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Defining the high and the low of audiovisual images: Contemporary approaches

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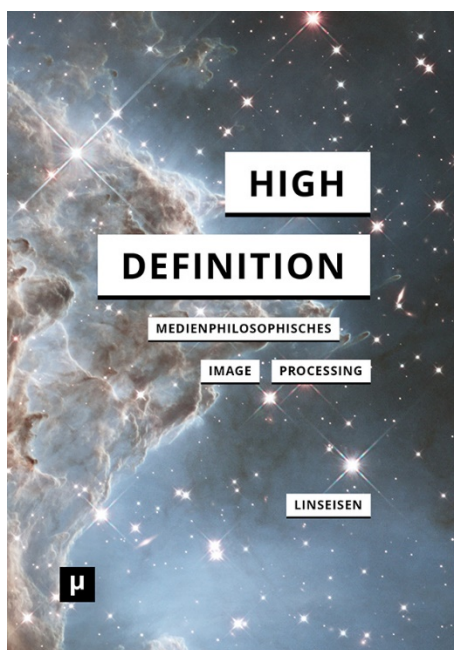
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‘HD is about reality’[1] (p. 11). Elisa Linseisen’s first monograph *High Definition: Medienphilosophisches Image Processing* (Meson Press, 2020), based on her doctoral thesis, opens with a powerful argument. The book is published open access. Through the analysis of documentaries, video art works, galaxy photographs, blockbusters, press images, and Netflix series Linseisen demonstrates that high definition (HD) images and reality are not fixed entities but always intertwined and in process. In the last decade, not least due to the advance of digital recording and distribution technologies, research on audiovisual image definition and resolution has risen as a significant subfield in film and media studies. Characterised by a double tendency, this subfield deals with the production of images that have a high definition as well as the circulation of images in low definition – like the blurred cell phone recordings from the popular uprisings in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region 2011. Researchers working in this area consider reproducing apparatuses as well as modes of cognition and the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, between perception and imagination, and between technique and aesthetics.

In her media philosophical approach, Elisa Linseisen opts for thinking *with*, and not *about*, high definition. Her book offers a multiplicity of intertwined themes, in order to combine the breadth of material with original critical examination of the inevitably heterogeneous cinematic and theoretical landscape of high definition. The introductory chapter ‘High Definition’ problematises the challenge to define HD. It clarifies central terminology and core concepts, pleading for a more diverse understanding of ‘resolution’, which in German (*Auflösung*) can mean both resolution and dissolution. This

paradox is particularly interesting in light of recent developments in film studies, in particular the growing literature on post cinema.[2] Linseisen's considerations on a media theory of 'post/-isms' (post/digital, post/cinema, post/photographic, post/television, post/video) underlines the media philosophical distinction of thinking *with* media. This is especially true for film, which, according to Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger, and myself

is no longer just cinema, [...] Film has become a purveyor of image worlds and virtual worlds of seemingly unlimited scope. It is no longer an art form celebrated only at public screenings, but a medium of cultural expression easily attainable through informal communication.[3]



Shane Denson and Julia Leyda emphasise the same line of thought that 'post-cinema asks us to think about new media not only in terms of novelty but in terms of an ongoing, uneven, and indeterminate historical *transition*'. [4]

Elisa Linseisen picks up the idea of the 'transition' of audiovisual images, though she broadens the meaning of high definition considerably. This is made clear in the second chapter 'Post/Produzieren', where she explores how post/production becomes an epistemic vehicle, since reality does not emerge outside but within the digital image. It is precisely the doubt about the authenticity of the images that points fundamentally to the claim of an original

representation and authentic reproduction of reality. This assessment is all the more pertinent since, in critical terms, cinema has always responded to historical change and triggered deep transformations in modes of production and distribution. In this context, the crucial role of formats, elaborated in the book's third chapter 'Um/Formatieren', charts the many ways in which HD formats shape and are shaped by past and present media cultures. The term 'format' circulates in a staggering array of contexts and applies to entirely dissimilar objects and practices. Formats are technical units of measurement for standardising and managing media applications and apparatuses; they influence the way media appear, operate, and are experienced.[5] Linseisen contributes to the articulation of these historical (dis)continuities as well as the relationships between media and recurring techniques from a hitherto understudied perspective. In the fourth chapter 'Interpolieren' she gives intriguing insights on the potentials of image-technological procedures such as interpolation, which exploits the qualitative predisposition of the HD image and its relationship to the image environment, before turning in the fifth chapter, 'Epistemologisch/Zoomen', to the epistemological horizon of the zoom. In the last chapter 'Hochaufgelöste Ereignis/Horizonte' she concludes that high definition is not about perceiving reality sharper or more highly resolved, but about negotiating reality in and with every HD image anew. Thus, she argues, HD enables us to understand images through both their image processing and the media philosophical determinations of the relationship to reality.

The relationship to reality is also at stake on the other end of the spectrum, the low definition.[6] Artist Hito Steyerl makes a claim for what she coined the 'poor image':

The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.[7]

It is the French translation of her text 'In Defense of the Poor Image' – in which she presents contemporary visual culture as 'a class society of appearances', populated by 'rich' high definition images and 'poor' low definition images – that marks the opening for Francesco Casetti's and Antonio Somaini's edited volume *La haute et la basse définition des images. Photographie, cinéma, art contemporain, culture visuelle* (Édition Mimésis, 2021). Despite the fact that the media and technological landscape and the parameters of the

distinction between high and low definition have changed significantly since 2009, when Hito Steyerl published her text, the power and fruitfulness of her analysis are still valid today.



