Blur and Fuzz: On Translating Representations of Low Resolution

Richard Shiff
TRANSPOSITIONS BETWEEN VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL SEMIOTICS

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1. Rule

The sociopathic killer Anton Chigurh, a creation of novelist Cormac McCarthy, enjoys using a coin toss to decide the fate of people he encounters. The toss establishes a differential binary: heads or tails, live or die, no ambiguity, no argument. Chigurh often dispenses with the toss, acting directly as an agent of chance. He is someone else’s misfortune. Having decided on a killing, he faces his soon-to-be-deceased counterpart with a question: “If the rule you followed led you to this, of what use was the rule?”.

The fictional Chigurh illustrates a principle: despite following a rule of conduct, a life remains subject to chance. Fate intervenes. Chigurh himself is seriously injured in an automobile accident caused only by his chance presence at the time and place of occurrence. There exist no reliable rules, unless we simply accept chance as the rule. The principle applies analogously to texts. Lacking rules specific enough to control it, a text is buffeted by chance associations, not only during its composition but all the more during the course of its interpretation. (A rule “specific enough” would constitute a template for the very same text: a duplicating or ingeminating device.) With or without rules, texts turn. At any moment, from any perspective, the writing or reading of a text assumes a direction; but this sense,

an incipient meaning, holds only until a subsequent turn. Despite the effort of translators and interpreters to achieve precision—or because of this effort—texts become entropic. Options expand; ambiguity increases; resolution decreases. The sense blurs; meaning becomes imprecise, fuzzy.

Like political ideologies and social imaginaries, rational theories exist to mask the entropy, the cascade of interpretive failings. Theories constitute the missing rule. To cite an ancient example: contradiction is likely to arise in the formulations of even the most accomplished thinkers. What should an interpreter do when faced with apparent contradiction? One theory—so ingrained that it seems to be “common sense” rather than a theory—condemns contradiction as destructive to reason. Arguments guided by this hypothesis eliminate every contradiction subject to detection, without necessarily featuring contradiction itself as a central issue. A rival theory, more common than one might think, finds contradiction instructive and even generative. The latter position, popular among academics working as critics of culture, challenges the former by recognizing an obvious theoretical alternative, the negative of the positive. This challenge is limited, for the alternative tacitly acknowledges the same entity or quality (either the absence or presence of contradiction) as the hinge on which the theoretical argument turns. To choose one position over the other—to prefer either closed resolution or open ambiguity—corresponds to an act of ideological alignment. Through the same door, whether closing or opening, each position claims validity. Theories are designed to lend strategic and even moral necessity to arbitrary preferences. They establish a hierarchy of value between abstract equals—choices that might as well be determined by a coin toss.

2. Context

When I discuss a text in a seminar—by Walter Benjamin, say, or by Jacques Derrida—I question the motivation of the theory or method that the text appears to be promoting, or at least exemplifying. Why does this writer develop this theoretical construct at this moment? Theory itself has a history and a context, even a theory like Derrida’s that denies the possibility of identifying contexts with reliability. There remain unreliable contexts, chance contexts, as moving targets of investigation. An interpreter guesses at a context as if its identification entailed an encompassing theory, to be grasped through one of its manifest aspects, however

2. “All things must be or not be, or must come or not come into being, at this or that time in the future. But we cannot determinately say which alternative must come to pass” (original emphasis). Aristotle (trans. 1938, p. 139).

3. A typical example of the negative mode: “Richter’s work questions from within the credibility of all of his strategies, confronting each category with its opponent [...] each convention with the one that denies its validity, each pictorial cancellation with its proper reinstitution, each prohibition with its critical negation.” Buchloh (1993, p. 50).
minor (like postulating immanent apocalypse, having noticed aberrant behavior in insects or birds). With ever greater degrees of false security, such guessing or abduction leads to induction, which leads to deduction.\footnote{See Peirce (1903, p. 106). “Deduction proves that something \textit{must} be; Induction shows that something \textit{actually is} operative [seems to be the case]; Abduction merely suggests that something \textit{may be}” (original emphasis).} To have articulated a hypothetical context leaves the interpreter—as the translator and bearer of meaning—free to speculate about a critical thinker’s motivation, which can be regarded as another aspect of the operative theoretical syndrome. We aim only for what a theory has established as possible or imaginable.

A pair of texts creates a context for each. Setting Benjamin and Derrida in proximity (as the previous paragraph did) encourages speculation on areas where the concerns and purposes of the two thinkers overlap—an orientation for understanding each of them separately or both together. Juxtapose any two entities: an observer will discover elements of sameness, likeness, resemblance, and difference (each a variation of the other conditions). The projects of Benjamin and Derrida converge politically in their development of anti-authoritarian arguments. Both sought a critical practice so resistant to authority that even their most sympathetic readers would fail at converting these texts to dogma in support of a contrary politics of their own (the negatives of Benjamin and Derrida yield no positives).

The sources of authority that the two writers confronted differed, analogous to the way that the structure of a social order differs from the conceptual play of the language that may appear—in theory—as its foundation. Benjamin, more the cultural critic, sought to undermine the authoritative discourse of the totalitarian state in both its material and symbolic manifestations in the Europe of the 1930s. Derrida, more the philosophical critic, undermined authority-in-general by denying it to the Image and the Word. No interpretation would reveal the Rule, Law, or Truth that a text or picture presumed to present. Derrida subverted conventional philosophy and theology by deconstructing its semiotics, that is, semiotics-in-general. If he had a specific target for his critique, it was probably the French university system of the 1950s and 1960s, and more broadly, “Western philosophy”.

