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Dressing the surface

Giuliana Bruno

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What is the place of materiality in our contemporary virtual world? To engage materiality, I suggest that we think about surfaces rather than images, and explore the fabrics of the visual and the surface tension of media. In order to pursue a new materialism, I propose performing critical acts of investigation on the surface, especially focusing on the luminosity of screen surface, and mobilising the wide potential of material expression across ‘screens’ of different media.[1] I have long argued for a shift in our focus away from the optic and toward the haptic, in order to understand the tangible spatiality of the visual arts, their moving, habitable sites, and the intimate experience they offer us as we walk through their public spaces.[2] The *haptic*, a relational mode derived from the sense of touch, is what makes us ‘able to come into contact with’ things. This reciprocal *contact* between us and objects or environments occurs on the surface. It is by way of such tangible, ‘superficial’ contact that we apprehend the art object and the space of art, turning contact into the communicative interface of a public intimacy.

This is why I prefer to speak of surfaces rather than images: to experience how the visual manifests itself materially on the surface of things, where time becomes material space. Digging into layers of imaging and threading through their surfaces, my theoretical interweaving of materials emphasises the actual *fabrics* of the visual: the surface condition, the textural manifestation, and the support of a work as well as the way in which it is sited, whether on the canvas, the wall, or the screen. I am particularly interested in what we may call the phenomenon of the ‘becoming screen’, that is, in the play of materiality that is brought together in light on different, intersecting screens,

and in offering a theorisation of the actual fabric of the screen as a material surface-space. I am also interested in the migratory patterns of such visual fabrications, and in tracing their material history as well as their shifting geographies. In this way, I want to rethink materiality and to show that surface matters in the fabrics of the visual.

Surface matters in visual fabrics

In this age of virtuality, with its rapidly changing materials and media, what role can materiality have? How is it fashioned in the arts or manifested in technology? Could it be refashioned? I argue that materiality is not a question of materials but rather concerns the substance of material relations. Hence, in order to open a theoretical space for a reinvention of materiality, I want first to consider how the surface mediates material relations.

In proposing that we pay attention to the surface and engage the pleats and folds that constitute the fabric of the visual, I wish in this regard to pursue what Gilles Deleuze calls a 'texturology': a philosophical and aesthetic conception of art in which its 'matter is clothed, with "clothed" signifying ... the very fabric or clothing, the texture enveloping'.[3] To make this textural shift involves tracing what we might call the enveloping 'fashioning' of the image and weaving this across different media.

This requires thinking of images materially, for it means viewing them as textures, traces, and even stains. The visual text is fundamentally textural, and in many different ways. Its form has real substance. It is made out of layers and tissues. It contains strata, sediments, and deposits. It is constituted as an imprint, which always leaves behind a trace. A visual text is also textural for the ways in which it can show the patterns of history, in the form of a coating, a 'film', or a stain. One can say that a visual text can even *wear* its own history, inscribed as an imprint onto its textural surface. It can also show affects in this way. After all, the motion of an emotion can itself be drafted onto the surface, in the shape of a line or in the haptic thickness of pigment, and it can be tracked down with tracking shots. An affect is actually 'worn' on the surface as it is threaded through time in the form of residual stains, traces, and textures. In visual culture surface matters, and it has depth.

To understand materiality, we thus need to expose the work of the surface and show how textural matters manifest themselves there. As we plumb the

depth of surfaces that surround visual culture, we can also see how they envelop *us*. Skimming the surface, we not only can weave together the filaments of visual existence, exposing their traces in layers of experience, but also trace patterns of transformation. Surface especially matters as a site in which different forms of mediation, transfer, and transformation can take place.

The surface tension of media: Screen, canvas, wall

A material transformation occurs as images travel across the surface of different media. Many changes affected by the migration of images happen on the surface and manifest themselves texturally in the form of a kind of surface tension, which affects the very 'skin' of images and the space of their circulation. In this sense, I claim that aesthetic encounters are actually 'mediated' on the surface and that such mediated encounters engage forms of projection, transmission, and transmutation.

I will offer some examples to make this aspect of the fabrics of the visual and its relation to a surface tension more concrete. In contemporary architecture, as the work of Herzog & de Meuron exemplifies, the façades of buildings are engaged as surfaces. Lighter and more tensile, these surfaces may be energised by luminous play, texturally decorated as if they were canvas, stretched as membranes, and treated increasingly as envelopes.[4] In contemporary art as well, such surface tension has emerged as a textural form of fashioning the image and, as a concept, is driving an aesthetic development that emphasises the dressing of visual space.[5] Such wearing of surface is an important phenomenon that art and architecture also share with cinema.

Think of the cinema of Wong Kar-wai, in which atmospheric forms of imaging are stitched together on the surface in patterns of visual tailoring. Here is a dense, floating surface in which one senses the material of light and the fabric of color, emphasised by the visual pleating of editing that itself creates volume and depth, grain and granularity, the final effect being that residue and sedimentation appear retained in the saturated surface. We almost never see clearly through the fabric of this screen, for several coatings and planar surfaces are constructed out of different materials, and all are folded together. There are so many layers to traverse on the surface that the screen itself, layered like cloth, takes on volume and becomes a space of real dimension.

