist; a horn toggle secured with leather thong; a mother-of-pearl two-hole button secured with parallel stitch; a moulded plastic four-hole button secured with contrasting cross-stitch; or a leather weave knot button with rivet fastener signifying the absence of stitch and the presence of machine-tooled fastener). The decorative use of stitch will comprise a selection from a range of types of embroidery stitch, such as running stitch, petit point, satin stitch, chain stitch, machine or hand stitch, so that the choice of cross stitch rather than saddle stitch, or blanket stitch across the edges of lapels, will produce different meanings, and again will accrue meaning from its combination with different fabrics, colours, tailoring, draping and silhouette—that is, elements chosen from the ‘axis of combination’. The stitching of the garment entails a number of choices taken from the ‘axis of selection’, such as hemming or fused interface lining, single seam or flat ‘French’ seam, heat-welded seam, or knitted seam. Likewise, the meaning of the stitching will also depend on the relationship it has to the other components of joining, securing and surface decoration that exist on the garment. Buttons secured with rivets or studs, the stitching of a motif or logo, contrast stitching, or self-coloured, invisible stitching—these all form patterns of significant differences within the two axes of selection and combination, sometimes conceived diagrammatically as vertical and horizontal axes, that Saussure identifies as the structuring axes of signification. But how can this systematic ordering of differences tell us anything meaningful about ‘the language of stitch’?

An identifying characteristic of a language is the fact that its patterns of combination and selection have an ‘unmotivated’ or ‘arbitrary’ relationship between their form and meaning, analogous to the arbitrary relationship between the sounds of words and their meaning. Can this be said of the elements of textiles—for example, the stitch as a means of securing two or more surfaces? This could manifest itself as the securing of patterns of pleats in curtains, in an interior design context, or the suture in surgery, or the stapler in the office, or a chain link fence around a sports field or car park, or a means





of securing sails to a mast, walls to a roof structure, or sections of a vehicle shell structure. The stitch then has meaning as one selection from a range of possible ways of joining edges, materially, imaginatively or symbolically. This characteristic of the stitch as paradigmatic of a set of devices for 'linking' disparate elements gives it the status of a 'verb' within a syntax of materials. The advantages of conceiving textiles as a 'language-like' structure are many, but the first is that the textile is no longer conceived as inert matter but as an active material system in which matter is inextricably imbued with meaning.

Is the stitch a verb, or a form of punctuation? Does sewing have the function of an ampersand in grammar, simply connecting terms without differentiating between the quality or type of connection? Or is sewing more like a verb, with an infinite range of differences?

Where the stitch exists as a structural element of the fabric, as in knit or jersey, and as the structuring element of a culture (*'couture'* means sewing, in its literal translation), in the arts and crafts of embroidery, patchwork, quilting, crochet, lace-making, petit point, or the textile art of the avant-garde, the stitch can accrue a very wide range of meanings, which multiply in inverse relation to its status as a functional means of conjuncture. This is a point at which stitch acquires, most visibly, its dual meaning as a point of articulation. It conjoins both matter and ideational content. The craft of stitching may also function to join together the disparate elements of a self that needs time 'to oneself', or may serve to bring together a number of people for a specified time and place as part of a ritual of sociability, such as the quilting circles, sewing bees and knitting groups that have functioned in a range of social, historical and cultural contexts, from pioneer homemakers of nineteenth-century America and the post-war suburban cultures of domesticity to the activity of avant-garde artists working with textiles today. In these cultures it is possible to find an episteme that derives from the specificity of the *techné*, which shares some of the features described by Richard Sennett as the 'ethics of the craftsman',<sup>8</sup> but extends beyond this to provide what Anton Ehrenzweig calls 'pre-articulate knowledge'.<sup>9</sup> The structuralist method can be used to further develop these ideas for textiles.

