Introduction: The Surfaces of Film-Philosophy

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Within Film Studies and Philosophy accounts of superficiality and cinema are few and far between. If there is any talk of it at all, more often than not, it is decidedly hostile. A similar sense of skepticism is reserved for superficiality’s conceptual relatives: hollowness, depthlessness, slightness, slimness, thinness and, of course, flatness. A superficial reading is one that pays little attention to detail. A slight film is a film without weight. A thin story lacks substance, or worse, conviction, a tale that could not withstand the most cursory analysis. “Flat” is another word for dull. Similarly, in critical theory depthlessness has lately become a byword for a lack of historicity and affect; while shallowness has long been associated with inauthenticity. Indeed, even those scholars who appear to be appreciative of surfaces, foremost among them Gilles Deleuze, turn critical when it concerns the cinematic apparatus: the single, isolated plane is a prison where time is “caught” (2005, p. 105).

In contrast, discussions of depth are far more common and, in comparison, positively congenial. An in-depth reading is a detailed or close reading, one that gets to the heart of the matter. A deep film or story...
with depth suggests a thoughtful and complex work of art. Tellingly, where Deleuze associates the single plane of the cinematic apparatus with entrapment, deep space offers liberation and emancipation, a “freeing” of reality (2005, p. 105). Deep thought is profound or thorough contemplation as opposed to fleeting or cursory consideration. Indeed, superficiality and depthlessness may well have such a bad reputation precisely because of the general equation of thinking with depth in Western culture.

In their analysis of surface readings, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus note that models of reading have revolved around binary oppositions, notably: surface/depth, manifest/latent, and present/absent, which are not equivalent (2009, p. 4). Of the paired terms, it is the surface that has the most negative connotations – conveying both superficiality and deception. This is exemplified by Fredric Jameson’s famous formulation of symptomatic reading in which the ideological surface acts as a locus of deception and destruction, covering over the truth of Marxist history. Best and Marcus comment on the similarities between Jameson’s symptomatic and Augustine’s hermeneutic modes of reading, arguing both revolve around strong conceptions of Truth (2009, p. 15). We would add that the degree of fascinating duplicity exerted by the surface is proportional to the strength of the proposed model of truth. This can be seen from The Republic onwards – Plato’s alluring, magical, evanescent shadow-play sustains the value of the real, eternal, absolute truth of the forms.

While this brief sketch demonstrates continuity in the oppositional and hierarchical conceptual pairing of surface and depth, this issue also explores historical moments in which film scholars and philosophers have reconsidered the relationship between the two. From the fierce debates about “depth of field” in the 1970s, the critical appreciation of avant-garde concerns with the surface in the 1980s, to the recent, emerging theorization of the haptic in the forms of the skin of film and the texture of the screen. This issue explores the ways in which such debates recontextualise and rework the relations between depth, surface, superficiality and depthlessness.

In his slim volume The Barbarians: An Essay on the Mutation of Culture (2006), the Italian novelist and essayist Alessandro Baricco distinguishes between two registers of experience: depth engagement and surface engagement. He explores the differences between them by considering the activities of diving and surfing. The diver descends deeper and deeper into the ocean in search of treasure; whereas the surfer uses qualities of the surface, such as waves and currents, to accelerate infinitely. While both are water sports, they are distinct activities that require and develop particular qualities. The diver values the experience of vertical movement, while the surfer privileges horizontality. Thus, the relationship between
these activities cannot be understood in terms of binary opposition as each cannot be measured in terms of the other. Indeed, endeavoring to define surfing negatively as merely “not diving”, or vice-versa, foregrounds the nonsensical logic of the oppositional hierarchy.

Each of the essays in this special issue explore superficiality and its conceptual relatives in relation to a variety of other concepts. Depth is one of them, but by no means the only one. Some of the essays scrutinize the relationship between superficiality and affect; others look at the dialectics between surface and ontology. Some explore typologies of surface aesthetics and others offer acute theorisations of surface interpretation. The issue retains its roots in the Film-Philosophy conference The Evaluation of Form, organized by Andrew Klevan in Oxford, 2015. This genealogy means much of the focus here lies with questions of form and surface and/or evaluation and surface. Perhaps, most importantly, the issue is formed by debates within Film Studies that have developed from/extend out into philosophy.

