

On Being Shallow:  
A Rather Breathless  
Theoretical Mashup

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### 1. The Möbius Striptease

In Whit Stillman's film, *Barcelona* – or perhaps it is *Metropolitan* (I get them confused) – two brothers are attending a picnic. The older brother – or perhaps it is the younger brother, my memory of this is also a little hazy – asks his sibling a question: “What do you call the message or meaning that's right there on the surface, completely open and obvious? They never talk about that. What do you call what's *above* the subtext?” His brother pauses in reflection, and then answers, “the text.” This joke strikes a chord because it captures a truth about our particular cultural moment, our exhaustion with a particular model of interpretation. Specifically, the masculinist models of penetrating into the profound depths of subtexts, of groping down below the surface to the obscure regions where meaning allegedly lies hidden.

Indeed, I get the feeling that we have been wearing X-Ray specs for so long that we can only recognize, and feel comfortable with, the bones and substrata of a situation: reflected in the changing techno-empirical attitudes toward the body. As Jose van Dijck has shown, the invention and utilization of the endoscope has now rendered the lurid and gruesome secrets of our deepest physiology, and projected them onto the screen, without major damage to the body's surface. (A situation anticipated by pop group The Vapors, who – before “turning Japanese” in 1980 – admitted that they “got a doctor, to take your picture, so I can look at you from inside as well.”) The effect is to simultaneously reinforce and breach this distinction between inside and outside, so that on a conceptual level, the body is treated as a möbius strip, with a single surface, eternally exposed to the diagnostic condition. This significant shift is also visible, logically enough, in the Visible Human Project: which features two prisoners who were sentenced to death, and then sliced into millimetre thick pieces and scanned onto the Internet, allowing both a 3D “fly-through” representation of the body, achieved through a raising of two-dimensionality to the next power.

Perhaps this is why Deleuze and Guattari are so popular in our post-millennial era, since their *Body Without Organs* provides a dynamic three-dimensional model, which relies on a series of interlocking, two-dimensional planes. According to their system, we are not human sausages – metaphorical

tripe covered by hypothetical skin – but the interweaving of three distinct lines: “the segmented lines that cleave us . . . the molecular lines . . . and finally the lines of flight themselves” (506). The machinic assemblage is akin to a mobile by Miró: complex and fragile, yet without subtext, without a hidden meaning that must be deciphered. This is also true of their notion of “the fold,” a sentient form of origami in which the singular psyche is constituted by the infolding of an exteriority. At first then, it may seem surprising that Deleuze in particular uses the term “profound” in his writings, but a quick flick through the OED suffices to recall that the profound is not only a measurable depth, but also an *intensity*, and obviously this resonance is closer to the Deleuzian spirit. This is why the rhizome refuses to acknowledge the very existence of ideology, since those who rely on this term are, according to Deleuze at least, today’s intrepid explorers, using their assumed clarity of vision as machetes to hack away in the sweaty jungles of subtextuality.

## 2. Oxymoronic

Moreover, I recall a professor insisting that there were three fundamental approaches to the world: the deep-divers (modernists, such as Joyce and Rothko), the high flyers (the positivists, such as Einstein and Lévi-Strauss), and the postmodernists, “who just enjoy the play of light on the water.” Of course, the flaw in this metaphor is that it is conceived by a modernist, and clings to a 3D hermeneutic. Indeed another professor, who inhabits a similar modernist position, was permanently amused by the existence of a post-modern musical genre called Deep House, since for him this was a contradiction in terms.

## 3. Architectonics

From *Surface* magazine, extending back to Mallarmé, the last century has played a pushme-pullyou routine between text and subtext, surface and depth, crystallized in the implicit opposition between superficiality/artificiality versus substance/authenticity. The two giants of the age – Freud and Marx – both established systems according to the logic of a rather multi-levelled architectonics. Marx’s labour, structure and superstructure were mirrored by Freud’s id, ego and superego, with the subconscious being the privileged site of decoding and diagnosis (by this time, separate processes completely conflated). However, even old father Freud admitted that “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” – or indeed a pipe is sometimes a pipe. But this only prompts the question, when? When are pipes just pipes, and when are they phallic phantasms?

This is the form, if not the content, of the questions we ask our selves on a daily, indeed, minute-by-minute basis. What are you looking at? What

does that shrug mean? Is that girl's T-shirt (the one that says, "Think My Pants Off"), addressed to me? Or to him? Or to her? Is it a sign?

... and there we hit upon the key term. *Sign*.