The two bodies of theory, Benjamin’s and Derrida’s, are potentially relevant to my own academic discipline of art history, which involves the evaluation of cultural signs, both textual and pictorial. Art historians attempt to define a past historical context as the foundation for comprehending its superstructure of signs, while they (in principle) acknowledge a present context of interests and terminological preferences. They are interpreters, that is to say, translators of the forms of art. Despite the subjective connotations of \textit{interpretation}, I freely exchange the term with \textit{translation} to stress the lack of equivalence between any two expressions of a discursive fragment or an isolated image. Common parlance identifies the
translator of speech (as opposed to written text) as an interpreter. Speech is fluid and may seem to create its context as it progresses, changing it. In contradistinction, a book has a translator pure and simple, as if the text, once removed from the specificity of a living context, acquires such permanence and stability that it can be conveyed in “literal” equivalence. The translation of a text is nevertheless a living interpretation, more like a painting in progress than a stop-action Polaroid print—more of a blur than a view in focus.

3. Speech

With respect to achieving a convincing description, analysis, and interpretation, an art historian, art critic, or theorist of art hardly differs from any number of others involved with problems of translation within the human sciences. Is the critique of visual art distinct in some way? From a recent discussion of the plight of the humanities as a general area of study, a longstanding and rather obvious answer emerges, but in an odd context. Early in 2014, the Irish literary critic Denis Donoghue introduced an issue of Daedalus (official journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences) dedicated to the topic, “What Humanists Do”. To follow is an extended quotation from his statement, which invokes in turn the considerably earlier work of the German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt. Here, a “past” (1958) communicates with a “present” (2014); the past speaks as a present, translated in terms of current concerns. Donoghue interweaves his words with Arendt’s:

On October 4, 1957, Russian scientists launched into orbit the first artificial Earth satellite, popularly called Sputnik, an object 23 inches in diameter. A month later, on November 3, they launched a larger object, Sputnik 2. Outside Russia and especially in the United States, these achievements caused mainly consternation. If Russian scientists could send such objects into orbit, they might send a nuclear bomb, next time. Worse still, on January 31, 1958, American scientists tried to emulate the Russian launching, and failed. Hannah Arendt, adding a last-minute prologue to The Human Condition, considered Sputnik an event ‘second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom’. Its bearing on political life was likely to be woeful.

Donoghue continues with unabridged quotation from Arendt:

If we would follow the advice, so frequently urged upon us, to adjust our cultural attitudes to the present status of scientific achievement, we would in all earnest adopt a way of life in which speech is no longer meaningful. For the sciences today have been forced to adopt a “language” of mathematical symbols which, though it was originally meant only as an abbreviation for spoken statements, now contains statements that in no way can be translated back into speech.
The political/cultural issue can be construed broadly as a translation problem among professional classes within the modern nation-state. Donoghue comments, again referring to Arendt: “The question of maintaining speech, or of rendering it redundant, seemed to Arendt crucial because ‘speech is what makes man a political being’”. He adds still another quotation from his predecessor:

The reason why it may be wise to distrust the political judgment of scientists *qua* scientists is not primarily their lack of “character”—that they did not refuse to develop atomic weapons—or their naïveté—that they did not understand that once these weapons were developed they would be the last to be consulted about their use—but precisely the fact that they move in a world where speech has lost its power. And whatever men do or know or experience can make sense only to the extent that it can be spoken about.

The failure is not of action but of access to an evolving discourse (“mathematical symbols”). Perhaps the social critics failed by abdication, neglecting to use discursive resources still available to them. Donoghue justifies his return to Arendt: “She did not say that the humanities are the prime form in which human values are described and discussed, talked about, and argued over; that the humanities are predicated upon speech. But she permitted us to think that it might be so”.

During the 1950s and 1960s, numerous critical thinkers argued along the lines sketched out by Arendt. Donoghue could have cited other intellectuals of the time, including the art critic Clement Greenberg and the art historian Meyer Schapiro, both of whom offered similar warnings, albeit as minor actors in the agonistic play of art and science as it was developing. During the early 1960s, C.P. Snow’s essay *The Two Cultures* was commonly assigned to college students; it acknowledged the widening gap between the methods of the sciences and traditional practice in the humanities and criticized those outside the sciences who made little or no effort toward reintegration. The task would not be easy. Theoretical scientists and even certain philosophers were abandoning ordinary prose exposition, creating their arguments through forms of higher mathematics and rarefied symbolic logic. Wherever this shift occurred without compensatory measures, something fundamental to human society was lost. Gone was the seriously informed political conversation that, given a well-intentioned, beneficent populace, would lead to sensible, collective political action. In the rapidity of their advances, science and the technologies dependent on it could be evaluated only in relative ignorance.

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5. Donoghue (2014, p. 9). For Donoghue’s quotations from Arendt, see Arendt (1958, pp. 3-4). (Original emphasis.)


7. C.P. Snow (1959).

8. A current case in point is the poorly informed debate over the efficacy of inspecting facilities for nuclear weapons research. The physical nature of radioactivity—the difficulty in masking its traces—seems incomprehensible to many political leaders: see Morello and DeYoung (2015).
Consider a common consumer technology: television. Americans of the 1950s and 1960s were hardly challenged by what they saw and heard from the screen, but they understood little or nothing of how this flow of pictures and words came into their homes: low entertainment, high technology.9 Television lacked a visible projection device. Its equipment seemed to have dematerialized, leaving only a trail of electrons and phosphorescence. When something went awry with this form of visual communication, the situation bore only slight analogy to a film strip jamming in a mechanical movie-house projector. In that instance, the passive viewer could sense the mechanical stoppage and perhaps even hear from the projection room that a human being, the projectionist, was taking action. With the problem acknowledged, an immediate response followed. To the contrary, when trouble with television occurred, it seemed to originate at a mysterious, unbridgeable distance. Whether it was a problem in transmission or in reception might remain unclear. Television amounted to a homely analogue of advanced science and philosophy. For college students who were being introduced to the latest sense of reality, the general picture of the world could be grasped—the significance, both scientific and cultural, of the uncertainty and indeterminacy implied by the theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Kurt Gödel, and Werner Heisenberg. But it was hard to comprehend how the technical arguments proceeded to their philosophical conclusions. The operation of an advanced form of logic or mathematics does not readily resemble a text to be read, word by evocative word.

