



Déjà Vu: Textures of Time

Tony Scott's *Déjà Vu* (2006) has an unusual aesthetic for an action film. In its visual style we find significant emphasis upon multiple diegetic screens, the layering of distinct images, and the use of different image resolutions. In this article I suggest that such aesthetic decisions work to create a sensuous involvement with both the film's style and its narrative. In order to explore *Déjà Vu*'s unusual aesthetic, I will be discussing sensation as it relates to the idea of *texture*. Coming from the Latin *textūra*, this word originally meant weaving, before being picked up by the fine arts in the 19th century to refer to the surface of an object. Both senses of the term suggest mixing and touch – the way that an object mixes its formal elements, and the way this mixing feels. To speak of texture in cinema is also to invoke a desire to touch and be touched by the film, to consider the sensuous bringing together of two bodies: the cinematic body and the spectator's body.

From a theoretical standpoint, then, I position myself within the phenomenological study of cinema, particularly those traditions that consider cinema as 'sensuous', associated with critics such as Vivian Sobchack (1992) and Laura Marks (2002). I am especially interested in the embodied aesthetics developed by Anne Rutherford (2004, 2011), and also inspired by the historical shift, identified by Antonia Lant, that occurred between photography and cinema. Lant argues that the transition from flat photography to an early cinema that emphasises volume is grounded in our sensory relation to images, what she calls a 'haptical cinema' (1995). Going beyond these theoretical bases, however, in my approach a haptical narrative cinema also remains a *narrative* cinema, one in which narrative and texture inform each other. As Ian Garwood argues, the textural and sensuous qualities of films are often articulated within a storytelling context, making it important that we engage with that context as well as those qualities (2013: 63). As such, the sensuous texture of cinema images do not solely register on an affective level but also inform and constitute the narrative, providing narrative cues as much as sensual ones. A focus on texture encourages attention to the felt sensations of the image, then, but also provides a particular way of approaching how narrative structure resonates with *mise-en-scène*. Finally, I am also indebted to Mark Paterson's (2007) notion of a 'tactile phenomenology'. Although Paterson is not a film theorist, his work offers a significant point of departure because he emphasises the importance of technologies in relation to tactile aesthetic experience. Such attention would seem

especially relevant for *Déjà Vu* since, as we shall see, the film employs non-traditional image technologies both in its production and in its fictional world, making significant use of screens within its *mise-en-scène*, which develop distinct textures through their grain and light.

Although I attend only to one film, my analysis aims to suggest the usefulness of texture as a concept for our understanding of film more generally. In *Déjà Vu*, the etymological origin of texture as a weaving is felt not only in the film's layering of different temporalities, but also through a particular approach to the dramatisation of the romantic subplot, which relies to a great extent on the textures of grain and light. In this way, the film invites our emotional engagement with the surface of the cinematic image in addition to its narrative. What texture helps us understand is the sensory role played by aesthetics in the film's emotional and visceral achievements, producing what we might call affective meaning in addition to cognitive meaning – each of these levels interacting with and supporting one another.

Texture and Grain

Déjà Vu is a procedural action film whose narrative revolves around Doug Carlin's (Denzel Washington) attempt to locate the terrorist Carroll Oerstadt (Jim Caviezel) in order to stop him from blowing up a New Orleans ferry. What distinguishes *Déjà Vu* from a host of similar films is the introduction of a particular science fiction device, known as the 'time window'. This time window allows an investigative unit called Snow White to see four days back in time. While the intended purpose of the time window is merely to locate the perpetrator, Carlin ends up traveling back in time himself in order to stop the terrorist attack. Carlin attempts this reckless move because he has fallen in love with Claire Kuchever (Paula Patton) during his investigation. Although she is at first seemingly unrelated to the attack, Claire is later revealed to be the terrorist's first victim. Thus, solving her murder will reveal who the terrorist is. Carlin doesn't meet Claire until near the end of the film, but there are nonetheless several earlier moments in which we can see Carlin developing feelings for Claire and eventually falling in love with her. This romantic subplot dramatises a desire expressed by the film more generally: to be present, to actually feel the past and be able to change it.