#### 4. The Transparency of Evil

The hermeneutic quest is intrinsically a libidinal one. As I tried to show in my book, *After the Orgy*, the search for an underlying truth is part of the sexual-textual legacy of uncovering or stripping. Revelation is quite simply to reveal, and we are all well aware of the games of concealment and disclosure, which power the erotic engines of social and psychological life. Baudrillard uses the striptease as a metaphor for the process in which the moment of revelation is necessarily an anticlimax: *the secret is that there is no secret*. The voyeuristic overtones of the contemporary mediascape occur in the seemingly endless repetition of this fact, itself the "secret" behind the success of Big Brother and its ilk. Such compulsive voyeurism is now ubiquitous, and found on every rhetorical register: for only this morning BBC's *Hard-Talk* promised me that it would "reveal the person behind the persona," and one flick of the channel enabled pop star Shakira to warble her Latin impatience to explore the endless story which lurks dormant underneath her lover's clothes. Likewise, commentators are always amused that the pornographic moneyshot must happen externally, on the surface, despite any claims to being *hard-core*. This paradox stems from what Baudrillard has called, the "transparency of evil." Who needs to decode a subtext when the text is already so enigmatically obvious . . . so painfully present?

#### 5. Reading Between the Pixels

And here's the rub: for some reason we are never satisfied with the way things are *presented*. Perhaps we can go the common route, and blame Plato for encouraging us to see objects as merely the shadows of an ideal, transcendent form. Or we could take the theologians to task for turning hermeneutics into an ethics, a deep-scanning vigilance, which, I have already mentioned, Freud deflected inwards to *the* self (if not his self). Perhaps, in recent times, we have confused subtext with the sacred, to the extent where we forget that *the subtext* – as a reified and definable object of study – was invented in the same chemical explosion in which it allegedly disappeared. Recall, the chronology of the simulacra, in which the signifier soon masks the *absence* of the signified. (Extending this chronology even further than Lacan or Baudrillard, N. Kathryn Hayles claims that signifiers no longer float, but flicker.) As with other meta-categories, such as "community," the object is found in the same gesture and moment that it is supposedly lost: reconstructed after the crime. In a parallel process, psychoanalysis is

attacked by Deleuze for finding objects beneath people's fantasies that it has put there in the first place – like an amnesiac Easter bunny.

Nothing is more seductive than the notion of seduction itself, and thus, the subtext will not be something that politely leaves when asked to. Indeed, the sharp rise in redundancies has confirmed that we need not comb corporate or government jargon for “the truth behind the lies.” Capital has reached the critical point where it can say what it means: “you are fired,” “we don't care,” “made from 100% slave labour” (an actual Nike billboard campaign) . . . these are the slogans of the twenty-first century. No reading between the lines, even less reading between the pixels. It's all there in CMYK . . .

## 6. What Year Is This?

But I began with a reference to Whit Stillman films, and I don't think it is an accident that a certain genre flourished in the 1990s, specifically those slacker, talky movies that are so self-reflexive that they compulsively and pre-emptively analyse themselves in order to say, “hey, I know, I'm hip to it, whatever *it* is,” (perhaps the legacy of Woody Allen movies). This is in sharp contrast to say, Stanley Kubrick, who also wanted to control and pre-empt everything, but by creating an imposing Ur-Subtext, which only he has the key to. This is why *2001: A Space Odyssey* will never be described as talky.

For how else can we account for the success of a fundamentally flawed film like Christopher Nolan's *Memento*, other than the general cultural empathy with a lucid-yet-confused character who must decipher messages written onto his very skin, as tattoos? In this particular thriller, the thrill is not the unspoken secrets circulating within the *noir* economy of shadows, looks, evasions, intentions, trench coats and evening-gowns, but the *différance* of a message compromised by an endless loop of meaning and memory – where comprehension is a re-recovery, in the Biblical sense.

## 7. Those Obscure Tendencies to Enfold

Which leaves us with yet another question: is it oxymoronic, or just plain moronic, to attempt to say something deep about surfaces? Surely this is better than saying shallow things about profundity? Or is it? Back in the day, before being stalked in print by Chris Kraus, the cultural studies pioneer Dick Hebdige was already flagging what he called “the profoundly superficial level of appearances,” an attempt to elevate the status of surface on the one hand, and yet claim it as a space of buried meaning on the other. These so-called “loaded surfaces of life” (17-18) were also the focus of his mentor Roland Barthes, who noted in the 1950s that the relatively new technology of *Omo*

washing powder claims to clean “in depth,” which, as he points out, “is to assume that linen is deep, which no one had previously thought” (37).

But as Thomas Pynchon says, “if they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don’t have to worry about the answers,” a statement which haunts every line a critic writes. It is indeed possible that the binary between depth and surface is as false as all the others, only more persistent because of our preoccupation with space over time. Space is easier to think about, easier to map, trace, fill in and convert into place. Time is less tangible, and resists the kind of conceptual movements that result in the axes of surface and depth, skin and skeleton.

