

Tavi Meraud
**Iridescence,
Intimacies**

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There are more pressing matters than this potentially touchy matter of pressing close. The following story isn't so much an apology for intimacy or some kind of championing of it, but rather the modest suggestion that intimacy organizes our experience of space and especially of surfaces. As such, it is in fact not so trivial or delicate after all. These are notes towards a reconceptualization of intimacy in light of new ways in which we can think of the surface.

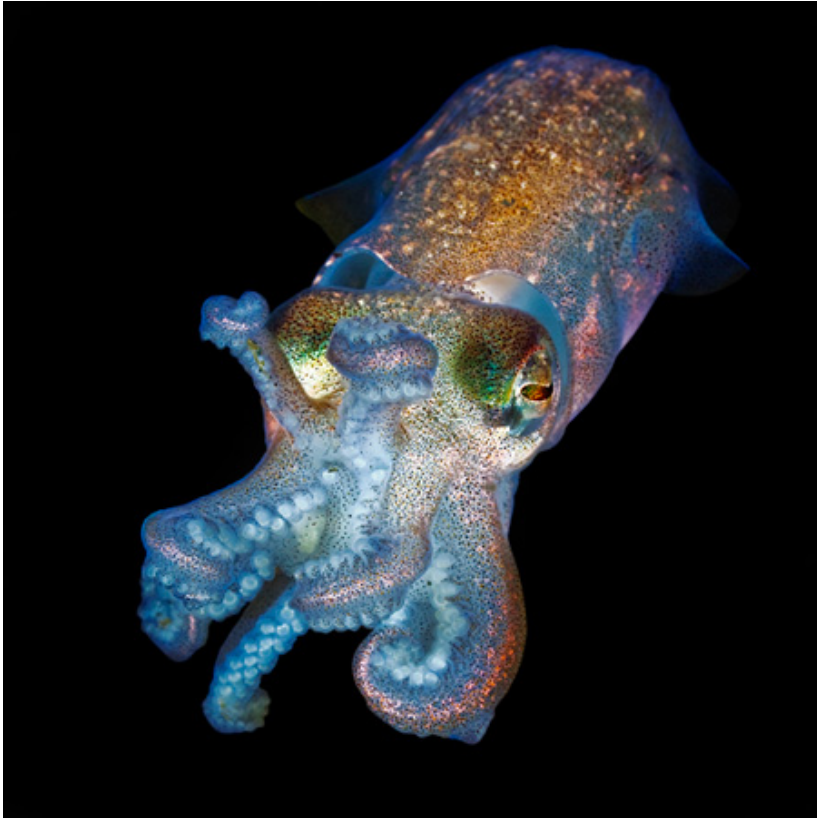
1. Iridescence

Iridescence begins, as it were, at the surface. For the most part, in the world at large, it is visible among animals, some minerals, and even some plants. It is not obvious what the proper preposition here would be – visible *on*, visible *in*, and so on. It is a trace or residue of the surface interacting with air and light, the mediums of vision. Let us consider iridescence as a *Denkfigur* for surfaces. What I intend here by invoking the *Denkfigur*, itself a contested term, is merely to underscore that the relationship being suggested between iridescence and surfaces is not one of metaphor, analogy, or exemplification. It is precisely a petering out into mere metaphoricity and lyricism that this *Denkfigur* allows us to avoid when speaking of surfaces. It can be considered a navigational tool because it guides and organizes our thinking, indeed, configures our thought.

