

## Editorial

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*Patrick Condliffe*

Regularly we complain that things and people are superficial, that they are too concerned with the surface of things to be considered seriously. People are deeply concerned about appearing ‘shallow’, it is often perceived as being a social sin tantamount to excess vanity or hubris. Emotions carry three-dimensions as well, if one is buoyant they are happy but the image conjured is that of a balloon or ring – something flat inflated on a third axis. In the critical process we argue that objects, artworks and, of course, texts lack ‘depth’. If one considers the critical process the dichotomy between surface and depth becomes apparent almost to the point of cliché. People ‘plumb the depths’ of subjects; offer ‘in depth close readings’; present ‘deep insights’, or make comments that are ‘deeply insightful,’ to name but a few.

What exactly do we mean by these comments and clichés? As academics we strive to find meaning within the fields that we have chosen for our research. And for many describing the process of or aim of that study oddly requires the use of three dimensional allegories and metaphors. Research is a process of ‘scratching below the surface’ and ‘getting a handle’ or ‘getting to grips with something’ – metaphors we use to make tangible the sometimes ethereal nature of knowledge. These are paradigms and ‘objects’ that many researchers find upon the surface of a page, a picture, or a screen, and are rendered and discussed as multi-dimensional rather than merely two-dimensional. Cognitive psychologist Mary Crane has argued that ‘[t]he spatial imaginary of a text can be a way for an author to resolve contradictions

that are irresolvable in abstract theoretical formulations, since it operates according to a very different logic, one that is image based and inflected by feeling.’<sup>1</sup> In this estimation the ability to mentally perceive things in dimensions not physically present within the point, text, or object of attention is a necessity to interpret meaning successfully. It is an essential strategy used by critics on a day to day moment to moment basis and one often overlooked or taken for granted.

Similarly, at the heart of Plato’s Allegory of The Cave is the importance of differentiating between surfaces and depths.<sup>2</sup> The shadow viewed by the prisoners is of course a surface reading that, to the prisoners at least, demonstrates depth and is an object to be read and understood superficially. Yet once released the prisoners experience the depth of the world around them. What was merely superficial silhouette becomes a realised object. So too, Heidegger’s conceptions of *being-in-itself* and *daesin* revolve around our spatial awareness and our ability to perceive the depth of objects so as to realise our place in relation to them and thus to ourselves and the world at large. And so the modern research work of Mary Crane is embedded in the spatial metaphors at the heart of our academic traditions, both modern and ancient.

The distinctions, tensions, or relations between surface and depth are something that have permeated popular culture in recent times as much as it has academia. Homer Simpson’s classic transition from the flat world of Springfield to the terrifying depth of our extra dimension in 1995’s *Treehouse of Horror VI* was a classic cartoon moment that deftly explored the manner in which audiences critique texts based on their spatial dimensions, whilst

also parodying the attitudes that individuals place on form of text over another. Additionally, the increasing ubiquity of the internet and the lay communities that inhabit its sites of fandom are exemplar of this. For example, Rust Cohle's (Matthew McConaughey) recent hollow-eyed assertion that 'time is a flat circle'<sup>3</sup> in HBO's *True Detective* has secured the shows large following. By presenting a nihilistic philosophy, penned by former academic Nic Pizzolatto, which some declare empty nihilism and sends others scurrying to dig up the hidden meanings of the text and the ideologies behind it, the show has inspired fan communities to engage in philosophical Easter Egg hunts that are representative of modern audiences' desire for texts to have depth that stretches outside of the text; creating a web of interlinking meaning across differing textual and narrative forms. These communities that surround this renaissance of long format television narratives, as well as the traditional cinematic and literary forms, embody the legacy of Louis Althusser's program of symptomatic reading popularised by Frederick Jameson.<sup>4</sup> Jameson's assertion that "if everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either" has become the mantra of popular culture wherein communities largely refuse to see the text as merely a superficial narrative, but rather a broader critique on current societal issues.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the ivory tower no longer seems quite so high, nor does it cast the long shadow it once did.

In our first article Rodney Wallis asserts that film scholars have traditionally viewed Hollywood's Biblical epic cycle through a Cold War lens. And that, therefore, the manner in which Oriental characters have been represented in these films has hitherto been largely overlooked. In this essay he examines

the ways in which the Biblical epic cycle Americanises the ancient Hebrew protagonists whilst simultaneously constructing the figure of the Oriental as a cultural and racial “Other”. Eliza Waterhouse presents a reading of Palestinian/Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum’s video recording *Measures of Distance* to reveal what it may tell us about the politics of memory and identity in exile. She argues that as the post 9/11 surge of Arabophobia continues to undermine claims of personal identity within diasporic Arab communities, And that as such, works exploring identity through visual self-ethnography may be thought of as timely forces of intercultural exchange.

Adriaan Smith's paper discusses a mythical Pākehā cultural identity present in Gary Henderson’s play *Home Land*; Christopher Blake and Stuart Hoar’s opera *Bitter Calm*; *Fishnet* a piece of dance theatre by Lyne Pringle and Kilda Northcott; as well as the jazz songs of Andrew London. In this article Smith argues that beneath its surface representation theatrical performance reveals the mythical aspects of culture. Yi-Chuang Elizabeth Lin’s essay incorporates Jan Patočka’s *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* into the reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* and demonstrates how Woolf illustrates *Eros* and nature as the primal momentum and intermediate of history through a village pageant. Through Patočka, war is recast as the suppressed other face of peace rather than its inherent antagonist. The release of energy in the form of war and violence, instead of disruption, is what unifies and thrusts history forward. Woolf’s *Between the Acts* re-evokes the organic unity underneath the apparent fragmentation of life through an acknowledgement of *Eros*. Chris Rudge seeks to demonstrate that sociological and philosophical studies of science have more to offer readers

than deconstructionist or semiotic readings of technical scientific texts. It does so by illustrating how Bruno Latour's and Henri Bergson's studies of various experimental and semiotic-textual practices (in the textual, political and philosophical productions of theoretical physics texts) point to important aspects 'at the surface' of science: aspects to which scientists may themselves remain blind.

Grace Andreacchi explores the technique of mending broken pottery with gold dust in 'Kintsukuroi'. In 'Keeping Fish' Tim Stains probes the existential depths of fishkeeping. Stephen Davis' 'Email #183' examines the dangerous depths of a relationship the surface of a lone email in this epistolary narrative. Aaron Sommers' 'Beef Jerky' combines teen angst, charcuterie, dermatology and fishing as it explores the pitfalls of judging teen angst superficially. Finally, Jaimee Edwards reviews Ben Quilty's latest show *After Afghanistan* in the context of a national discourse on war and its recent inclusion of representations of trauma. On behalf of the editorial team, I would like to thank our authors for their excellent contributions to this issue, as well as the readers who offered their generous feedback on our submissions.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Crane. 'Surface, Depth, and the Spatial Imaginary: A Cognitive Reading of The Political Unconscious'. *Representations*. Fall 2009. 108. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Plato. *The Republic*. Translated and with an introduction by R.E. Allen. New Haven: Yale University Press, c2006. Print.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Secret Fate of All Life'. *True Detective*. HBO, February 16, 2014. Television.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Althusser & Itienne Balibar (1970). *Reading Capital*. Translated by Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books.

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca. 1981. Cornell University Press, 61