### 8. Superfice

So my point is simply this, that perhaps the time has come to deploy “superfice” as a noun and long-lost brother of the term “superficiality.” (Similarly, it could be the distant cousin of the word “artifice.”) An appreciation of superfice would help us account for the digital espionage art of steganography, which disguises coded messages in the pixels of a seemingly innocuous picture. This process disturbs the neat partition between surface and depth, signifier and signified, since the hidden material is smuggled within the digital skin of its vessel, much more like an invisible ultraviolet tattoo than a swallowed condom full of heroin.

For instance, bodysurfing naked is not more “natural” than boardsurfing in a Kevlar wetsuit; but it *is less complicated*. For a complication is a fold in being: ontological origami, in terms set out by Liebman and adapted by Deleuze. Each invention or innovation is in fact a combination or variation on pre-existing natural states and objects, from “fake” breasts to “artificial” flavours to nuclear fission. So when we skinny-dip in the ocean, it is not a rediscovery of “nature,” but rather a deliberate reversion to a less elaborate (some would say less “mediated”) scenario. We seek the napkin before it has been manipulated into the shape of a swan.

The next question then revolves around the precise tipping point for complication itself, within the laws and algorithms of cosmic and cultural entropy. At what point does this complication reach “critical mass” or “saturation” and violently revert back to simplicity (through, for instance, nuclear war)? This is a question implicitly answered by the rhetoric and actions of the Luddites, the Greens and the Global Justice Movement, as much as the G8, the IMF and the R&D labs of the world’s megacorporations. And the challenge is to resist placing a reductive moralistic framework around this process, for example “women who succumb to the vanity of silicon get their comeuppance with health *complications*,” etc.

Reading such processes ethically may itself be a case of the Heisenberg

Uncertainty Principle, in that the fact of observation affects that which is observed. As the phenomenologists insist, perception is always already entangled with interpretation, thanks to the cultural lenses that we acquire so early in life. And so the words we must fear most is any so-called political call to “get back to basics” (for this only leads to further complications).

### 9. Neo-Levellers

And what does this mean for the “location of culture” (Bhabha), or rather “the culture of location”? Well, allow me to venture that the so-called War Against Terrorism has highlighted a more general war against verticality itself: most obviously from the kamikaze terrorists, but also from Hollywood’s obsession with collapsing buildings (most notably perhaps by David Fincher’s *Fight Club*), as well as recent published calls for Rem Koolhaas to “come back to Earth.” This new breed of Levellers shares the original goal of flattening social and political hierarchies. It seems, however, to be groping towards a more ontological project, that being, flattening the subject itself, via the built environment. (And let there be no misunderstanding, my sympathies are for this turn toward superfluous, albeit with several important qualifications, unpacked in more detailed in two forthcoming books.) The task is thus to inject the discoveries of Möbius into the playful geometry of Edwin Abbot, who in 1884 first created a world of two dimensions in his book *Flatlands*, in which men are polygons and women “mere” lines (again, a more promising prospect in the age of Deleuze’s lines of flight and McLuhan’s lines of force). More than a hundred years ago, Abbot realized that a “higher dimension” could be a matter of geometry, rather than spirit or metaphysics.

In the 1960s and 70s, the figure of the Architect in the cultural imaginary enjoyed a bird’s-eye view of his city. Examples include the aptly-named Royal in J.G. Ballard’s 1970s novel *High Rise*, or indeed the architects from my home town who redesigned the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology so that their own offices would command a view of the horizon from the pinnacle. (And let’s take note of the fact that the Taliban prisoners being held by the US in Cuba are inmates of Camp X-Ray, again a symptom of the transparency of [Western] evil, as opposed to the presumed opacity of the Islamic kind.) Indeed, a friend of mine has always distrusted architects for the simple reason that they presume to decide and control who sleeps with who. In the information era, bricks-and-mortar architects are relinquishing their god-like status to network and systems administrators, who shepherd our lives in ways we are not yet equipped to realize. “The [computer] chip,” Bill Nichols insists, “is pure surface, pure simulation of thought. It’s material surface is its meaning without history, without depth, without aura, affect

or feeling” (131). The parallel processing of computer chip and city grid has become a millennial cliché, emerging more generally from the familiar mantra that the utopian force of (architectural) modernism has crashed, forcing the majority of people to live in the ruins of domestic spaces which appear to be more about building, dwelling and stinking, than Heidegger’s original formulation.

