

On the Concept of Surface
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It is known that the Greek philosopher Plato formulated a worldview according to which we should distrust surface visual appearances.¹ He contends that the surface is somehow hiding something truer, lying just beneath, or behind, or outside. Indeed, the surface itself is seen and conceived of as a kind of deceit.

Yet it is equally remarkably true that surface is all we have to go on, as viewers, in the field of the visual. Based purely on a visual approach, the surface appearance of something or someone is what we have to judge or assess or “read” an object, situation, or environment. We can, however, take clues from the context and text / sound information accompanying those surfaces, or integrated into them, in order to help anchor specific interpretations or meanings.

What this false surface / depth duality leaves out of the question is, in my view, a twofold argument. Firstly, the intentionality of the viewer, i.e., one sees what one wants to see regardless of what it actually shows or manifests, and secondly, the fact that any surface appearance has less to do with the intentionality of the author than with the set of relations—or should I call them performances?—that inform the decisions leading up to those visual features.² I believe that, in the long term, one cannot really “fake” those interactions, or instrumentalize them beyond a certain limit. I am ready to defend this statement.

In my view, there is no contradiction between taking things on surface value or delving more deeply into them because one is the precondition of the other. Surface appearances create definition, rather than the other way around.³ Things or people move around and through, interact with, or are arranged so that a specific surface emerges. It does not originate from a conscious endeavor to create or arrange something in that visual way; it comes from an unconscious preparation to be ready to leave, a “conditional readiness”⁴ that can be roughly equated with being prepared for something, i.e., what one is ready to do if certain circumstances arise.

Importantly, therefore, surface cannot be reduced to its exteriority. In fact, when we cannot see something clearly or in detail, we can usually refer to its appearance as an indication of its shape or form. Similarly, its outline, rather than its specifics, might provide the clearest or

¹ For further reading see Wikipedia. “Plato: Theory of Forms”. Accessed Bibliography December 10, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_forms.

² See Bate, David. *Photography: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg, 2009.

³ For further reading see Vacis, Gabriele. *Awareness. Dieci giorni con Jerzy Grotowski*. Milano: Rizzoli, 2002.

⁴ See MacKay, Donald M. *Information, Mechanism, and Meaning*. Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1969.

most striking aspect of its manifestation. But this also means that the surface of something or someone becomes the essence of that object or being. “Surface reading” thus has a parallel with the concepts advanced by French mathematician René Thom, the founder of catastrophe theory, which seeks to describe those situations in which continuous actions of gradually changing forces give way to discontinuous alteration, leading to abrupt changes.⁵ Thom outlines how, in the presence of an external disturbance, the surface of something tends to blur and its contours deform. However, we can still distinguish its appearance, and more often than not, this perturbation produces a certain “stylization” of that something—a reduction to its fundamental and structural features, which become, if anything, clearer and more defined. That is to say, we can recognize not only what it is but also its essential features through its surface apparition, like the skeleton’s structure in a shaking body.

Transposed to the field of the visual, the above is to me a poignant example of a reading of the concept of surface that goes beyond its exteriority, to reveal not only the essence, the structure, of what makes that specific surface but also its condition of existence—the forces, the interactions, the performances that give its features a surface, above and beyond the sentient intervention of whatever author.

The rewards for such conceptual effort are not only the opening of new perspectives and ways of seeing and perceiving the world; they can be, sometimes, sheer beauty in the surface itself—the type of experience that moves us intensely.

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⁵ For further reading see Thom, René. *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*. Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1972 (reprint 1989); and Thom, René. *Modelli matematici della morfogenesi*. Torino: Einaudi, 1985.