Donoghue’s version of the cultural critic’s evaluation problem—which for Arendt amounted to a translation problem, symptomatic of a grave political problem—introduces visual art into the mix. He alludes to the fact that visual art, especially the relatively new art of abstraction, evades linguistic translation. Words fail us in two areas of advanced achievement, not only in science but also in art. Scientists can resort to mathematics to analyze their observations and data, most of which are amenable to numerical coding and algorithms; and mathematical specialists can aid them, like engineers aiding architects. Painters and sculptors command neither numbers nor words, unless they solicit art critics to verbalize the visual experience, translating the sensory into the conceptual. To represent this practice, Donoghue invokes T.J. Clark, who has acknowledged a critical reorientation, motivated by his sense of changing societal needs. Having once resolved to identify specific works of art with discursive origins in the dominant ideologies of their place and time, Clark returned to an attitude he had previously ridiculed, the tendency to define art as a force in resistance to any articulate ideological alignment. He announced his reconsideration in 2006: “I believe the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about

9. Along with its technology, the production values of commercial television have improved over the years; but the aesthetic judgment of a literary critic rings true: “Television has not produced a single major work of art and lags far behind film itself”. Russo (2005, p. 56).
For an art critic to follow such a principle of untranslatability defeats much of the purpose of the profession. But Clark is hardly the first in this ironic realization. Following Clark’s lead, Donoghue concludes with an anecdotal account of his having viewed *Golden Bird*, a sculpture by Constantin Brancusi that only vaguely evokes avian appearance and movement. Critics call its form “abstract”. Donoghue’s response suggests—for better or worse—that the discourses of visual art and advanced science run parallel: both are mystifying; neither can be addressed adequately by common language. This is the art critic’s dilemma, but not Donoghue’s: “If I were an art critic, I would be obliged to be expressive”—that is, to apply a discourse of translation, “expressing” the “meaning” of the art, explaining how and why the forms affect human sensation and emotion. “Standing in front of *Golden Bird*, I was gratified […] to accept the gift as it was offered”. As what? Presumably, as feeling. Yet Donoghue steps back from this disarticulating, speechless brink. As a parting gesture, he places Clark in the shadow of Arendt, who retains a discriminating power of evaluative translation: “Has Hannah Arendt the better part of the debate, when she comes back to speech that she has never left?”.

4. Human

There is hope, Donoghue implies. Speech—common language—has its means of investigating the undeniable reality of feeling and can match the indeterminacies of contemporary science and philosophy with its own rhetorical force. This very fact, if it truly is one, is illustrated by the words and gestures of a character in the film *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen (released in 2001). The story is set in 1949, the year the Soviet Union happened to test its first atomic bomb, a moment when the technocratic problems that Arendt and Snow would address a decade later were already apparent. In the film, we follow a trial lawyer’s argument, made before a jury. He alludes to modern painting when he wants to demonstrate that facts, however evident to observation, may have no rational scientific explanation—at least none that ordinary people can understand. As a consequence, it seems that some facts, although factual, acquire no meaning. They have neither causes from which they derive nor effects to which they lead. They enter no narrative, no discourse. They have no rule.

The lawyer uses the everyday language of his speech to sway the jury. The gist of his argument is this: no proof, even if based on facts, can be established with reasonable certainty. No evidence can be regarded as reliable, once people acknowledge where modern science has led them—namely, to Heisenberg’s

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uncertainty principle or principle of indeterminacy, which, as the lawyer points out, has been established by mathematical proof, not verbal argument. And modern art, the lawyer implies, has had the same effect of undermining ordinary reasoning. When he refers to the visual abstraction characteristic of modern art, he makes a looping, spiraling gesture in the air, as if to indicate that he lacks words adequate to its description and analysis. The parallel to Donoghue’s “expression” of Brancusi’s art (which the literary critic had no obligation to attempt and never did) reduces within the course of the lawyer’s speech to a voiceless hand-signal—a direct enactment of feeling. If the feeling were not already present, it would be induced through this action, its own imitation, which is as much of an interpretive spiral as it is a physical spiral, involute, closing in on itself. The jury is let to infer that the facts of the legal case can reach no logical conclusion, just as the lines and colors of abstract painting fail to generate a coherent representational structure or narrative order. No one denies the presence of each abstract element, but its motivation escapes observation; it enters no causal chain. Analogously, the lawyer defends his client, whom the facts would otherwise seem to condemn: because no observable fact can have a secure meaning, the jury has no recourse but to acquit the defendant on grounds of insufficient evidence and reasonable doubt. The defendant is “modern man”, a creature who has “lost [his] place in the universe”, now regulated by science, mathematics, and technology, not to mention forms of art that no one understands.¹² The plea amounts to an argument against the logic of argumentation, favoring the presence of contradiction as opposed to its absence. Just as our observation of an infinitesimally small particle of physical matter may cause a change in its form or position (Heisenberg’s “fact”), each of the facts of our experience undermines another. Every fact is a contradiction of a fact that might have been.