Peirce's theory of semiotics, developed in his 33 volumes of writings on philosophy and theories of knowledge, offers an alternative method. For Peirce, the relationship between signifier and signified takes place across a spectrum of relational qualities that can be identified at three points of qualitative difference. Peirce called these firstness, secondness and thirdness, or icon, index and symbol. Each has a different level of proximity between the signifier and its signified, with the firstness of the icon having the most direct, proximate relationship of resemblance. For example, an iconic image of the sun might be a diagrammatic circle with rays spreading outwards from the periphery. There is a relationship of visible resemblance between the icon and its meaning. The indexical relation to sunlight might be a photograph,





where traces of sun exist in the form of chemical changes in the photographic process. A symbolic representation of sun exists in the word 'sun', which bears no resemblance to the signified except through convention and encoded patterns of difference.

The level of secondness, or indexicality, corresponds to a relationship of contiguity between signifier and meaning, so that the sign bears the trace of the presence of the signified. For example, the mercury expanding in a thermometer gives a trace of the heat that it measures through the pointer on a calibrated scale, and the weather vane gives a visible trace of the direction and movement of the wind. A photograph, taken with a SLR camera that exposes light onto plastic film coated with silver nitrate and developed into a negative, then printed onto light-sensitive paper and fixed, is a sign that has an indexical relationship to its object: the light reflected by the object is a trace of its existence.

Thirdness, or symbol, relates to those signs that have a relationship of 'unmotivated', 'arbitrary' or entirely abstract connection between signifier and meaning. Spoken or written language, for example, uses words that have no relation or resemblance to their ideational content. Onomatopoeia is an interesting exception that proves the rule, as are jokes like puns and 'double entendres'.

Although all three levels of semiosis are, according to Peirce, rarely found in isolation, and are approximate points along a scale of difference rather than absolute and mutually exclusive categories of difference, there is something to be gained from considering these as guidelines for thinking about meaning. This is especially useful with a form such as textiles, where the materiality of fabric plays such an important part in its significance, and where the symbolic levels of 'thirdness' are often found as one aspect of more iconic and indexical qualities. The very concept of proximity and distance as a means of differentiation has real purchase on a language of materials that are experienced as so liminal and ambient that they are often not perceived as having an 'objective' status at all. The complexity of the meaning of textiles as 'subjective objects' and as 'objective objects' is interesting, and is a complexity that confounds many analytic methods of classification, description and analysis.

We might use Peirce's semiotics to bring textile into clearer focus as a cultural object. As an artefact that always bears the traces of the process of its making, it tends to draw on the indexical level of 'secondness'—but textile culture makes full use of both 'firstness', iconicity, and 'thirdness', symbol. The iconic use of cloth is very much present in the logic of 'the fold', as the drape has been present in rituals of shrouding and mourning in all cultures. Textiles have themselves been subjected to ritual burial and entombment, as well as playing an important role in the burial rites of humans and their treasures. The drape is iconic in that it literally denotes the invisibility of things that





are 'gone', 'lost' or 'dead'. The hiddenness that the textile can create, and therefore signify, is the relationship between perception and memory, which is the element common to both forms of signification (we can make visible, or present in representation, referents which are no longer present to our senses, and we can, through representation, sustain a memory of what once was but no longer is). Thus the twin aspects of mourning and representation are combined in the icon of the drape (the French language retains the traditional association between death and sleep: bed sheets are known as '*draps*').

The absorbent quality of cloth is also part of its capacity to signify as iconic, seen in the way that stains which indicate the capillary action of fibres retain the meaning of mark-making. The body as topos of conflict between nature and culture is, traditionally, prevented from staining fabric. There are many examples of the capacity of textile to signify through its use as symbol. Because textile absorbs liquid, it can be dyed to hold colour. Imperial purple (from the shells of Mediterranean shellfish), eighteenth-century military scarlet (from South American beetles), the gold embroidery of ecclesiastical garments, and the black clothes of European mourners (produced by expensive repetitive immersion in dye baths), are all examples of textile as symbol, although the association of the value of specific colours with the financial cost or rarity value of the dyestuffs adds a level of 'motivation' to the otherwise entirely symbolic association between colour and meaning. Deleuze suggests that the fold also contains symbolic Baroque meaning within the iconic, and certainly this is evident in the architectural conventions in which stone and marble and other hard materials are made to imitate or signify the pliability of the textile drape and fold.<sup>10</sup> The vestigial remains of the ceremonial curtains we find at the cinema and the theatre and in other display contexts have symbolic meaning, with their indication of codes of spectatorship.