## 10. Accented Ontology

According to Hermann Broch:

The horror of this age is perhaps most palpable in the effect that its architecture has on one; I always come home exhausted and depressed after a walk through the streets. I do not even need to look at the house-fronts; they distress me without my raising my eyes to them . . . I am convinced that no former age ever received its architectural expressions with dislike and repugnance; that has been reserved for ours. Right up to the development of classicism building was a natural function. It is possible that people never even noticed new buildings, much as one scarcely notices a newly planted tree, but if a man’s eye did light upon them he saw that they were good and natural; that was how Goethe still saw the buildings of his time . . .

We are left with a profound disquiet and the knowledge that this [new] style of building, which is no longer a style, is merely a symptom, a writing on the wall proclaiming a state of the soul which must be the non-soul of our non-age. Simply to look at it makes me tired. If I could, I would never leave my house again. (49-51)

But of course we *are* forced to leave our own houses, no matter how agoraphobic our disposition. (And a good thing too, or our encounters with otherness would be purely filtered by the television; *screening* out all tangible, sensual alterity through its increasingly flat plasma screen.) Moreover, we are forced to acknowledge that the architectural pendulum – which swings between the anonymously indifferent and the “contextually sensitive” – has been swinging far longer than the cultural amnesiacs care to admit. In these post-post-postmodern times, we witness the parallel *embrace of*, and *backlash against*, the so-called International Style. (Which was, of course, simply the hegemony of a certain culturally centric style.) These symptomatic buildings, with their “non-style” tailored specifically for our “non-age,” function, however, as the generic shells for a world still as culturally diverse as the Great Barrier Reef is bio-diverse. Those discourses claiming a global convergence of cultures seem to be way off the mark; especially in this terrifyingly Brave New Millennium.



And it is in the wake of these various backlashes: *against* placeless architecture, *against* secular Western decadence, *against* measured responses to immeasurable catastrophes, even *against thought itself*, that we realize the significance of the philosopher's insistence that we are "spoken by language." For to do so amounts to an acknowledgement that we are *spoken in a particular accent*; marked by not only our place of origin, but our spaces of transit, and our different species of asylum. This has profound implications for architecture as much as ethics, for it suggests that cultural specificity *is indeed* crucial to our thinking of "the coming community": even in the supposedly universal domain of ontology. (A domain presumed to reside far above the squalid politics of national identity and border disputes . . . at least by those who haven't read any ontology for the past twenty years.)

Heidegger implicitly answers his own question, "where are we?," with the following:

only where man *remains* subject does the positive struggle against individualism and for the community as the sphere of those goals that govern all achievement and usefulness have any meaning. (133)

Such a positive struggle involves nothing less than redefining the concept of *belonging*: beyond essence, beyond blood and soil, beyond location, and beyond the technology-biology distinction. But towards what? A nanotechnological motorhome of Being? A cyborg igloo? An artificial language without blueprint? William Gibson's Golden-Gate Bridge, repossessed by the poor?

Why not? For we have little to lose at this point. Not even Goethe's respect.

### 11. But How Do You Live Your Nihilism?

Deleuze tells us that "all multiplicitous are flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy all of their dimensions" (9), just as Giambattista Vico, more than two centuries earlier, deliriously discussed the earth of imagination as "one infinite plane" (in McLuhan, 184). Writing in 1998 on the impact of hypertextuality, Pierre Lévy claimed that: "It is as if digitization were establishing a kind of immense semantic plane, accessible from anywhere, which each of us can help produce, manipulate, or modify" (62). The question then becomes, how to think, build and dwell within one infinite plane. What post-Euclidean conditions must be fulfilled before we can conceive of an architecture – or a local habitus–beyond inside and outside, above and beneath?

Without wishing to finish on a prescribed prescriptive tone, it seems increasingly necessary to escape the GPS system in our heads; the one that uses accent, clothing, skin colour and eating habits as a means to identify and pinpoint. To see these elements as symptoms of a cultural sickness, or

further still, to read them as a brand, thereby linking medieval torture and cattle inventory with corporate campaigns and demographics. As any semiotician could tell you, signs can deceive, and symptoms may encourage false diagnoses. Accordingly, we should resist this prevalent obsession with “meaning,” and its associations of depth. Equally, we must realize that to signify something without significance is not necessarily the same thing as signifying nothing. In fact, this may be the most significant activity available to us.

Take, for instance, the example of dancing for no reason whatsoever other than to dance; becoming the medium for the music, either external or internal. Here there is no narrative, no content, no meaning – only movement. All is form, neither pure nor impure, but simply thus . . . the perfect form of the Thai dancer following the spike of false fingernails. Utterly meaningless, and utterly beautiful: “There is . . . nothing important to say; there are perhaps only the resources we deploy in order to avoid the traps of meaning in language” (Bersani, 27). Or better still, “I have nothing to say, and I am saying it” (John Cage).

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