A certain value to the practice of art criticism nevertheless remains, just as Donoghue’s visceral appreciation of Brancusi’s art could remain (“I was gratified […] to accept the gift”). Perhaps without acknowledging it as such, art critics and historians investigate the sensuous aspects of human thought and experience, which lie beyond or behind any concerns for logical order, contradictory or not. Their kind of analytical thought links intimately to sensation and emotion, the thought that generates truly poetic works of art in all media—forms of art resistant to translation. Arendt referred to human existence as a “free gift from nowhere”.¹³ Sensation and emotion are among its manifestations. Like the result of a coin toss, whether lucky or unlucky, existence has no ultimate cause, no explanation. “I don’t know what it is I stand to win”, one of Chigurh’s potential victims says when told to call heads or tails. “You stand to win everything”, Chigurh replies. Confused, the

¹². Coen & Coen (2002). Words quoted from _The Man Who Wasn’t There_, spoken as a voice-over by the defendant Ed Crane, summarizing his lawyer’s argument.

¹³. Arendt (1958, pp. 2-3).
man insists: “You ain’t makin’ any sense, mister”. He fails to grasp that his future existence is the wager. But existence itself makes no sense.

Sensations are the feelings that correspond to thinking, not its words. Words make sense; but thinking itself, whatever its means, has a dimension apart from its words. Like existence, it is a “free gift from nowhere”. Thinking defines the human, as if it were a theory of the human: humans think; thinking is human. Translation (critical interpretation) is an aspect of this theory. It can occur with or without words.

5. Scale

Allied with a critical practice of art history—its concern for physical objects and physicality in general—are speculations on the materiality of language and the phenomenology of reading, writing, and speaking. Given our increasing dependence on electronic messaging, I wonder (as others must wonder) whether our thought processes are now paced to the speed at which our fingers can do the necessary typing, the speed at which we feel our way into the sentences we compose: tap-tap, tap-tap, tap-tap. The thinking we do when writing in cursive longhand must differ. Typed thinking is decidedly digital in our physical experience, less analog than its discursive continuity would otherwise imply; and it usually engages two hands rather than the one of the draughtsman. Curiously, because of the rather archaic hardware (a keyboard) attached to advanced software (a computer program), it may be that most of us are thinking more slowly than the professionals of the 1940s or 1950s, who were free to operate at the speed of speech, given a stenographer’s capacity to record spoken words in shorthand. An office assistant could have facilitated the fast speaking-thinking of the lawyer in The Man Who Wasn’t There. Today, we use an unsystematic version of shorthand when at a keyboard for text-messaging, but not for serious, fully sensuous thoughts. There are different speeds of thinking. Can I think faster than I can talk—or type? Perhaps not: “Speech is not a fetter, then, like a drag chain on the wheel of the mind, but a second wheel running parallel to it on the same axle”. Heinrich von Kleist’s early nineteenth-century metaphor is mechanical, not electronic, though he understood electricity. The gears of both speech and thought shift only at a certain speed. An art historian’s sensitivity to such issues of scale, including the scale of time (its relative, experiential speed), may be the measure of the social value of the interpretation of art at the present moment. Art and its criticism preserve a sensitivity to scale.

I sympathize with the position of the lawyer in The Man Who Wasn’t There: facts have no inherent meaning, only some arbitrary meaning that a theory assigns to them. Yet an array of facts projects a sense of scale. A limited archive sometimes

reveals as much as an extensive one. Size and scale differ. Our descriptions become more elaborate, Friedrich Nietzsche observed, while our explanations fail to improve. An increase in information (its size and scope) does not render an argument or a judgment better (its scale and import). Perhaps we should evaluate the “scale” of an argument rather than the logic of it. We feel the scale. It impresses.

An art critic ought to be skilled at articulating judgments, with or without a surplus of data. Art historians assume responsibility for establishing contexts of causality—for example, whether the evolution of a form, theme, or genre has resulted from natural causes or cultural causes. A form might develop for its capacity to deceive the eye (a natural cause) or by correspondence with ethnic standards of beauty (a cultural cause). Context, as I have been arguing, requires a theory of what counts as a context. Charles Sanders Peirce, whose philosophical pragmatism either directly or indirectly inspired a number of late-twentieth-century American artists, understood that philosophy has to start somewhere in a specific place and time; it cannot begin (all over again) at the beginning of time and evolution. Some pattern or context of belief needs to be acknowledged, even by the most skeptical of theorists: “We cannot begin with complete doubt”, Peirce wrote: “We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have. […] Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts”. Our prejudices constitute our factual base (in all its contradiction and indeterminacy). Peirce implies that when we act with a pretense to full objectivity, we accomplish no more than proving rationally what our hearts have caused us to believe. We will have gotten nowhere beyond where we started, having become rationally convinced of what we were already emotionally convinced. Having responded to the subjective scale, we evaluate the objective size—information that attributes a rational foundation to thought presumably underlying the immediacy of speech that has already occurred. We might have been satisfied enough with our speaking-thinking as a “free gift from nowhere”.

6. Performance

I have alluded not only to the materiality of language but also to the materiality of time. The two forms of materiality join in the pacing of speaking and thinking, which affects our sense of scale (the import of whatever we experience). Deliberately or not, certain works of modern and contemporary art face the issue of scale head-on. Consider how David Reed reflects on his “brushstroke” paintings of the 1970s, acknowledging a condition analogous to a division of speech and thought: “Part of me would identify with the painting, as if I were inside it [immediate speech] […]. Another part of me would stay outside and watch what was happening [analytical

17. Peirce (1868, pp. 156-57).
thought]. I felt split in two. In some of my first Stroke paintings, the idea was to work so quickly that I knew I could get the two parts back together”.18

Reed’s brushstroke paintings often consist of several relatively narrow, vertical panels joined together to form a larger canvas. In the case of #90 (1975), five panels, each with a height of 76 inches and a width of approximately 11 inches (total width, 56 inches), create a ground for Reed to extend ten horizontal strokes with a wide loaded brush, left to right (Fig. 1). He first painted the entire canvas white, then spread the ten parallel brushstrokes in black quickly enough so that the ground remained wet, the white mixing with the black as he proceeded. Reed’s action created a number of chance effects, indexical markers of his race against the drying time of his pigment mixture: various spatters, drips, and striations. In addition, where each stroke passed over one of the four interior panel abutments, a white highlight would appear, the result of the brush snagging on the minor physical break in the continuity of the surface (increased resistance at this point in the passage of the black stroke renders more of the white ground visible, as if the stroke were either holding or skipping a beat).