It is the Peircean concept of indexicality that is especially interesting to textile research. This is because of the way that textiles have indices of both tacit and tactile meaning contained within whatever other levels of semiosis they may denote. For example, how else to account for the meaning of the Yoruba tradition of producing elaborate stitching on fabric which is then dyed, so that the stitched cloth resists the dye, leaving an elaborate tracery of absent stitches when the stitching is unpicked? This is not the same as an applied form of surface decoration, such as print, nor is it a means of creating pattern through materials within the weave, but is rather a signifier of the action of laborious hand-stitching that once was present, but is now no longer, except as trace of resistance to immersion in dye.

Other ceremonial and ritual uses of textile are evident in the British Museum textile archives, which include examples of sub-Saharan/central African woven back-strap bands, in which the weave is augmented with elaborate stitching, which is cut with a sharpened stone tool to create a 'pile' fabric. This labour-intensive form of signifying tactility has meaning that is





different from the meanings of the geometrical patterns that can be produced by variations in the weaving technique itself. Even in societies where metals have not been discovered, needles are made from bone and are used for stitching in a way that is both functional and symbolic.

### Time

Time is present in a number of ways within the meaning of textile as cultural object. The temporality of the tactile, haptic quality of the textile as sign depends on a paradox of presence and absence. The sign denotes meaningfully when it pertains to a referent that is absent. The sign then performs a memory-like function of retaining, in consciousness, what has been lost to the senses. The iconic serves to retain visual similarity, whereas the indexical serves to commemorate haptic presence, and it is the interplay between the absence of the contact and the presence of the sign which sets in motion the memory of a time in which tactile contact was present. This play of memory serves to form a connection in consciousness, to the unconscious bodily memory of the past body. The fact that the ego is a world of representations does not alter the fact that the ego is, as Freud asserted, 'first and foremost a body-ego'.<sup>11</sup> It is the textile sign that most powerfully sets into play the symbolic equivalence between different sensory modalities. The modalities of tactile and optical refer us to a developmental process in which the bodily is gradually replaced by the virtual, symbolic and cerebral. If mapped as an imaginary line of 'ascent', the cultural narrative of human, sensory and moral growth should lead us from an existence of instincts and drives, transmitted through the smell, taste and touch of corporeal proximity, through the optical and acoustic sense of relative distance, towards the goal of complete abstraction of verbal and written language. This imaginary lineage has served as the moral narrative of the Western episteme, embodied in the Cartesian *cogito* and in the monotheist fantasy of the divine, especially as a pedagogy and as the ideology of imperialism. The time connoted in the meaning of the textile sign is the presence of the absence of touch. This gives textiles their power to convey, and elicit, memories of lost affect and relation. This may be why Winnicott's 'transitional object'<sup>12</sup> is usually a textile object.

The meaning of stitch contains within it the index of the time it takes for the hand to complete the gestures required for its production. The traces of this temporality, which is always a time prescribed by the body and the temporalities of embodiment, convey meaning which is somewhat specific to textiles. As the cultures of industrial manufacture and electronic reproduction generate a temporality of instantaneity, so the time of physical movement, which cannot be increased beyond certain skilled speeds, remains an important index of value. The temporality of stitch gives to textiles the status of Winnicott's 'transitional phenomenon', marking the meaning of threshold experiences of change and transformation. Cloth, used in rituals, is attributed





magical powers of causing change, or of representing the belief that such change is possible. The mystery of how human subjectivity is capable of transitional changes from states of sensory experience to abstract knowledge is given recognition in rituals of transition.