The time window offers one of the most interesting and important ways in which *Déjà Vu* brings together sensation



and narrative. During the scene in which Carlin, and we, are first introduced to the time window, the layering between the present and the past is clearly evident. In a medium wide shot, Carlin is positioned with his back to the camera as he stands in front of the time window. A plethora of image feeds are projected on a massive screen, along with a range of monitors on the workstation. The most prominent image of the past is of Claire's house as it slowly renders and fills in detail, while also visible are many news station feeds, surveillance video footage and, trailing off the left edge of the frame, several more screens and monitors. Carlin is watching the main screen, astounded by its ability to zoom into a house and track through walls. Our view of him and his surroundings in the present at this moment becomes one layer among many other fragmented renderings of the past. As I will suggest, the textural and sensuous effects created by the interaction of these layers of images come to be given simultaneously narrative, thematic, and affective significance by the film.

Those textural effects are made possible in part by the mediums employed. Scott made use of two distinct technologies to achieve the time window sequences. The first was a LIDAR device that employs laser light to scan, analyse and render visible a delimited space, with both the set for Claire's apartment and actress Paula Patton being

scanned for later superimposition over more traditional footage. Scott also employed a digital video camera (the Panavision Genesis) to film the scenes which take place in the past (see 'Déjà Vu Technical Specifications'). Put together, these two technologies produce images distinct in quality, compositing alternate imaging technologies into one. Inevitably, the resulting images have a very different feel to them to those shot with the Panavision Genesis HD for the present, a feel that is best expressed as the relative grain of the image. These differences in image grain can be seen as parallel to what Paterson identifies as the sensory qualities of painting, where every brushstroke and mark on the canvas are physical points of the translation of sensation (2007: 88). While Paterson's argument originates with the physical activity of brushstrokes on a canvas and the painter's ability to layer and crease paint, I believe the analogy holds true for digital video images, since, despite being made of code rather than celluloid, digital technologies nonetheless have materiality. Laura Marks makes much of digital video's materiality in her book *Touch*, where she argues that video footage still 'perceives the world and expresses its perception to viewers' (2002: 148). This process of perception and expression is what in turn, according to Vivian Sobchack, constitutes a film's body, whether it is analogue or digital (1992: 205), so we might say that we sense this difference when our bodies brush against digital video's body. Grain offers a useful way of underlining the difference between two forms of cinematic perception and expression, since its materiality speaks to our *experience* of that difference. *Déjà Vu* exploits this experience to numerous effects.

On the most basic level, our experience of the difference of texture in the time window's image is what reveals that we are looking back in time – that what we see is viewed across time and not, as is usually the case with surveillance

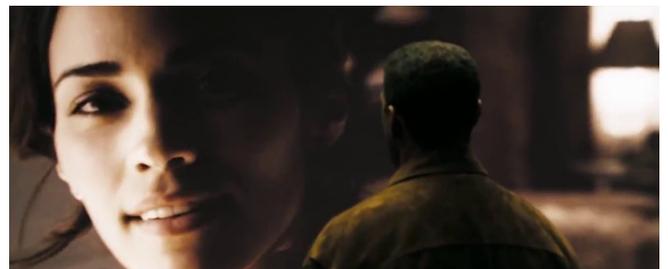




cameras, just across distance. Following the establishing shot of Carlin in front of various layers of screens, the next shot is of the time window's rendering of Claire in her home. The film pans away from a partially complete image of Claire, tracing yellow and grey lines of light, indicating both camera movement and Claire's movement. As the time window catches up with her, there is a shot / reverse-shot of Claire in a close-up, then Carlin in medium shot, and back to an extreme close-up of Claire's face. Here the different timelines are made evident by their textures. Carlin's timeline shots are clearer and brighter, while Claire's timeline is represented as grainy with a distinct yellow tint (to which I shall return). Here, then, the material dimension of the window, the way its resolution does not quite match the rest of the cinematic image, is made crucial to how the mise-en-scène crafts and shapes temporal distance. It is also the way that the spectator engages with two different times in the same frame. We experience past and present simultaneously, the contrast in grain between the distinct timelines making us perceive them differently. The image of the time window has a different texture due to its lower resolution, and through this difference we sense that it is a diegetically mediated image, at once removed from and more tactile than the present. A further, compositional, benefit of the differences in texture is that, while the overlapping of several images could easily become cluttered and incoherent, the grain helps separate the images by providing a distinct identity for each of them.