Fig. 1. David Reed, #90 (1975). Image courtesy of the artist.

18. Reed (1989, p. 5).
The width of #90 required Reed to extend his horizontal reach to its physical limit; and, by stretching toward the top and crouching along the bottom, he was able to work continuously to fill the entire height of the canvas, somewhat taller than he. The effect he sought would have been lost had he failed to work fast enough to prevent the paint from drying. In this painterly stress test, doing and looking, speaking and thinking, become integrated, or at least approach this condition. If Reed were a typist, he would be typing as fast as he could think; but he would be thinking to the physical specifications of his typing apparatus, including his hands as part of the equipment.

Reed’s work projects the artist’s body not so much as a source of manual skill but as the determinant of the scale of the painting and its figuration. Scale becomes the element that solicits our sensitivity as viewers. In art as in life, scale often remains a background feature, taken for granted by critics and even by artists themselves; but Reed foregrounds the performance of scale. It seems that the artist’s mind has returned to his body, where it belongs, experiencing phenomenological wholeness, another “free gift from nowhere”. Yet how should others interpret the image of his art? Does a flowing, variegated, sometimes spattering, sometimes dripping brushstroke constitute anything more definitive than a blur? Does the spread of irregular edges follow some complex rule of conduct, or does it lack all rule? Has the pictorial grid of horizontal strokes and vertical panels lost its oriented, orthogonal focus? Each surface anomaly, such as the slight crevice created by the abutment of adjacent panels, adds fuzziness to the sense of linear direction and regularity within Reed’s rigorously programmed exercise.

7. Resolution

Consider fuzziness as a semiotic factor related to the quality of resolution. Many recent paintings, both abstract and representational, extend over surfaces that are large in relation to the dimensions of the typical human body; yet what affects our culture most deeply at the present moment, both economically and perceptually, is miniaturization. The latest cell phones are larger than earlier models, but still pocket-sized. With respect to this miniaturization, as opposed to various kinds of gigantism, we may be in danger of losing our sense of bodily scale and its limits—limits often signified by a quality of fuzziness. My sense of bodily scale causes me to wonder whether thinking faster than I can speak, write, or type would serve any purpose. Would faster thought merely become vague and fuzzy? Reed’s visual art, with its coordination of feeling and thinking, provokes such a question.

Our current version of the problem of the body and its sense of an image begins with still photography. This is a well-rehearsed account. I will repeat only its essence, stressing the matter of scale. Before the advent of photography, the market for images rewarded painters and engravers for their ability to work with clarity in miniature. Portraits by miniaturists offered the advantage of portability; they could
be carried like coinage or paper currency, which also depended on the skills of miniaturists for the design. Like many other visual practices, those of the portrait miniaturist became obsolete with the advent of negative-process photography. Commercial interests soon expanded the imagistic stretch of photography: what was small became large. This was especially true of the early development of cinema, where it seemed proper for the projection screen of a moving picture to assume the width of the traditional theatrical stage. Viewing a movie became a collective, social event. Through the early decades of the twentieth century, photographic filmstrips were projected at ever increasing size with correspondingly enhanced resolution, so that large images could be seen with the clarity of small images.

The early years of television brought a new form of dramatic miniaturization. Moving pictures entered the private living room, even the bedroom. In the United States, it became customary to refer to the “big screen” of cinema and the “small screen” of television. Despite its inherent technological mystification, early television left minor electronic adjustments in the hands of the consumer, who could look at the test pattern at the beginning or end of the day and regulate the reception of the image. The test pattern itself is a fascinating communicative device, demonstrating that disturbance and irregularity, rather than stasis and order, are the conveyors of information (perhaps analogous to gaining information, not losing it, through instances of contradiction: we notice only what breaks our cognitive rhythm). When the test pattern lacks distortion, it resembles a sleeping consciousness. Its thinking, if it does any, bears no import. But even when the pattern becomes active, linking its newly distorted appearance to some material cause in the environment is difficult. We have information—an image of “interference”—but no interpretive translation comes immediately to mind.

Over several decades, the television screen grew larger; and the apparatus now projects a high-resolution, digital image that we no longer regulate save by turning it from off to on and back again (the electronic current is never actually inactivated). While television increased the size of its filmic image, cinematic effects found a new outlet in the miniature screens of cell phones, where, by electronic transfer, low-resolution representations can appear as if high-resolution. When the same imagery is projected at such radically different sizes, we lose the sense that a representational image is itself an aesthetic, material construction and must have an internal scale relating to the physical conditions of its human creation. A miniature portrait was once a miniature painting—that is, a painting that had been created at small scale with a brush or stylus, not a diminished projection of something existing also at much larger size. The painted miniature remained specific to its conditions of fabrication, just like a Reed brushstroke. But a filmic image that can be scaled either to a theatrical environment or to a hand-held electronic device no longer possesses this material specificity. A simple movement of the fingers against the screen of a cell phone increases or reduces the size and resolution of the image, which annihilates the specificity of scale. We view cyclopean video
projections in New York’s Times Square, Berlin’s Potsdamer Platz, and Tokyo’s Ginza, while living in an era of miniaturization. Everything equates to everything else, as if dimensions no longer mattered. Electronic technology seems to have lifted imagery out of its base in materiality, where the unaided eye could detect the limits of refinement inherent in the use of any particular material, such as an oil medium conveying granules of mineral pigment in a process of painting. The granules can be only so fine; the medium spreads them only so smoothly.

