

The Surface

... the surface will bear the imprint of the political, material, social, technological and affective forces that shape it.

This takes modern ideas about representation as surface to a new level. Georg Simmel introduced the idea that surfaces were not only an integral part of modern urban life but were in a sense its condensation. This was in opposition to more traditional views of surfaces that connected them to mere appearance, inauthenticity, and shallowness. John Allen contrasts these perspectives:

The implicit vertical imagery which suggests that if you really want to know what is going on, we must somehow plumb the depths, is a hard one to shift. Depth, in this evocation, acts as a synonym for cultural truth, authenticity, or as the locus for a better interpretation of events, as in many psychoanalytical accounts of the everyday. Equally, the metaphor of society as a smooth, flat surface is one that can give rise to a rather stultifying geography where space amounts to little more than a setting in which events take place, rather than as a source of animation and experience in and of itself.

Breaking with a more traditional view of surfaces that associates them with superficiality, Siegfried Kracauer was convinced that all that was worth knowing in an era could be read from inconspicuous surface-level expressions. For him, the surface was all that needed to be looked at in order to diagnose the present. It presented an unmediated expression of the social unconscious. Kracauer insists on the surface as a primary site of historical and social information:

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. Since these judgments are expressions of the tendencies of a particular era, they do not offer conclusive testimony about its overall constitution. The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things. Conversely, knowledge of this state of things depends on the interpretation of these surface-level expressions. The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally.

Excerpt from "Ripping Reality: Blind Spots and Wrecked Data in 3D" by Hito Steyerl (published in [*Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*](#), Verso, 2017)