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The Surface of Objects

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in

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by

Robert Carter Seddon

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In one of the opening scenes of Robert Bresson’s 1983 film *L’argent*, a teenager is in need of some money. He calls a friend and they meet in a room. The teenager brings his friend a watch that they could pawn and he places on the table. The friend says he has a better idea and pulls a forged 500 franc note out from between the pages of a book. They share some comments about its likeness to a real banknote briefly before the friend tells the teenager to come with him. In the next scene, they arrive at a camera store where Bresson’s camera lingers on a shelf of empty frames in a glass cabinet; they choose one to buy with the false banknote. The woman behind the counter then holds the note up toward the window and the sunlight seeps through the printed image of Blaise Pascal as the woman’s fingers feel the note. She’s unable to detect its fraudulence, as the paper has the same tactility of any other banknote.

Bresson shoots the scene in a manner that highlights the counterfeit note’s presence as matter: it is held in the woman’s hand and we hear it crumpling between her fingertips as a breeze blows it slightly. The note is then pulled forcefully out of the woman’s hand as the teenager plays at being indignant that he would be suspected of anything. Finally she accepts the note, deceived by the apparent authenticity of the money, its convincingness as tangible matter.

This scene is filled with divisions between the actual nature of the events and their appearances. The forged note itself evokes benevolence, with the face of the 17th century Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal gazing back toward the camera and inviting a kind of trust and a promise of authenticity. (fig. 1) Also, the teenagers are bourgeois, on the surface they do not appear to be thieves as they do not appear to have the need to steal. They are motivated more by boredom and dissatisfaction than by actual need, which makes it more difficult for the clerk to
identify their actual intentions. Lastly, the scene takes place in a camera store, allowing Bresson to frame the action amidst the physical tools of image making and replication. (fig. 2,3)

The choice to shoot the scene of the counterfeit note’s entry into circulation (which will drive the events of the film) in a camera store is significant for a number of reasons. One being that photography is a medium of distraction—of spectacle and simulation. Whenever one is looking at a photograph, one’s mind is occupied with something that is not occurring in present flow of events—the breeze through the forged note as the clerk holds it for example—but is in the space of the image, a space with no immediate relevance to the events occurring in one’s surroundings in the present moment.

In *Pensees*, Blaise Pascal comments on the subject of distraction:

> The only thing that consoles us for our miseries is distraction, yet that is the greatest of our wretchednesses. Because that is what mainly prevents us from thinking about ourselves and leads us imperceptibly to damnation. Without it we should be bored, and boredom would force us to search for a firmer way out, but distraction entertains us and leads imperceptibly to death. (Pascal 11)

The form of distraction described by Pascal could either take the form of a reverie: for example, a memory or a fear about the future, or it could take the form of a simulated experience, something external such as a film or a photograph. In Pascal’s use of the term, distraction is something that pulls one away from the actual nature of what is happening around one and into another space. This other space includes the space of the copy: films, photographs and other translations of the real. In Bresson’s film, it is these simulations of reality that trigger the actual events of the narrative. The counterfeit note is a flawless simulation that is passed from the teenagers to the woman in the store, then to a gas man who comes to the store as payment for a repair. The innocent man ends up being caught for the possession of the counterfeit rather than the teenagers, adding further irony to the face of the moralist Pascal on the note—which is in fact a malevolent object.
The fact that Bresson chooses to frame this action in a camera store also emphasizes that the harsh events of the film occur in a society dominated by abstractions: the abstraction of images, currency, etc. And in the film, it is the unrealness of these things which causes the suffering of the main character. The note itself is a copy of a copy, materially no less real than an authentic banknote. The notion that there is a fluid boundary between the real and the simulated is important in the film. The concreteness of the effects of the counterfeit also imply a moralistic attitude toward the society of simulation and distraction; as the note moves through the world in the beginning of the film, it sets off a chain of destructive events. And furthermore, there is a focus on the hollowness of objects in the film--particularly in this scene where the counterfeit is exchanged between three people among the inert tools of image making and display. The teenager’s decision to buy an empty picture frame (of all possible objects to buy) as the pretense for passing off the false note furthers this notion. Bresson’s shot of the empty frame--reflecting some cold light from the window in a glass case--heightens our sense of a world within the film that consists of hollowness, simulacra and endless deferral from the authentic.