What are the consequences of this loss of specific scale, which now seems to be the normative condition of viewing? For one thing, we lose the tension between our perception of the whole of an image and our perception of its constitutive parts, the materiality and physicality that (so we used to think) ought to bear on the meaning. Reciprocally, we no longer sense a conflict between the “meaning” of an image—its holistic identity within an abstract, linguistic discourse—and its sensory, aesthetic composition—the physical causes of its “feel”. It is as if speech had been set loose from thinking and vice versa, with neither faculty influencing its counterpart. The feel of the image relates to what we perceive when we probe how it was made, the conditions of its “construction”, which are not only physical but cultural. When we fail to differentiate meaning from feel, we tend to regard images in either of two extreme ways. They become entirely natural, the equal of anything else identified in nature, like physical things that exist. Or they become entirely artificial, having no meaningful material foundation, like concepts expressed in language.

To draw a parallel to Arendt’s thinking in 1958: digital imagery is the higher mathematics of photographic representation. Its meaning appears like “a free gift from nowhere”—from chance—for those who have not worked through the technological process and who could not, even if they troubled themselves to try. Imagery that lacks physical scale surely has a rhetoric, but one liberated from the restraints of bodily gesture and material resistance. To conclude that this new rhetoric of electronic imagery must be an impoverished one is tempting, yet the conclusion would be misguided. The new rhetoric is merely different and relatively unexamined, posing as a new reality, a new nature. Curiously, we may learn more about it from paintings than from video monitors.19

Modern painting, like modern photography, developed an uncomfortable rift between meaning and feel—its own incommensurability problem. When Paul Cézanne sought to coordinate the strokes of his brush with his visual exploration of nature, the image that resulted displayed a pattern of interference, the insistent

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19. For example, to work photographic or video imagery back through a “slow” medium such as painting, drawing, or printmaking—as in the art of Gerhard Richter, Chuck Close, Vija Celmins, Marlene Dumas, Laura Owens, Ewan Gibbs, and many others—can be an effective deconstructive exercise. The notion of a slow medium is Chuck Close’s. Brody and Close (1998, p. 24). Another source of understanding would derive from artists whose process of painting approaches the scope and speed of photography and film; an example is the work of Katharina Grosse.
presence of his medium of paint; his strokes appeared coarse, even blurred. Art critics of the time, those who applied traditional standards, concluded that Cézanne was making marks too large for the projected scale of his image, causing pictorial imprecision. His painting exemplified a tension between its “meaning”—perhaps a group of domestic objects on a table—and its “feel” or sensation—the perception of a rather strident pattern of colored marks that failed to coalesce into a stable configuration. The size of the mark did not relate to the scale of the image. It was instead scaled to Cézanne’s physical activity. Size is absolute: it can be measured and reasoned out. Scale is relative to the presence and action of a human body. In Arendt’s terms, size would be the province of the modern scientist, whereas scale would be a measure or value estimated by the humanist. Size has no morality, whereas scale raises moral questions.

We can understand the apparent imprecision or incommensurability of Cézanne’s imagery by comparing its features to flaws that appear in fine-grained, paper-print photographs, even at miniature scale. Photographic blur occurs with movement in the model or scene relative to the camera, and vice versa. There might be movement of an object fast enough within the visual field to escape the shutter action of the camera; or there might be movement of the camera itself, caused by a photographer’s attempt to track something in the scene or the result of an unsteady hand. Some pictures blur a moving object, whereas others blur unmoving features of a foreground or background.

A second kind of blurring also occurs, known as fuzz: it appears when the grid or grain of the medium, its resolution factor, is inadequate to the representation of some quality or detail in the model. By a principle of representational incommensurability, there always exists a point at which a photograph or a painting fails its model and becomes fuzzy in this respect, since it can be no more than a projective mapping, never an adequate substitution or “literal” translation (it has no “rule”). But our newer forms of electronic imagery present a problem: the point of failure lies well beyond what the human eye normally detects. Hence, we lose the critical tension between meaning and feeling. There may be little to feel in opposition to the conventional meaning. The image is too clear, too strong, too “natural”, as if in need of no translation at all.

Blur and fuzz: blur refers to disjunctive movement and has a temporal foundation; fuzz has a spatial foundation because it results from a disjunctive

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21. Of great interest in this context is the photographic documentation—a series of images titled The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups (2012)—provided by the artist Rabih Mroué, who appropriated the low-resolution cell-phone photography of demonstrators shot by snipers during the Lebanese Civil War. Taken through camera lenses, the images capture views of snipers looking through gunsight lenses. Mroué increased the size of the photographic prints so that what began as low-resolution imagery (due to the relatively crude technology and the stressful conditions of the moment) became all the more blurry (because of movement) and fuzzy (because of enlargement).
distribution of material elements (the constituent marks of a representation—the particles of pigment in painting, the particles of emulsion in conventional photography, the electronic raster of pixels in television and digital photography). Every representation, even in miniature, has fuzz, however slight this factor may seem. Similarly, blur or temporal incommensurability occurs in every representation, even as the conventions of both still and moving compositions seek to disguise it or compensate for it.

The gap between our experience and our understanding, always somewhat expected, may have widened. We comprehend the lack of alignment between an image and its time and between an image and its space as a central point of theory, but this theoretical principle is no longer manifest in our daily experience of the new forms of photo-electronic picturing. Our theoretical understanding and our experiential understanding continue to diverge, just as Arendt believed that during the 1940s and 1950s, our science had diverged from our politics and we had lost the means of having a conversation that dealt with both. Blur and fuzz are experiential reminders of the arbitrary cultural codes in operation for the assessment of degrees of realism or truth in representation. We must ask how blurry or fuzzy an image or graphic sign can become and still function without entailing a change of meaning.