The stitch as signifier restores a sense of the embodied experience of temporal limitation, because actions require the discipline of acquisition through fine motor control, and because each repeated enactment of the movement reiterates the whole series of actions that are 'held' in the muscular control of the now automatic gesture. The years of apprenticeship to the acquisition of tacit knowledge, as noted by Sennett, find no record in written archives but are given memorial recognition in the haptic indexical level of the sight of the textile artefact.<sup>13</sup>

The capacity of stitch to indicate a tacit understanding of the significance of holding has many possible origins. For example, the Judeo-Christian culture finds in the biblical book of Genesis the story of the originary moment of culture that demarcates the pre- from the post-lapsarian periods of humanity. The act that opens the story of the fall is the gesture of the hand reaching for the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a gesture that symbolizes the co-ordination of hand as the executive organ of both eye and mouth. The gesture that is the cultural 'rhyme' or replication of this hand, that reaches out to pluck the fruit, is the hand (of Adam) that sews together leaves to make garments with which to clothe the naked body that has taken on the meaning of shame. Although Adam goes on to plough and tend the land 'East of Eden', and Eve is allocated the travails of motherhood, it is interesting that this narrative of mythic origin should cite stitch as the originary moment of human culture. The narrators of Genesis (and we know they were several, since the narratives within the book itself are multiple) were no documentary anthropologists, and they thus give no fascinating accounts of the origins of needles, tools or even of thread made from hair or fibre. The interest in the history of technology is modern. What was significant for thousands of years was the history of knowledge: the episteme, not the *techné*. The meaning of the stitching contains the same indexical significance of embodied knowledge then as it does now: namely, that of the mystery of tacit, bodily knowledge. The stitch pierces, punctuates, penetrates, as it unites the separate edges, and within a single gesture it combines both aspects of the paradox of destruction and creation. It also replicates the hand-eye co-ordination that, when articulated with oral appetite and instinct, was judged to be transgressive, and in place of the oral instinct to devour we are given the idea of 'making', by transforming nature into culture. If it was the feminine principle that embodied the instinctive appetites of nature, and was punished by means of the embodied pains of nature, then it is the masculine principle that is given the task of confronting the self cleaved between nature and culture, and his is the work of continuously transforming nature into agricul-





ture. Sewing is the reflective act that enables self-consciousness to take the place of instinctive action, and we find the same morality present in the feminine rite of passage of sampler sewing across later generations.<sup>14</sup> For a girl to be occupied with her 'work' is to prevent the diabolical abuse that might otherwise occupy her 'idle hands'. It is not difficult to sense the latent presence of sexual ideational content, but this, although undeniable, is not the main thread of the narrative. At the level of the cultural meaning of textile artefacts, their cultural history in myth is one dimension of analysis. It is worth drawing attention here to the exhibition *The Fabric of Myth* (2008), which explored the significant use of thread, weaving and stitching metaphors in mythology, including the role of weaving in the Greek myths of Penelope, wife of Odysseus, and Arachne, who was turned into a spider; Clotho, one of the Fates, who spun the thread of life into existence; and Ariadne, who provided Perseus with the thread that enabled him to find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth.<sup>15</sup> These themes were all represented in the exhibition in ancient and modern imagery, from Greek amphorae to the more recent work of Louise Bourgeois and Elaine Reichek.