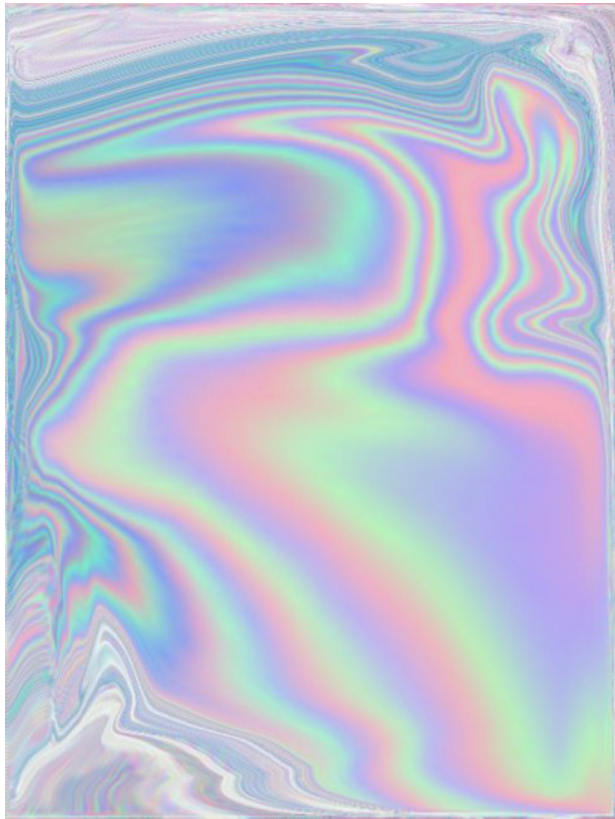
Iridescence is a visual phenomenon. The weird thing about it is that it seems to exist only insofar as it is seen. Essential to iridescence is its viewing geometry¹ – iridescence is the exhibition of “vivid colors which change with the angle of incidence or viewing due to optical wave interference in the multilayer structure present at the wavelength scale underneath the surface”²; it is the “visual characteristic attributed to surfaces that change in color with viewing angle.”³ This is what is meant by the claim that iridescence *is* only insofar as it is seen.

Iridescence is a phenomenon that has been formally recognized since as early as classical antiquity, as evinced by *poikilos*, a secular Greek word used to refer to dappled coloring, such as the skin of a leopard or the many-colored, indeed iridescent, scales of a snake. And throughout history, this phenomenon has recurrently caught the attention of the likes of Newton and Darwin.⁴ But it is only recently that concerted, systematic efforts – across various fields – have been made to study this phenomenon. But here we are not so much interested in the scientific history of iridescence, but rather in gleaning from these observations new dimensions of this puzzling, dazzling, seemingly superficial play of light and color.

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A stubby squid is found in the waters of British Columbia. Photograph by David Hall.



Dom Sebastian, *Digital Oil Spill*, 2014.

Just as much as iridescence scintillatingly seduces, this shine is also its cunning. It is precisely this element of iridescence that won it a place alongside *métis*, that classical notion of the especially (most) cunning form of cleverness:

This many-coloured sheen or complex of appearances produces an effect of iridescence, shimmering, an interplay of reflections which the Greeks perceived as the ceaseless vibrations of light. In this sense, what is *poikilos*, many-coloured, is close to what is *aiaios*, which refers to fast movement. Thus it is that the changing surface of liver which is sometimes propitious and sometimes the reverse is called *poikilos* just as are good fortune which is so inconstant and changing and also the deity which endlessly guides the destinies of men from one side to the other, first in one direction and then in the other. Plato associates what is *poikilos* with what is never the same as itself.⁵

Detienne and Vernant also point out, for instance, that Aesop “remarks in a fable that if the panther has a mottle skin, the fox, for its part, has a mind which is *poikilos*.”⁶ What is being discussed here is basically the phenomenon of camouflage. Indeed, iridescence – as a phenomenon in Animalia – is a form of camouflage.

Consider iridophores, a class of color-producing cells that are found in a wide variety of animals, from crustaceans to bacteria.⁷ Sometimes they are akin to a luminescent accidents happening at or just beyond the final layer of skin, fur, chitin – whatever that external-most layer might be. Consider the particular iridophores we find in the species of squid *Lolliguncula brevis*; here, iridophores are produced from within the flesh of the animal. Embedded within the flesh of this specific squid, but also found in similar instances throughout the animal kingdom, iridescence is always a marker of this interior-exterior negotiation. It is a kind of sign, secreted from within the being of the animal, working its way toward the external world.

Iridescence, then, as a particularly scintillating instantiation of camouflage, literally dazzling the potential predator, is a demonstration of a particular interior-exterior negotiation that ultimately results in a suspension of the appearance-reality distinction. The specific crypsis that is camouflage is so interesting because it is a rehearsal of the problem of the relationship between reality and appearance. It is the case when, indeed, this distinction appears to be

suspended. In fact, it is imperative that this strict distinction somehow dissipates; otherwise, camouflage fails and the organism dies. The cunning of iridescence, however, goes beyond its deployment as an undermining of the apparent rigidity of the animal integument. Precisely as a mechanism of decomposing the mediums of vision, iridescence seems to mark the site where a surface begins to emerge, where a surface surfaces.