After the introductory part ('Introduction' and 'En défense de l'image pauvre'), the edited volume is divided in two sections presenting texts by academics and artists, and finally concludes with two interviews. The first section of the volume (Archéologies, matérialités, temporalités) opens with a chapter by Antonio Somaini which situates the question of the high and low definition of the images in relation to a double history: that of the polarity of sharpness and blurriness, and that of the matrix images, composed by a matrix or an orthogonal grid of points. Lina Maria Stahl's contribution also adopts an archaeological perspective and analyses the stakes of the very concept of definition by turning to the history of microscopic imaging, and more precisely to the invention of the first electron microscope in 1931. In Marie Rebecchi's text the archaeological aim turns to a technique widely explored by photography and cinema of the 1920s: the effect of superimposition of two or more images obtained through a repeated exposure to light. These

contributions offer a detailed panorama of the issues raised by defining high and low definition images.

The following contributions express the desire to rethink the dichotomies between McLuhan's 'hot' and 'cold' media or between Steyerl's 'rich' and 'poor' images to theorise the new media landscape with more elaborated criteria, for instance that media often do not work on the contrast between high and low definition, but on their interstices. André Habib for instance analyses the attempts to give digital images the sensitive and material aspect, the grain and texture of film images (16mm, 35mm, Super 8, etc.), through filters that produce a 'film effect' or 'film-look'. Enrico Camporesi addresses the question of high and low definition in relation to that of technological obsolescence. Another approach is to tackle the issues of high and low definition through film analyses: Filippo Fimiani looks at a cult feature film from the 1960s, *Blow-Up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni; Peter Szendy takes as a starting point the film *Redacted* (2007) by Brian De Palma; and Emmanuel Burdeau looks at Barry Levinson's film *The Bay* (2012). Arild Fetveit turns away from the image and takes up the distinction between signal and noise, and questions artistic, visual, and sound practices, which intentionally highlight instead of hide the noise that is specific to the materiality of each medium. The contribution makes clear: high and low definition refers primarily to the quality of the signal used by a medium. In the chapter that closes the first section of this edited volume, artist Jacques Perconte explores the plastic possibilities of digital images, with all their degrees of definition and all their pixelated artefacts.

The ensuing second section of the volume (Contextes, circulations, altérations) emphasises then the need to broaden the view of images to different contexts in which images are produced, circulated, and used. The opening text by Francesco Casetti puts forward a radical hypothesis: if it is true that we never see images in isolation, but always within the environment in which they are situated and in which we are situated, their degree of definition also depends on the degree of definition of their medium. The following contributions elaborate mostly aesthetic values evaluated in relation to the context of circulation and use, as well as the political dimensions related to that. Jacob Gaboury invites us to explore the context of production of digital images, whereas Erika Balsom examines the forms of distribution and circulation of artist films and videos. The issue of piracy and forms of illegal production and circulation of film copies is the focus of Frédéric Monvoisin's chapter, which focuses primarily on the Asian market. Peppino Ortoleva turns back

to Marshall McLuhan and extends the question of high and low definition towards new anthropological perspectives. However, the concept can also apply to the quality of the sensory response that a medium activates: there is a high and a low definition of the media experience. In the last contributions to the volume's second section artist Thomas Hirschhorn writes about a series of works titled *Pixel-Collages* (2016-2017), asking provocatively: 'Why is it important – today – to show and watch images of destroyed human bodies?'[8] The volume concludes with Francesco Casetti in conversation with Raymond Bellour, and then Roger Odin. In this second section the contributions are placed at the crossroads of the dimensions of high and low definition, examining the values associated with it.

At the heart of both Elisa Linseisen's monograph *High Definition. Medienphilosophisches Image Processing* and Francesco Casetti's and Antonio Somaini's edited volume *La haute et la basse définition des images. Photographie, cinéma, art contemporain, culture visuelle* lies a relatively simple assessment: the interrelationship of high and low definition questions normative conceptions of perception. This is – and I would like to emphasise this – not only true for Western cinema and media production but also for non-Western productions. The political and economic transformations that these cinemas underwent during the last decades necessarily influenced the process of image production. The engagement with high and low definition is thus crucial for the understanding of today's global cinematic landscapes and the images which mediate between being in and out of focus, sharing at least two spaces, two movements, two times. Both publications presented and discussed above contribute fundamentally to this new research field.

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Notes

- [1] 'HD geht es um die Wirklichkeit', p. 11; all translations are my own.
- [2] See: Shaviro 2010; Schröter & Stiglegger 2011; Casetti 2015; Denson & Leyda 2016; Hagener & Hediger & Strohmaier 2016; Hediger & De Rosa 2017; Deuber-Mankowsky 2017.
- [3] Hagener & Hediger & Strohmaier 2016, p. 9.
- [4] Denson & Leyda 2016, p. 2; emphasis in original.
- [5] See: Sterne 2012; Fahle & Jancovic & Linseisen & Schneider 2020; Jancovic & Volmar & Schneider 2020.
- [6] See: Ullrich 2009; Makarius 2016; Beugnet 2017; Beugnet & Cameron & Fetveit 2017; Lauenburger 2019.
- [7] Steyerl 2009, p. 8.
- [8] 'Pourquoi est-il important – aujourd'hui – de montrer et regarder des images de corps humains détruits?'