#### Tenderness

The stitch has a reparative level of indexical meaning that also relates to this level of bodily presence implicit in fabric, particularly in relation to the hand and holding. Again psychoanalysis offers us two concepts that are useful here: Winnicott's concept of 'holding' and Wilfred Bion's concept of 'the container/contained', both of which refer to a relationship experienced in infancy that is internalized to become a capacity of the self, and a symbolic process that takes place within the 'representational world' of the ego.<sup>16</sup> The etymological root of terms associated with the hand can be found in all words with the 'ten' or 'tain' element, which indicates their ideational origins in the unconscious concept of holding. The concepts of tension, tenement, tenacity, tenable, attainment, pertain, maintenance, entertainment, containment, are just some of the terms with traces of the meaning of holding. The complexity of the textile's capacity to 'hold' meanings relates to the indexical trace of the hands and their movements in the making of textiles, and the unconscious symbolism of 'holding' and 'containment'. Not only is the unconscious fantasy present in the etymology of the language of concepts of holding but there is an affective register that is evoked by the haptic quality of textiles. The concept of tenderness is the affective level that corresponds to the pre-Oedipal states of the 'holding' fantasy. Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi writes of the 'confusion of tongues between child and adult' where the 'language of tenderness' of childhood becomes misconstrued by the adult as the 'language of desire'.<sup>17</sup> The meaning of tenderness is experienced as a property of the textile itself rather than as a memory from childhood, or as a fantasy of regression to dependence. This semiotic quality is responsible for the





attribution of a protective agency to cloth and textiles, including their use as magical materials in the history of medicine. Related to the superstitious or irrational belief in the curative power of touch, the haptic meanings contained by the semiotics of textile at an indexical level are significant.

Another dimension of the indexical significance of the hand–eye co-ordination that leaves its trace within the textile artefact is one with specific meaning in a post-industrial age. The stitch, like the hand-drawn line, the brushstroke or Barthes's 'grain of the voice',<sup>18</sup> is the trace of a movement that refers us to a time in which experience was tangible and available through the senses as guarantor of presence. The power of this indexical trace of a time of presence is both sensual and affective. When we urge a fantasist to 'Wake up and smell the coffee!', there is a gain of pleasure from the release of energy that is used, in consciousness, to keep the concepts of time and smell separate, and the joke that conjoins different sensory registers is based on the idea of smell as a sense of the experience of the present and the real. The relation of memory to taste, smell and other sensory registers of visual and acoustic representations is complex, but the absorbent qualities of the textile endow it with both tactile and olfactory presence. Fabric, in its paradoxical transposition of sensory registers, restores to us the memory of an experience that took the form of 'states of being' rather than organized separate sensory modalities. This memory offers the promise of a return to a lost 'oceanic' state of synaesthetic synergy, where boundaries differentiating self from other have become fluid, permeable or mutable. The promise held by the fantasy of the restoration of this state, from memory to actuality, is one of the elimination of affects of loss, suspension of anxiety, and a lifting of the burden of sense used for reality testing and self-observation. It is a fantasy of the potential victory of the 'pleasure principle' over the 'reality principle'. The illusion of a hyper-reality that is generated by the augmented virtual reality of new information technologies is one in which embodied knowledge becomes disconnected from judgement and is channelled through the senses as perceptual rather than self-reflexive. The two meanings of the adjective 'haptic' illustrate this clearly. In techno-speak the term 'haptic' refers to the production, through software, of the illusion of real, because embodied, actions. The training in the gestures of surgery or in machine operation can take place remotely through the science of computer 'haptics'. The other meaning of 'haptic' refers to the sensory relationship that exists between optical and tactile, or the muscular action of manual dexterity. Sometimes it is used to refer more generally to the relation between optical and visceral senses, as in Laura Marks's writing on film.<sup>19</sup> 'The haptic' is a quality that is strongly indicated within the meaning of textiles, and it can give cloth powerful meanings of relationality. It is one of the qualities of the haptic that it is not easily rendered in verbal, symbolic or spoken language, but is closer to iconic and indexical forms of signification. The haptic is not, therefore, subject to





the rigours of syntax, with its requirements of a triangulated relation between subject, object and verb. If the subject of syntax is either passive or active in relation to its object and its verb, this is not the case in the logic of the haptic, so that 'doing' can have the meaning of 'being done to' in a way that combines active and passive both simultaneously and indivisibly. The pleasures of the illusion of such fusion offer endless horizons to narcissism by removing all focused sense of agency and therefore of both frustration (failed agency), or responsibility (agency realized).