The special issue is structured around four debates, each considering surface as a productive concept and tool of analysis within a related but distinct context. The first debate addresses the relationship between cinematographic techniques such as editing, digital visual effects, camera movement and focal length and the construction of the surface as a critical narrative and self-reflective device. Lisa Purse’s article “Layered Encounters: Mainstream Cinema and the Disaggregate Digital Composite” considers the extent to which a variety of digital composites, which have traditionally been characterised in scholarly literature by their apparent attempt to erase signs of their composite nature, formally fragment, foreground, and scrutinise the digital surfaces that constitutes them. In a reversal of historical discourses, here it is precisely depth that is seen to constitute the illusory, whereas surfaces are shown to reflect critically and speak meaningfully to their historical and material context. Timotheus Vermeulen, in his essay “Flat Film: Strategies of Depthlessness in Pleasantville and La Haine”, discusses how strategies of depthlessness, in particular shallow focus and the dolly zoom, determine the nature of filmic worlds. Just as Purse reverses historical discourses on surface and depth to suggest the surface has critical potential, Vermeulen argues that these devices are not homogenous—as opposed to the complexity of depth models— but radically multiplicitous, making possible a wide range of fictional ontologies and interpretative practices. Indeed, in the process, Vermeulen suggests that in some cases, depthlessness is not the effect of depth, but its condition.

Another debate, one developed from the theorization of the haptic but with a distinct attentiveness to form, concerns the relationship between
surface and affect. The essays of Pansy Duncan and Lucy Fife-Donaldson both consider the ways in which surface qualities such as texture and the distributions of colour and light inform our experiences of films’ representative registers. In her article “Lights, Camera, Lumino-Politics: Lighting The Searchers, from Paraffin to LED”, Duncan argues that the surface diffusion, distribution and dissemination of light in John Ford’s The Searchers should be read in the context of the represented political struggle between colonisers and indigenous people. Through extensive textual and material analysis, she demonstrates how The Searchers situates its own formal and technical efforts to regulate light’s movement across the surface of the cinematic image within a history of settler-colonial efforts to regulate light’s movement across varied domestic, civic and geographic surfaces. In “Surface Contact: Film Design as an Exchange of Meaning” Fife Donaldson concentrates on textural qualities so as to interrogate a rather different modality of contact between film makers and audience. She asserts that just as painters may use their hands and brush to texture the surface, filmmakers – from directors to designers – can add an expressive touch. Through detailed discussion of film moments, archival design materials and interviews with film designers, she attends to the intersubjective exchanges of meaning filmmakers initiate on the surface.

Ever since Jameson’s (1991) influential theorization, superficiality and depthlessness have been understood as indices of a general condition of loss pervading Western culture. In contrast, Maryn Wilkinson and Matt Denny’s close readings of surface strategies in contemporary film suggest that depthlessness should be considered in more individuated terms, its qualities related to distinct texts; and more productively, as gains into hitherto unexplored directions. Wilkinson contends in “On the Depths of Surface: Strategies of Surface Aesthetics in The Bling Ring, Spring Breakers and Drive” that these films use the surface to develop new modes of storytelling. Looking at the titular films, she distinguishes three different “strategies” of surface engagement: The Bling Ring relies on a sense of “skimming”, Spring Breakers engages ideas of “drifting”, while Drive promotes a sense of “gliding” or “coasting”. Analysis of these strategies of surface aesthetics reveals that the films make dialectic categories of depth and surface, sign and meaning, form and content, indistinguishable, and it is precisely in doing so that they both propel their plots and offer complex societal critiques. Denny’s central argument in “Deconstructing Depth: Proximity and Contemplation in Déjà Vu” is that Jameson’s general indictment of the “new depthlessness” should be counteracted by close engagement with particular instances of surface style. Denny is interested specifically in the qualities and possibilities of
proximity. Drawing on Catherine Constable’s writings on postmodern cinema and through a close reading of a key sequence in Tony Scott’s *Déjà Vu* (2006), Denny explores the ways in which the film reworks the stylistic conventions of action cinema in its promotion of engaged closeness over critical distance.

The final two essays adopt a meta-critical perspective, considering the ways in which the surface/depth opposition figures in various strategies of interpretation and meaning making. Engaging with the ongoing debate between the relative value of surface versus symptomatic readings, James MacDowell explores the ways in which the concept of irony both depends upon and problematises the opposition between literal and latent meanings. Through a close-reading of irony in *Clueless* (Amy Heckerling, 1995), MacDowell interrogates the notion of literal meaning in film, opening the way for consideration of what a reading attentive to surface should entail. Catherine Constable’s article on *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2015) explores the ways in which two conceptions of the postmodern surface, deriving from Jameson and Judith Butler, provide two different genealogies for conceptualizing and reading the surfaces of the science-fiction film. Her close reading of the aesthetics of *Ex Machina* focuses on its plurality of textured and reflective surfaces as well as examining the performativity of “humanness” as presented by the android and human characters. Constable argues that moments of *Ex Machina* force the viewer to consider the political stakes of reading the surface. While MacDowell and Constable utilize different theoretical frameworks, both address the issue of surface readings and how these might be conceptualized positively.

As Fredric Jameson once noted, talking, ironically, about postmodernism and the proliferation of surfaces in late twentieth century culture: “[t]hinking at once negatively and positively about it is a beginning, but what we need is a new vocabulary” (Jameson, quoted in Stephanson, 1987, p. 17). We hope that this issue with its play of surfaces, layers, textures and depthlessness will play a key role in the development of new critical languages.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