The precision with which the film depicts the surfaces of objects in the world at a moment just before the nature of our interactions with matter would be transformed by digital technologies is especially poignant from the vantage point of the present. The camera store that the teenagers go to is filled with the physical materials of analog image making. Bresson also has many close up shots of hands--hands passing money, or trying to determine the reality of an object: as when the clerk feels the false note and holds it up to the light. The characters in the film often touch the surfaces of things as if they are trying to convince themselves of the authenticity of these objects, but they are deceived nonetheless. The persistence of the imagery involving hands and the tactility of common objects seems to emphasize the plight of characters existing in a world that is dominated more and more by abstractions. Under these conditions Bresson, in a Pascalian manner, focuses on the concrete, inert matter surrounding the characters. His camera
focuses with extreme sobriety on the minutia of the world of objects--that which would not be considered under our normal condition of distraction. (fig.3,4,5)
In Franco Berardi’s book: *The Soul at Work*, written some 30 years after the making of *L’Argent*, Berardi tries to define the current state of this condition of distraction:

Digital technologies are based on the loss of the physicality of the world, on simulating algorithms capable of reproducing all life forms, except for one quality: their tangible reality, their physical form and therefore their caducity. (Berardi 38)

Bresson’s film anticipates this condition just at the cusp of a complete transformation to the digital through its insistence on the physicality of relatively immaterial things such as money. The film depicts a transitional moment. The events of the film occur in spaces which are concretely on a human scale: the scale of a European city, the scale of rooms in 19th century buildings etc. While the events of the films are propelled by the simulation that Berardi points to, Bresson insists on rendering ‘the physicality of the world’ with extreme precision as this physicality diminishes more and more from everyday life.

The sensation of a direct interaction with the physicality of the world, already dwindling at the time depicted in *L’Argent*, has only become more rarified and complex. More and more of our interactions with the world involve an interface of some kind, thus reducing the chance nature of experience and the visceral qualities of experience which emerge from this unpredictability. One example of this increasing reduction of the haphazard, aleatory nature of everyday life is the commonality of social relationships being formed and maintained within the space of the Internet. In a 2009 interview with Nicolas Truong, Alain Badiou discusses an ad for a French online dating site, which he sees as representative of the loss of the chance nature of the romantic encounter:

I believe this hype reflects a safety first conception of “love.” It is love comprehensively insured against all risks: you will have love, but you will have assessed the prospective relationship so thoroughly, will have selected your partner so carefully by searching online- by obtaining of course, a photo, details of his or her tastes, date of birth,
horoscope sign, etc.- and putting it all in the mix you can tell yourself: “This is a risk free option.” (Badiou 45)

Digital technologies, by simulating the world, reduce all types of phenomena to a repeatable algorithm. These are used for most experiences which occur within the space of the screen: shopping, dating, advertising etc. Badiou points to the “insurance against risk” that this mediated experience entails. This idea points again to not only the ‘loss of the physicality of the world’ but also to the loss of the natural disorderliness of experience--it speaks to a desire to completely control one’s experience. The increasing ubiquity of the digital and the use of an interface to mediate almost all of one’s life experiences implies a loss of sensation because of the safety of the interface. One’s interactions with others become more carefully deliberated over through the ability to control more intentionally one’s self presentation. The spontaneity of a real encounter is lost, and hence the sensation of the actual experience of being in the world; if there is no real risk involved, then there is no need for one’s senses to be active. The loss of sensation is one thing that leads to depression and alienation.

In Bresson’s depressive style of filmmaking, characters are always using their hands, as if out of a desire to feel the solidity of the matter around them; a haptic form of perception. For instance, in his 1956 film: *A Man Escaped*, the imprisoned main character spends much of the film slowly chiseling away at the wall of his cell. *A Man Escaped* is a film composed of hands. The film is a slow progression of images: images of hands manipulating the concrete, wearing it away, scratching into it, forming tools to chisel the wall. The film is extremely reduced, a person in a room desiring to escape--his hands slowly breaking off chunks of the wall, massaging the inert matter which surrounds him (Fig. 6-10). Bresson’s films span the later half of the 20th century and as meditations on materiality they go from hands chiseling stone in *A Man Escaped* (1950’s) to hands passing counterfeit money in *L’Argent* (1980’s). The melancholic nature of these films owes much to the inherent contradiction of the immateriality of film itself and the
visceral nature of the interactions with matter occurring within the films. If depression stems from a loss of sensation, film and photography are ideally suited to reflect this condition, as the tangible qualities of matter are at a remove. The photograph or film can only allude to the tactile, sensory qualities of surfaces; the actual surface of the object present before the viewer, however, offers very little to the senses.

Bresson’s films are especially cognizant of the contradiction between the immateriality of film and the visceral qualities of its referent, of the experience of the viewer sitting still in a room watching an image someone’s hands chiseling the concrete wall of another room. Today this type of interaction with the immaterial has evolved, an emblematic example of which can be found in Apple’s ads for the Ipad. These ads always feature imagery of hands on the screen of the product. They also normally imply that the user is sitting still in a room while the apparatus functions as a portal to some other space. Where Bresson’s imagery is reduced yet visceral, Apple’s imagery is sterile--pointing again toward the increasing sterility of experience engendered by the digital.

