

## Call for Papers

### Symposium

## ***Hide and Seek. The Interplay between Transparency and Opacity***

November 23 – 25, 2007

Concept: Markus Rautzenberg and Andreas Wolfsteiner

During the final scene of Fellini's "La Dolce Vita" two people stand facing each other on opposite shores of a beach. They try to talk to each other but all attempts to do so are drowned out by the rumbling of the ocean. The tragedy of the impossibility of communication is evident in the pantomime of the protagonists; the situation oscillates between near-comprehension and utter failure of dialogue. This disruption of linguistic communication is a recurring motif in "La Dolce Vita": again and again, Fellini overlaps language with layers of "noise" and thus achieves a special form of presence for language *through its very absence*.

The interplay between image and sound presented in Fellini's film goes back to pre-cinematic processes, such as the cloud chambers of the late eighteenth century, as well as advanced historical procedures of image mediation, such as the perfection of perspective in the *trompe l'oeil* style in Early Modern times. Still life motifs of the seventeenth century, such as Wilhelm van Aelst's "Still life with hunting equipment and dead birds" (1668), often incorporated an element of irritation that blurs the line between real and visual space while otherwise strictly following the rules of central perspective. The above-mentioned painting includes the image of a fly that disrupts the composition through its proportion and positioning and draws attention to the otherwise carefully concealed materiality of the painting's surface.

Such *modi operandi* have not only been incorporated into cinematic post-production, as in the case of mattes; these processes are also taken to an extreme in robotics, where the term "Uncanny Valley" denotes that strange moment in which the simulation of human behaviour and/or physiognomic characteristics achieve a level of realism that immediately collapses the sense of illusion. The outwardly perfectly copied double is *zombified* and, paradoxically, reveals its *artificiality as realism*. Today this phenomenon, famously explored by E.T.A. Hoffmann in his "Sandmann" story and at the heart of every Turing test, is a practical problem for computer graphics, for example when producing convincing digital faces.

What can be gathered from this?

We are no longer simply dealing with one of many paradoxes of anthropomorphic representation; it could be said that all of the above examples are inherently characterized by an oscillation between *transparency and opacity*, as when looking at a so-called impossible figure, which is tied to an unstoppable *sensual perception of the hidden* and of what is to be *meaningfully discovered*. That is to say, the momentary indistinguishableness of *transparency and opacity* gives rise to a third, liminal phenomenon, which cannot be attributed consistently to either sense (*semiosis*) or sensuality (*aesthesis*). *Transparency*, then, refers to the particular quality of *media* which the observer experiences as an *impression of immediacy*. The centrality of this impression as the condition for success of medial processes (Greek *tò metaxý*) is evident not only since Fritz Heider's "Thing and Medium" of 1926 but goes as far back as Aristotle's theory of perception. Accordingly, a medium fulfils its purpose only when it itself disappears in the process of mediation and becomes fully transparent in its capacity of "aesthetic neutrality" (Sybille Krämer), which withdraws it from the flow of perceptual data. As Kierkegaard puts it in *Either/Or*:

"If when a man spoke one heard the movements of his tongue, etc., he would speak badly; if when he heard, he heard the air vibrations instead of the words, he would hear badly; if when reading a book one constantly saw the individual letters, one would read badly. Language becomes the perfect medium just at the moment when everything sensual is negated in it."

For this reason, media always prove useless or “incomplete” at the very moment when the transparency of medial surfaces is obfuscated and turns into opacity. This is the case when the spoken word is drowned out by noise or when it becomes *meaningless* due to incomprehension of the language. Yet, the above-mentioned examples illustrate that the relationship between transparency and opacity cannot simply be thought of in terms of a dichotomous pair. Instead, the interplay of these two levels gives appearance to something that would otherwise remain hidden. The logic of this dynamic thus follows a pattern not of *either-or* but of *as-well-as*.

Moreover, phenomena of transparency and opacity refer to epistemological structures beyond purely visual and medial processes. On the one hand, processes of revelation at times bring to light new knowledge; on the other, some knowledge must be concealed from time to time in order to secure other knowledge. Both processes are necessary if we are to speak “On Certainty” in our potential worlds. That which is concealed from knowledge and that which reveals itself to the senses (and *vice versa*) is thus not only put to the test but invalidated altogether.

How, then, are we to think of the relationship between *transparency and opacity* if the “excluded third” is no longer excluded?

*The symposium entitled “Hide and Seek. The Interplay between Transparency and Opacity” draws attention to these very instances of blurred boundaries and attempts to approach them conceptually. Although the terms transparency and opacity obviously derive from the sphere of optical perception and were thus primarily theorized with reference to visual representation – such as in the theory of painting (Louis Marin) or in architectural theory (Rowe and Slutzky) – theories of frame analysis (Bateson/Goffman, Derrida’s concept of “parergon”) play an equally important role, as do those of perception, arts and aesthetics, and interface theory. What insights could spring from such a negotiation of the relationship between transparency and opacity for the sphere of the acoustic, language philosophy, or semiotics?*

*While rooted in the field of media theory and aesthetics, the symposium takes a distinctly interdisciplinary approach. Ultimately, it also poses the question about the potential of visual metaphors: is it productive heuristically to speak of “transparency and opacity” outside of the visual arts and media or does the much-lamented “oculocentrism” of Western thought obscure these terms more than it illuminates them?*

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Length of lectures: 30 minutes. The submitted proposals should not exceed 300 words and should include the topic as well as a brief summary of the theoretical and disciplinary framework. Please also attach a biographical outline including current projects, affiliations, and, if applicable, latest publications. A selection of the contributions to the symposium will subsequently be published. The proposals must be submitted by August 20, 2007. All submissions should be e-mailed or mailed to

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