In terms of the film's narrative, then, grain becomes a temporal and visual organiser, allowing us to understand clearly which timeline the images exist on. This, though, is far from the only significance of the differences in image quality and the experiences they provide. The variance in colour depth between celluloid film and digital video also takes on deeper significance, not only on a narrative but also on an affective level.

The time window images are often dark and muted, which at times makes it difficult to comprehend details of facial expression, or even space and place. While the Snow White team often voice their frustration with the low resolution, which is too low to clearly see the face of their terrorist suspect, Carlin is caught up in rapt attention, enthralled especially by the grainy images of Claire. Thus considered too indistinct in terms of their ability to convey concrete information, the images are not too blurry to support an emotional or sensuous connection. For this is another significance of the varied textures in the film: no longer only a matter of articulating time or space, texture deepens our understanding of the emotional connection between characters and, through this, our own sensory relationship to the image. Most especially, texture becomes a key means through which the film expresses Carlin's growing attraction to Claire, which develops slowly across the course of the narrative, but is foreshadowed texturally.

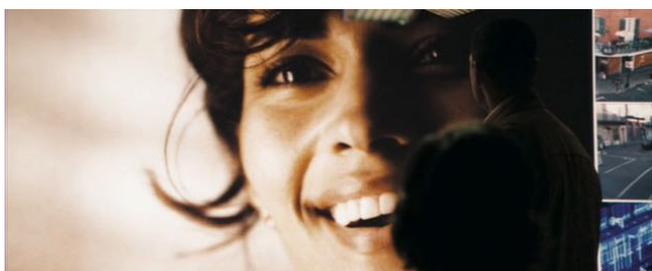


Claire's face is usually seen in close-up in the inaugural time window scene, with Carlin presented in a medium shot within the same frame. As the scene continues, we see Carlin looking at Claire and, significantly, we find eyeline matches in these shots, as though Claire returns his look, despite the difference in scale (and time). As such, while

these strands of the story world are visually distinguished and separated, the film is also concerned to emphasize their porousness. In the scenes where Carlin gazes at Claire, the grainy images of her play across his face, the low resolution rendering them thicker than the clearer, but thinner, celluloid images. The sharpness of film carries less textural and affective weight than the softer grain of the time window's digital images. The projections of Claire soon become more than simply images; they are caresses between Claire and Carlin. The flickered layering of Claire's image across Carlin's face makes his skin warmer and richer in colour. Carlin's presence becomes visibly thickened by Claire's ephemeral caress, the shift in texture creating an emotional density or weight added to Carlin's face as he increasingly experiences a longing for a complex combination of past and future.



These aspects of the image are placed in further relationship with the performances of Denzel Washington and Paula Patton, which add a further weight to the scene, achieving a balance between the practicalities of the narrative situation, the emotional connection of the characters, and the textural aspects of the image. This harmony is achieved despite the challenge of their actual physical separation: although they are not in the same space, the two performers nevertheless had to interact with each other. While Washington had the advantage of seeing Patton's performance projected on the glass screen, neither had the option of truly interacting physically (as Tony Scott points out in the DVD commentary). Patton's performance needs to develop the character as a vibrant, happy woman in order to convince the viewer that Carlin might fall in love with her across time and space, while also generating sympathy for the fate that we know is to befall her. Patton manages this primarily through small, delicate smiles and looks just off screen, careful to avoid a more confrontational



look straight into the camera lens. Performance thus synthesises with the film's style, and as she moves through her house she appears to glide due to a slight slow-motion shot, suggesting lightness and a carefree state of being. A challenge for Washington, meanwhile, is to calibrate the visual fascination Carlin has for Claire without suggesting that he merely takes voyeuristic pleasure in observing Claire in intimate moments without her being aware of his presence. In contrast to his fellow male investigators, who stare at Claire with a lascivious gaze, Washington restricts Carlin's facial expression to one of attention, without accompanying bodily movements, his eyes flicking across the image, seemingly seeking out details and clues. This performance strikes a balance between a keen investigator and something akin to an art connoisseur, rather than a voyeur.