When photo-electronic imagery eliminates blur and fuzz, we lose our experiential sense of the active cultural construction of identity and meaning that prevailing interpretive models indicate must apply. Technology gives the lie to theory. With imagery being transferred and “shared” helter-skelter, the medium no longer determines the scope of the image or skew its significance; instead, the medium seems neutralized. We may need to redesign our theory of what constitutes a medium of representation, defining anew the essential features, rather than dismissing the medium as no longer worthy of investigation. The displacement of material miniaturization by electronic miniaturization—the substitution of a rigid, physically limited mode of presentation by one that seems infinitely flexible—drives this theoretical dilemma. If culture is a construction, what are its constitutive elements and what is their axiomatic foundation? A theorist like Derrida would argue that no foundational ground exists. Interpreting culture becomes analogous to catching a flow of water in the hand—the same hand that types on an electronic device as it tries to catch a flow of thought.

8. Projection

Around 1967-1968, Richard Artschwager initiated his use of images that he called “blps”, designating the form by a word containing no vowel—hence, against the rule. Such a word can be uttered only by speakers unembarrassed by awkward vocalization. A “blp” is an elongated rectangle with curving ends—a shape similar to that of a running track (Fig. 2). Artschwager associated the form with electronic blips observed on a scanning radar screen, a tracking device analogous to a
television test pattern: “The radar blip is not exactly a spot but [like the cathode-ray phosphorescence of television] is a small arc of a circle, has a tail like a comet because it does not decay instantly”. Artschwager painted some of his blps directly on exterior walls and architectural surfaces; others he constructed as objects for interiors, using various materials, including smooth, hard Formica and textured, rubberized hair (stiffened, thickened strands of hair, forming a tough, coarse surface). Rubberized hair assumes a fuzzy edge when cut, just as cut burlap assumes a fuzzy edge by comparison with a cut of fine silk. In 1983, an interviewer asked Artschwager why he made “hairy blps”. He replied: “To get some difference, a difference anchored in sameness. The blps were relentlessly in focus. So I went the other way: to make something that is approximately where it is, that is out of focus, existing apart in another sense”. With the introduction of fuzzy edges, each blp became different from every other blp, not only because it may have been different in size, but also because it assumed a slightly different, irregular contour. For the viewer, the perception of the contour provided a sense of scale, yet ambiguously. It would never be clear whether the perceived difference in contour was a factor of faulty eyesight (failure to focus), distance (atmospheric blur), or instability (radar-like movement). Artschwager’s hairy fuzz generated multiple effects of blur in his blps.


The interpretation of Christopher Wool’s imagery raises similar issues. An untitled painting of 1990 features two figures that resemble heraldic birds, oriented sideways (Fig. 3). This theme is easy to recognize because the birds are graphically simplified, revealing their most distinguishing characteristics: a head with an eye and a beak, two wings extended, a tail with feathers, and two clawed feet. Wool rendered the birds in black silhouette on a stark white ground, using an aluminum panel to provide a hard, smooth surface of support. The size of the panel is relatively large but not unusually grand: 8 feet in height, 5 1/3 feet in width. Each bird occupies approximately one third of the total height of the panel, about 32 inches. The two graphic images are sizable; yet, if rendered smaller, the same representational qualities would be apparent, for there are no fine signifying details to be lost. For this reason, the scale (as opposed to the absolute size) seems generous. The edges of the black forms are wobbly and irregular, rather than following a regulated curve. They may seem “hairy”, as with some of Artschwager’s blps. At a viewing distance suited to the height of the object, a person standing before Wool’s painting is likely to feel closer to it than need be. Why? Because of the fuzz factor. The contour of a simplified graphic form ought to be smooth, but this one is not. It looks as if it were under magnification, revealing its points of material failure, all the wobbles along its edges.

Fig. 3. Christopher Wool, Untitled (1990). Image courtesy of the artist.
Wool’s two birds appear cut from the same cloth, as if they were replicas of each other, with only a slightly different distribution of the black pigment. The connotation is of stamping, or printing, or stenciling, as if we were viewing the fragment of a continuing pattern, always slightly off-register. In fact, Wool had a large rubber stamp made in the shape of the bird so he could replicate or ingeminate the image indefinitely; some works in the series position the birds in a mirroring way or add a third bird. Stamping devices are crude. Even if this type were more refined, it would continue to register irregularities in the black imprint due to variations in the application of paint to the rubber stamping surface, the hand-pressure applied, and the local character of the ground of support. All such factors are subject to so many physical variables that the details of the image might as well be regarded as products of chance.

Wool’s rubber stamp is a template that provides the rule for the form of his birds. Yet no two birds appear entirely alike—each is a translation of another or of the template itself—and the visible differences require an interpretation to establish whether they convey supplemental meaning. To view the birds is to imagine viewing an enlargement that has exceeded the capacity of the medium or the process to retain its proper degree of legibility. Wool’s image, in other words, has excessive fuzz; and its function as a symbolic (perhaps heraldic) sign yields to the aggressiveness of its material qualities. If Wool had painted these forms during Cézanne’s era, they would have been subject to criticism on the grounds of the incommensurability problem. In Wool’s art, as in Cézanne’s, the constituent elements of the image—its marks—become imprecise because their scale fails to relate to a viewer’s habits of focus. Here, the size of the human body remains a factor in evaluating the image.