Where hands in the films of Bresson imply a kind of longing for significance within the indifference of matter, in the Apple ads they are used to persuade consumers of the humanity of the object in lieu of a bizarre contradiction. The contradiction being that the surface of the screen is filled with images--things with no material presence--yet the device works by physically touching this completely immaterial thing. The images of hands function to convince consumers of the reality of the world within the interface that it is physically responsive to touch--malleable like the stone wall of the prison cell in A Man Escaped. The ‘loss of the physicality of the world’ is in this way regarded by the ads as beside the point--as the apparatus depletes sensation in the its users, its own ability to respond to touch and lend us the feeling of sentience increases.

(figures 11-13)
In my own work, I would like to find a place for the photographic image within the conditions I have discussed above. Robert Heinecken once stated that: “a photograph is not a ‘picture’ of something... but is an object about something.” (Durant 8) This has become a very important idea as the printed photograph can, in my mind, offer significant resistance to the ubiquity of images circulating online: on Facebook, Instagram etc. The notion that the photographer is a person who makes ‘images’ has become increasingly problematic because of things like Instagram. An image is an immaterial thing which circulates freely due to this immateriality and can attach itself to any context. While Roland Barthes has discussed this as being intrinsic to the medium of photography through his conception of the photograph as a ‘message without a code’, Heinecken’s ideas push against this amorphous nature of the image simply by placing emphasis on the objecthood of the photograph.

The printed photograph contains content as an image while simultaneously being a physical object. I do not, however, feel the need to emphasize this objecthood beyond the mere fact of its existence as a physical object on the wall or in a frame. While a photograph does not need to relate itself to sculpture in my mind in order to separate it from the general mass of images (its qualities as an object being necessarily more limited) it does clearly need to be more than an image for it to hold any weight among the world of images emanating from the web. I believe that the uniqueness of the medium lies in its contradictory qualities; in the tension between its abstract qualities as a flat smooth surface and its representational qualities as a very specific kind of transcription of the surface of things. It is through this inherent limitation of the medium that much of its poetic potential lies. In the minimalist poems of Aram Saroyan from the 1960s for example, the extreme reduction of language opens up the sensory associations of
language itself, of each individual word. Likewise in photography, the comparative slightness of its objecthood can allow for sensory associations to emerge obliquely in the viewer’s mind through the rendering of a surface that is alluded to rather than presented as such.

In my work, I attempt to achieve a kind of solid relationship between the physical presence of the object photographed the physical presence of the photograph as an object. One way in which I go about this is by photographing things which are small enough to be held in one’s hand, and then printing them to be perceptually on the same scale as the original object. Another way this kind of relationship emerges is in the correlation between the surfaces of objects and the way these surfaces are rendered as a photographic print. In other words, by choosing subject matter uniquely suited for its tactile properties and for the way it will translate as a photograph. One example of this in my mind would be Walker Evan’s 1929 *Stamped Tin Relic*--a photo of a crumpled ornate metallic object, whose textured and painted metal surface is contrasted by the smooth, but also metallic surface of the photographic print. (fig. 14) Another example would be Minor White’s 1959 photograph of mineral deposits on a rock. In this photo, the white deposits on the surface of the rock seem to conflate the subject of the photograph and the print itself--as if the smooth surface of the print had formed its own kind of tactile silver crust. (fig. 15)

By choosing subject matter in this way, I hope that the viewer of the photograph will be confronted by both its status as a representation and its status as an object on the wall in equal parts. While I am interested in the visceral qualities of the photographic print, I am most excited when these qualities are combined with the associations of a representational, indexical image. In other words, I would like photography’s unique relationship to time and place to remain intact. I am not interested, for example, in the mere fact of chemical and material interactions on the surface of the print. In my mind, the particular kind of visceral sensation offered by the photographic print comes about through its unique relationship to the physicality of the world as
well as its status as a technical, representational image. Being a technical image (something produced through one’s interaction with various, constantly evolving technical tools: cameras, printers etc.) photography is dictated by the technology of the culture at large. By using photography, one is always in some sense reflecting one’s position within culture and one’s attitude toward it. In this way, photographs are uniquely and complexly associated to the time and place in which they are produced. And in my practice, I would like to allow these associations to emerge obliquely through my own subjective engagement with the medium.
Bibliography


Still from L’Argent photographed off of my computer screen

Still from L’Argent photographed off of my computer screen

Still from L’Argent photographed off of my computer screen

Still from L’Argent photographed off of my computer screen

Still from L’Argent photographed off of my computer screen

Still from *A Man Escaped*

Still from *A Man Escaped*

Still from *A Man Escaped*

A Man Escaped

Still from A Man Escaped

Still from *A Man Escaped*

I-Pad Billboard in Los Angeles

I-Pad advertisement

Ipad Advertisement

Walker Evans *Stamped Tin Relic*, 1929

Minor White: Untitled (Black Boulder Rimmed in White Deposit; White Substance Creating Design in Middle of Rock) from the portfolio Sequence 15, 1959

Pickpocket: Overview of Installation at Sweeney Gallery
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