The graininess and low resolution of the time window's image also importantly suggest a disintegration or decay of the image. Although Claire is visible, she is slowly dissolving, the increasing pixilation showing her gradually and materially disappearing. When the perspective of the time window remains stable, the image fills out and produces the characteristic grainy texture. Whenever the time window shifts perspective, though, the images render more slowly, creating a ghost-like effect of outlines of both people and places. In itself, this ghosting effect underlines the past-present slippage. The digital materiality of the LIDAR device and the Genesis camera is what produce the particularities of the grain: slowly, the pixels become more evident in the images, thus reducing resolution and making the past appear further away. The effect is one of disintegration, the images breaking apart. On a narrative level, this helps express that Claire is fading as time slips away from Carlin and his team, the time remaining to save her decreasing. We cannot see this visually in any other way than through the grain, the material difference between the two superimposed images making the temporal difference evident.

The image grain thus works as marker, not just of time, but also of a loss of presence. As such, layers of distinct narrative timelines take on deeper resonance through their superimposition, particularly in the close-ups of Claire and Carlin. The extreme close-ups of Claire juxtaposed with Carlin in the same shot, or presented in shot reverse-shot, create a textural tension between presence and distance.





Another clear example of this temporal layering comes in the scene where Carlin forces the Snow White team to send a written note back to him in the past, in order to warn himself of an impending attack. In a wide shot we see Carlin in the present looking at his past self in a medium close-up. Here the difference in grain between Carlin in the present and Carlin in the past clearly reveals an immediate and material distinction between timelines. Yet the grain of the image not only helps us clearly separate present from past, but also suggests a decay of the past, achieving the sensation of memories losing sharpness and resolution, becoming less and less tangible. The fuzzy texture of the time window image helps lend a melancholic tone to the scene, used here to underscore this as the last time Carlin saw his partner alive.

Finally, it should be noted that we as spectators also share in what amounts to the haptic engagement that Carlin has with these images, as well as with the images of Carlin himself. As light moves across Carlin's face, for instance, we are often asked to recognise that this is also the touch of Claire, a sensual rhythm that anticipates their future relationship. We also respond differently to Carlin's movements because we see the light from Claire's images play across his face, the rhythm of which brings a tonality to the *mise-en-scène* that is primarily evoked by texture and not composition. We apprehend Claire's body differently due to the image grain, which we know evokes time running out – this is part of the intensity of the time window's texture. As a consequence, we too are touched by the image; the grainy, low resolution invites a tactile interaction. We understand the fascination and intensity that Carlin feels in these scenes, because they play texturally across us as well. Texture allows us to look beyond *mise-en-scène* as simply a visual and spatial term and instead allows us to conceive of the intense rhythms embedded within the cinematic frame. These rhythms describe the relations between elements as they change and transform; characters and objects move within the *mise-en-scène*, but colour, brightness, grain, and resolution also shift and suggest new relations.

The tactile sense of image grain thus opens up the concept of *mise-en-scène* to how the texture of an image pulls the spectators corporeally into the frame, in what Anne Rutherford calls a move of 'sympathetic excitation or resonance' (2003). Although Rutherford never explicitly deals with texture as a concept, she notes how film theory must become more attentive to a film's 'rhythms, its palpable sensuous textures' (2003). From Rutherford's

perspective, we feel a film more than we watch it, and texture offers a way into understanding how we respond to and identify with a film's materiality, not only its characters and narrative. The experience of texture weaves us into the film, blurring the boundaries between film world and our own, engrossing us deeper into the image, through its narrative and sensory properties.