I sense an exploration of the same general problem—perhaps not fully intended as such (this is, after all, an arbitrary interpretation on my part)—by many contemporary painters who develop repetitive patterns with either fuzz or blur, as if some physical phenomenon were interfering with the integrity of a core, conceptualized image. Jack Whitten has excelled at this type of investigation. Beginning around 1970, he layered various colors on canvas, then dragged a comb-like device—he calls it his “developer” or “processor”—across the surface to generate a complex pattern of incised, striated lines revealing color and light as if from below; an example is Slip Zone (1971) (Fig. 4). An allusion to color from below is a physically oriented way of describing the effect. But the general resemblance is to a television screen with a color test pattern that has turned to blur, perhaps due to an accumulation of electronic interference. Whitten’s paintings project a photographic, electronic appearance. “The idea was to [extend] a single gesture to encompass the entire picture plane. The analogy, symbolically, was to photography”. A camera lens captures a complete view in “a single gesture”,

that is to say, immediately, directly, without rhetorical articulation. With a notion that recalls questions of the speed of various modes of conveying and translating thought (speaking, writing, typing), Whitten relates the feel of his photographic painting to the feel of his thinking: “The image is photographic; therefore I must photograph my thoughts”.24 His thinking becomes visual rather than verbal—hence, verbally fuzzy (materially rough around the edges) and visually blurred (an image stilled, but implying motion).

9. Test

Art like Reed’s, Artschwager’s, Wool’s, and Whitten’s performs an examination, a testing of possibilities. At issue is the resolution factor: whether the materiality of the image passes into sensory focus (in Wool’s case, the rough, seemingly enlarged graphic contour of a bird) or, in contradistinction, the thematic of the image passes into intellectual focus (the bird as symbol). If we were to grasp both phenomena simultaneously, translating one into the other and back again, it would be like having science and its moral meaning—or art and its moral meaning—in operation

at the same moment, perhaps with mutual interference and distraction, but not mutual contradiction and destruction.

In a work titled *Divide* (2005), the electronic artist Jim Campbell provides an apt illustration of our present condition. *Divide* amounts to a coarse, rectangular grid of light-emitting diodes (LEDs) that Campbell programs to display analog filmic imagery in a digital format (Fig. 5). By means of a diffusion screen, *Divide* represents both the disintegration and the reconstitution of a moving image of oceanic waves. Campbell places the diffusion screen in front of the digital projection, flexibly hinging it. The device of the hinge allows him to vary the quality of the view from a relatively focused grid of lights at the top of the projection surface to an unfocused fuzzy blur of illuminated wave motion at the bottom. The closer the diffusion screen is to the diodes (as at the top), the more the lights merely pixelate; the farther the screen tilts away (as at the bottom), the more the diode grid appears to generate a moving, analog image. Where the diodes appear as points of light (that is, simply as diodes), we remain conscious of a degree of representational fuzz. Where the diffusion screen causes the light of the diodes to form a coherent image of waves, we become conscious of a degree of blur. Campbell synthesizes fuzz and blur in a single low-resolution representation. Oddly, it is low-resolution in somewhat contradictory respects—both digital and analog.

![Fig. 5. Jim Campbell, Divide (2005). Image courtesy of the artist.](image)

There is a structural logic to the situation: the image must vary along a continuum from discrete and pixelated at the top to continuous and blurred at the bottom—digital in appearance at the top (where the diffusion screen lies close to the LED lights) and analog at the bottom. Somewhere in between, the image must contain a line that would divide these antithetical concepts and polarized
sensations. We might think of it as a both-and, neither-nor line of contradiction. Campbell’s title, *Divide*, implies as much and becomes an ironic challenge to his viewer’s powers of observation—a test of sensing and thinking. Where is the line? The observer must find the divide, in plain view yet obscure, visible and invisible at once. This is the perceptual divide that lies between body and mind, materiality and meaning. Or, is it instead a self-imposed conceptual divide? This line is like a missing rule. As with other differential rules, it may not exist. Even if it does exist, it may lead interpretive translation nowhere—or to Anton Chigurh, to chance.

The adaptability of photographic processes to miniaturization and enlargement alters our sense of human scale. This same electro-mechanical adaptability obscures how a rhetoric of sensation, associated with a particular medium of representation, can change the understanding of whatever the medium represents. We move ever farther from a rule. So be it. The projects of the contemporary artists mentioned in this essay may not have been intended to affect perception in the way that they affect my perception. Regardless of the intentions of the various artists, their works direct me to the photographic and photo-electronic problem. They trouble my sensation and my understanding. These works of visual art are test patterns for the televisual eye with which my technological culture of images has endowed me. I am a product of the chance effects of the photo-electronic environment.

The art-historical study of forms of technological resolution, allied with the semiotics of blur and fuzz, stands apart from issues of cultural identity and cultural ideology, which have been central to the discipline of art history for many years—from its early involvement with the logistics of national style to its current interest in both globalization and the preservation of cultural difference. Through the resolution problem, art history contributes anew to the human sciences, re-entering from an alternative direction the real-life politics of public perception. It joins the world that humanists like Donoghue now, and Arendt in the past, seek to inhabit. Within such a world, sensitivity to human scale operates as a check on excesses of abstract conceptualization, and both physical sensation and emotional feeling remain closely allied with thinking.

Feeling is thought in low resolution. Images of low resolution keep us aware of the tension between medium and message, their interaction and mutual translation. There is reason to provide a cultural space for thought-as-feeling, the semi-articulate state that works of visual art exemplify as they open their potential translation to chance association. The realm of blur and fuzz exists outside the rule of ideology; it corresponds to a reserve of thought to be drawn upon when conventional solutions to social and political problems fail. As a show of respect for the reserve, art historians must avoid projecting too many words as the imaginary speech of works of visual art. The most affecting works operate like intuition, in the mute translation of one object or image for another that cannot be its equal. Meaning lies in differences to be sensed but not comprehended, in feelings situated at the edge of reason, like indecipherable blur and irresolvable fuzz.
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