When a surface condition is activated in this way on visual planes, it changes our notion of what constitutes the support of the image and its way of siting a medium. I want to demonstrate that this new form of materialism initiates a major transformation. If we consider this textural form of fashioning the image closely, the very nature of what we have traditionally understood as canvas and wall changes to incorporate another form: the screen. An architecture of mediatic transformations comes to the surface at this very junction. Surface tension can turn both façade and framed picture into something resembling a screen. This filmic screen, far from representing any perspectival ideal, is no longer a window but is reconfigured as a different surface. Made of translucent fabric, this screen is closer to a canvas, a sheet, or a curtain. Partition, shelter, and veil, it can be a permeable architectural envelope. On this material level, the current intersection of canvas, wall, and screen is a site in which distinctions between inside and outside temporally dissolve into the depth of surface. The screen itself is becoming a fold, in which all appears to fold back into screen surface – that reflective, fibrous canvas texturally dressed by luminous projections.

An archaeology of migrant media

This ‘becoming screen’ is a fundamental aspect of our contemporary visual culture. Such a phenomenon is at the center of a luminous, material reconfiguration of visual space. The screen has become an ever-present material condition of viewing, and this is occurring paradoxically just at the point that cinema, at the very moment of film’s own obsolescence, comes to inhabit today’s museums. A refashioning of images is taking place in a proliferation and exchange of screens. Such refashioning of the fabrics of the visual shows tension at the edges, in the space beyond a medium, in the interstices between art forms, at junctions where both transgressive and transitive moves between the arts become palpable on the surface.

The screen acts as the actual surface of this refashioning by returning us to the absorptive materiality of a permeable space of luminous projections. As screen-based art practices enact such a return to materiality by emphasising surface luminosity and textural hapticity, the memory of film is materialised in contemporary art. As epitomised in Christian Marclay’s video time-piece *The Clock* (2010), the history of film is learned in the art gallery. The screen is furthermore activated outside of cinema as a historically dense

space – re-enacted, that is, as a mnemonic canvas that is fundamentally linked to the technology of light. Walking through the art gallery and the museum, we encounter webs of cinematic situations, reimagined as if collected together and recollected on a screen that is now a wall, a partition, a veil, or even a curtain.

The tensile surface of the screen canvas contains several ‘sheets’ of the past, which, unfolded, lead all the way back to the birth of modern vision and its history of visual surfaces. After all, the public museum flourished in the same age as the cinema, and shares with film that fabrication which is the visual, theatrical architecture of spectatorship. In some way, then, today’s artists appear to be winking at the very phantasmagoric moment out of which cinema historically emerged as a visual medium. Artists are becoming archivists. They are turning into materialist scholars. Why? What is to be learned from this material history of surfaces? Can we refashion it for the future? If museum culture and film exhibition are mined as an archive of visual fabrics open to reinvention, this cultural archaeology of media, if not nostalgic, can reveal the potential for artistic media to serve as the material conditions for haptic screen encounters.

Screening material space

This geography of material transformations is the main object of my work in visual studies. It is important to engage the virtual movements that are taking place in material ways in this luminous environment of screen surfaces. This passage is crucial because it affects the sedimentation of the visual imaginary, its residues and transformations. It concerns not simply the medium but also the space of image circulation, forms of siting, and the situational experience.

The exchange that has taken place on the field screen of visual archives profoundly affects the fabric and architecture of the visual experience. In suggesting that we weave through the visual fabrics and the material relations that link together screen, canvas, and wall across time, exposing the threads that connect the visual to the spatial arts, including the migrations between cinema and museum space, my aim is to reclaim materiality, and to foster further explorations in surface tension and depth. For the future of a medium shows texturally and experientially on the surface – that is to say, in the folds of its architecture, the thickness of its visual culture history, and the tensility of its moving geography.

Author

Giuliana Bruno is Emmet Blakeney Gleason Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University. She is internationally known for her research on the intersections of the visual arts, architecture, film, and media. Her seminal book *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2002) provided new directions for visual studies and won the 2004 Kraszna-Krausz Award for ‘the world’s best book on the moving image’. Other books include *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (1993), winner of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies book award, and *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (2007). She has contributed to numerous monographs on contemporary visual artists, including Isaac Julien’s *Riot* (2014) and Chantal Akerman’s *Too Far, Too Close* (2012). In her latest book, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (2014), she revisits the concept of materiality in contemporary visual culture.

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Notes

- [1] This text expands upon a central concern of my book *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*.
- [2] See also Bruno 2002 and Bruno 2007.
- [3] Deleuze 1993, p. 115.

- [4] See, among others, Leatherbarrow & Mostafavi 2002; see also Ursprung 2002.
- [5] See, for example, Joselit 2006; Iles 2007; and Coblenz 2003.