Yet we must pay attention to the grain of the image not only because it reveals its materiality, but also because it allows us to recognise the interaction between the narrative representation (the events unfolding) and the film's far more ineffable effects (how the unfolding events feel). As Garwood has pointed out, there exists a sensuous aspect to cinematic narration that is too often overlooked, but there is also a narrative component to the sensuous aspects of the image (2013: 31). As we have seen, grain and narration in *Déjà Vu* work *together* to produce a rhythm that does not supplant but rather inflects our experience of the narrative. Miriam Hansen discusses narrative as a 'scaffold' for the production of sensations (1999: 67). However, the interaction between texture and narrative is more complex, as my analysis so far has suggested. The sensuousness of the image, to paraphrase Garwood, contributes an affective tone to the film, which here helps solidify the narrative relationship between Carlin and Claire (2013: 37). The images themselves certainly take on sensuous qualities in addition to their narrative meaning, but at the same time this also strengthens our alignment with Carlin in his fascination with Claire. As we shall see, such a synthesis between narrative, texture, and sensation is further heightened by the film's use of light and colour.

Light and colour

Light and its texture are just as central to our felt relation to the image as grain. While light is often invisible in itself, the manner in which light illuminates surfaces brings texture to the world around us. Whereas grain in *Déjà Vu* encompasses the difference between the two forms of images in the film, light works mostly as a form of touching. Not only does light and its texture (especially the colour yellow) work as a way of bringing Claire and Carlin together visually through the blending together of two light sources, but it also generates a physical connection as the bodies of Claire and Carlin merge before they ever meet.

As in the case of grain, light has narrative as well as sensuous functions. In part, what the colour does is to make certain images and their significance recognisable — they

stand out because their light textures are different. All the time window images are imbued with yellow light, which visually emphasises their difference from images of the present, offering another way for us to recognise if a given shot is in the past or the present due to this yellowish tint. Moreover, the yellow light is primarily associated with Claire, and specifically Claire's presence in the past, meaning it is also a strong narrative marker. Slowly, though, it becomes evident that the yellow light has resonances beyond simply orienting the spectator towards the progression of the plot. The yellow light also begins to tie images together haptically; they start to carry the same distinctive feeling, and this feeling has both narrative and affective significance.

Both Claire and Carlin take on a similar texture when lit by yellow light, distinguishing them from their surrounding environment. In this way the yellow light unifies and brings together separate elements across time through textural association, urging us to connect them together. In the first investigation of Claire's home and her activity leading up to her abduction, the glare of a bright white light from the time window often shines on all the members of the Snow White



team, flickering quickly across them. In Carlin's close-ups, however, the yellow light moves more slowly across his face. In the rapid movements that dominate the Snow White investigation, driven by fast-paced editing and swish pans, the lingering on Carlin's face provides extended moments of contact between Carlin and Claire. Carlin's warm brown skin is lit up by the yellow light emanating from the past images of Claire and her house. The movement of the light across Carlin's face offers a sensuous delay, running counter to the otherwise hectic mood of the investigation. The close-up framing and the composition, which centres Carlin's face rather than providing a two-shot, allows the viewer to dwell on the brush of light. Furthermore, the light plays most prominently across Carlin's eyes, the place where we are more likely to be focusing our attention. The brushing of Claire's light and colour against Carlin, although a subtle contact, becomes a way for the film to bring the two future lovers together in a way that suggests intimacy by means of texture. Furthermore, in these instances light is not simply a means of linking sight and visibility, but also a medium of sensation – both for Carlin and us: we too are literally touched by light from the screen, just as Claire touches Carlin in this manner.

The texture of light, then, is significant for expressing Carlin and Claire's relationship, and the way in which yellow light brings them together in the time window sequences is also evident in other scenes. Consider a moment before Carlin is introduced to the Snow White team, in which he looks at Claire in one scene in which they are spatially and temporally co-present: in the morgue. The presence of the dead body of Claire itself is not enough to affect Carlin at first, and he treats her as an object of investigation rather than a person, peering at her wounds as he would at any inanimate evidence. Claire's father will later underline the necessity of seeing her as a human subject by gathering up a collection of photographs of Claire that he gives to Carlin. Carlin protests that it is unnecessary but the act is important for the father: he needs Claire, as he puts it, 'to matter' to Carlin, and the photographs are the best way he knows to impress his daughter's importance. Looking at the photos in a subsequent scene, Carlin begins to contemplate Claire, to see her as more than a clue. Other details of the mise-en-scène – the downward angle of the camera, the longer shot, and the fact that Claire is smiling in the