### **The agency of textiles**

To bring the semiotic method to textiles is to acknowledge the potential of textile as a complex cultural object of knowledge, as well as matter. This is to acknowledge that the set of cultural practices comprising textiles are too interesting and important to be overlooked in the interests of 'using' textiles as material. Although an essential element of textiles culture is material science, it is not a science that analyses textiles as inert matter. The frontiers of material science and textiles are acknowledging the agency of textiles as materials with interesting and powerful 'conformable' properties which have advantages in research fields where questions of scale, of mobility, of pliability and ambient surface are necessary. The potential for textiles to provide substrates for the growth of new neural tissue is becoming part of current medical research practice. The potential for textiles to give form to polymeric yarns with various degrees and types of conductivity is another indication of the importance of textiles for research into intelligent and smart fabrics in a material science context.<sup>20</sup>

This quality of being 'relational' or 'connective', which is an integral part of the meaning and matter of textile, is what gives it this power of 'agency', in the terms discussed by Alfred Gell.<sup>21</sup> As we work to secure the cultural recognition of textiles as a complex matter with agency, it is important not to overlook the valuable qualities, both of liminality and as a paradoxical 'subjective object', that are inherent in the haptic dimension of its materiality. This means that having secured its status as 'object' we now need, also, to further explore and understand textiles as a complex practice.



## NOTES

### Chapter 7. Tension, Time and Tenderness

I would like to thank Cathy Johns for her editorial help. Additional thanks to Emma Shercliff and the research students at the Royal College of Art.

- 1 Rozsika Parker's groundbreaking work in helping to establish this discourse should be mentioned here. See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984).
- 2 Claire Pajaczkowska, 'On stuff and nonsense: the complexity of cloth', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 3/3 (2005), pp. 220–49; Claire Pajaczkowska, 'Thread of attachment', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 5/2 (2007), pp. 140–52.
- 3 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 97–9.
- 4 Barthes: *Mythologies*, pp. 109–59.
- 5 Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* [1967], trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983).
- 6 See, for example Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* [1977], trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Stephen Heath, 'Narrative space', in *Questions of Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), pp. 19–75; Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg/BFI, 1969); Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' [1969], trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12/1 (1971), pp. 27–36; 12/2 (1972), pp. 145–55; 13/1 (1972), pp. 120–31; Catherine Dormor, 'skin:textile:film', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 6/3 (2008), pp. 238–53.
- 7 The cultural significance of the collar and lapels is discussed in Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska, 'Looking sharp', in Marketa Uhlirova (ed.), *If Looks Could Kill: Cinema's Images of Fashion, Crime and Violence* (London: Koenig, 2008), pp. 62–6.
- 8 As discussed in Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
- 9 Anton Ehrenzweig, 'The four stages of the articulation process', in *The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953), pp. 116–25.



- 10 Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* [1988], trans. Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 2006). See also Gen Doy's examination of the cultural significance of drapery in art, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002).
- 11 Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id' [1923], trans. Joan Riviere, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1960), p. 27.
- 12 Donald W. Winnicott, 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena' [1953], in *Collected Papers: Through Paediatrics to Psycho-analysis* (London: Tavistock, 1958).
- 13 Sennett: *The Craftsman*.
- 14 See Parker: *The Subversive Stitch* for a discussion of the cultural history of women's sewing activity.
- 15 Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, Antonia Harrison and James Young (eds), *The Fabric of Myth* (Warwickshire: Compton Verney, 2008). This catalogue accompanied the exhibition *The Fabric of Myth* at Compton Verney, 21 June – 7 September 2008.
- 16 Winnicott: 'Transitional objects'; Wilfred R. Bion, *Elements of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic, 1963).
- 17 Sándor Ferenczi, 'Confusion of tongues between adults and the child' [1933], in *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-analysis* [1955], ed. Michael Balint, trans. Eric Mosbacher *et al.* (London: Karnac, 1994), pp. 156–67.
- 18 Roland Barthes, 'The grain of the voice', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 182–3.
- 19 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
- 20 The frontier of research opened up by the new medical textiles is discussed in Chloe Colchester, *Textiles Today: a Global Survey of Trends and Traditions* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007).
- 21 Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).





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