photograph – intensifies his sensuous recognition of Claire, whereby she is made to come alive, rather than simply remaining evidence to drive the investigation forward. Significantly, though, all of these photographs have a distinctive yellow tone to them. In fact, even the autopsy photograph has a yellow tint that we do not see in the morgue itself but only later as Carlin travels from the hospital. It would seem to be this and the later snapshots that first affect Carlin. I would go so far as to say that it is the texture of Claire's image that is significant for Carlin, the yellow light becoming integral to how he sees her. In other words, the texture of the photography, the manner in which the yellow tint and warmth render Claire, becomes what draws Carlin in, and in turn leads him to care for her, thus establishing the pattern that will be developed in the time window scenes.

After Carlin has travelled back in time to rescue Claire, we also find the same yellow colour in a scene during which Claire nurses Carlin's wounds. The yellow light brings a soft texture into these images, suggesting a kind of tenderness that would be difficult to express otherwise. Moreover, the light is a warm, golden yellow reminiscent primarily of 'magic hour' footage, the time of day when



natural light becomes softer and redder. As light intensity wanes, colour vibrancy deepens and the skin of the actor glows. Emotional intensity swells here through the softness of the lighting, underlining the unity of these characters. As well as this, via the large mirror that reflects the pair here, we even find a similar play of the nested frames-within-frames found in sequences with the time window, echoing the distinct spatial relation through which their relationship has developed. Light and colour thus develop and visually tie together the romantic subplot, but also determine the felt sensations of the film by making the scenes with Claire and Carlin softer and warmer texturally than those in which they are apart.

At the end of the film, during the first meeting of Carlin and Claire in the present, we see the same yellow light shine on them. The golden tone brings them together once more, and its repeated presence strongly supports the suggestion, implied by the impending conclusion of the narrative, that they will become lovers. This shot becomes over-determined in the way that it resolves the tension of whether or not the two lovers will remember each other from their encounters in the past and be together in the future. The warm golden yellow has become such a fundamental part of the film's narrative and sensuous dimensions that when Carlin and Claire have their last same-frame two-shot, all the emotional and affective sensations of the entire film are brought together through this lighting decision. It is thus not only the narrative that suggests that Carlin and Claire will be together, but the texture of the image, the manner in which the characters are joined by light. For lack of a better word, the yellow light colours our sensuous perception of events, even as we might not consciously register it, almost becoming for *Déjà Vu* the colour of love.¹ Through its textures the film encourages not just a cognitive and emotional, but also a physical and affective, reaction to these images, inviting both narrative engagement and embodied sensation.



Conclusion

A distinct understanding of this film emerges from a focus on texture. The aspects of texture I have dealt with weave us into *Déjà Vu*. Grain and light engage our emotional relation to the cinematic image as image, but also to the characters, thus deepening our narrative experience of the film. A range of stylistic devices such as shifting image

resolution, layered superimposed images, and the play of light become part of the sensations emerging from the film, and are put to many purposes. Texture becomes the way we differentiate between layers of time, but the grain of the images, light, and colour also contribute crucially to the film's emotional intensity.

Texture thus offers a particular way into the cinematic image, a way to talk about our embodied relationship with film aesthetics that goes beyond narrative or composition alone. Textures invite us to want to touch the film and to be touched by it, creating a dynamic movement between the cinematic body and our own. By emphasising sensations and emotions, attending to texture encourages an aesthetic approach that allows us to see the materiality of the film more clearly. Yet, while helping articulate our sensory experience of cinematic perception, texture also participates in the narrative construction of film – in *Déjà Vu*'s case by contributing to our understanding of a central relationship. Texture and narrative work together to produce our experience of film.

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¹ We can contrast the golden yellow of exuberance and resolution with the hard, bright light of Claire's sorrow over having lost Carlin, as he is pulled under water by the car, unable to escape because he saved her. In that shot, the texture of light expresses the despair of the moment, the starkness of the light mirroring the starkness of loss – colour and life drained from the world. We might equally think of the uncharacteristically bleached look of Claire's funeral scene, in which it is as if the colour has left the world in order to express the sadness of Claire's passing.