To witness iridescence is to encounter a phenomenon where the axis of reality is perhaps no longer the mundanely given but rather one that is shifted towards a heterotopic convergence of images with different degrees of reality, cohering into a single image: the apparent – the really apparent and apparently real – of the perceived shine. This is not an epistemological valorization of the purely experiential at the cost of all other possible perspectives of considering the apparent phenomenon at hand; but nor it is an argument to enhance the understanding of that peculiarly puzzling and seductive phenomenon that is visible, for instance, in the animal kingdom. Iridescence, as *Denkfigur*, allows us to constellate a conception of the surface precisely not as boundary, but as a scintillating site of intractable multiplicities. Iridescence, then, appears as a *Denkfigur* for surfaces surfacing.

2. Screening the Surface

Though a strict taxonomy might suggest that the screen is a mere instantiation of surface, let us consider the surface as screen. In so doing, it will become clear that the constellation of realities, which occurs at the site of the screen, is precisely a rehearsal of the reality problem at the heart of the surface. Of course many of the considerations of the screen that I have in mind deal with the screen in the plain sense of a screen for projection, a screen on which something, namely a film, is projected. But as a site of projection, or rather upon which something is projected, the screen is freed to appear in a variety of manifestations. Here are some easy targets: consider the German word for screen in the sense of movie screen, *Leinwand*, which is also the exact same word for the canvas upon which one can, say, paint. But if we are going to indulge in word games, then there is of course that other just-as-prevalent definition of screen as blockage: the site of the absorption and reflection of luminance can also be a sight of exclusion and rejection. But of course, to have and to manifest that reflective potential, physically, there needs to be enough solidity/concretization as far as the substrate, the screen, is concerned. This is the alluring paradox of the screen agenda.

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Screen talk seems to slip naturally into virtuality talk (emphasizing this seemingly slight distinction between the virtual/virtual reality and virtuality is my own intervention, which I will elaborate on shortly). Anne Friedberg's book *The Virtual Window* considers the evolution of windows and screens, from Alberti's theories of perspective all the way to the computer screen. In *The Virtual Window*, we see that the discussion of screens turns into a discussion of virtuality. Friedberg thematizes the two spheres, which were identified above, in terms of a tension:

Another way of thinking about this tension between the material and the immaterial is by means of a question often asked in a spectator theory: "Where are we?" or "When are we when we watch film or television or sit at the computer?" The theorists have answered this in a variety of ways. The answer might be something like: *in a subjective elsewhere, in a virtual space, a virtual time.*⁸

"The space of the screen is a virtual space, an elsewhere that occupies a new dimension." The virtual here is juxtaposed with the real. This juxtaposition seems to be one of the basic tenets of virtual-reality talk – the virtual is opposed to the real in the sense of the material, corporeal, and so on. And yet – and this is what I want to draw attention to – it seems that one is also speaking of virtuality to describe the effect that is produced by this sphere, as marking something like a quivering space or phenomenon or something *between* the real and the virtual. It is an effect on the real; it is a trace of the virtual. I take this to be the thrust of Elizabeth Grosz's argument in her book *Architecture from the Outside*, particularly in the chapter "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Real." While the discussion here initially begins by demarcating a kind of opposition between the virtual and the real, aligning the virtual with the realm of ideas (the unfettered aspect of the imagination and fantasy), and the real with the body and the flesh, the clarity of this initial distinction quickly blurs:

The very term *virtual reality* attests to a phantasmatic extension, a bizarre contortion to save not the real (which is inevitably denigrated and condemned) but rather the will, desire, mind, beyond body or matter: this is a real not quite real, not an "actual real," a "really real" but a real whose reality is at best virtual ... The real is not so much divested of its status as reality as converted into a different order in which mind/will/desire are the ruling terms and

whose matter, whose "real," is stripped away.⁹

Her account goes something like this: the virtual is ostensibly opposed to the real, but the real – fleshy bodies, for instance – persists; it coexists with the virtual because virtuality resides in the real. Yet Grosz ultimately emphasizes the dimension of futurity and potentiality as the link between the virtual and the real: "If virtuality resides in the real ... this is because the real is always in fact open to the future, open to potentialities other than those now actualized."¹⁰ As such, she claims, the virtual expands the real. Virtuality, then, is the marker of the ways in which the firmness of the real gets a bit shaken.

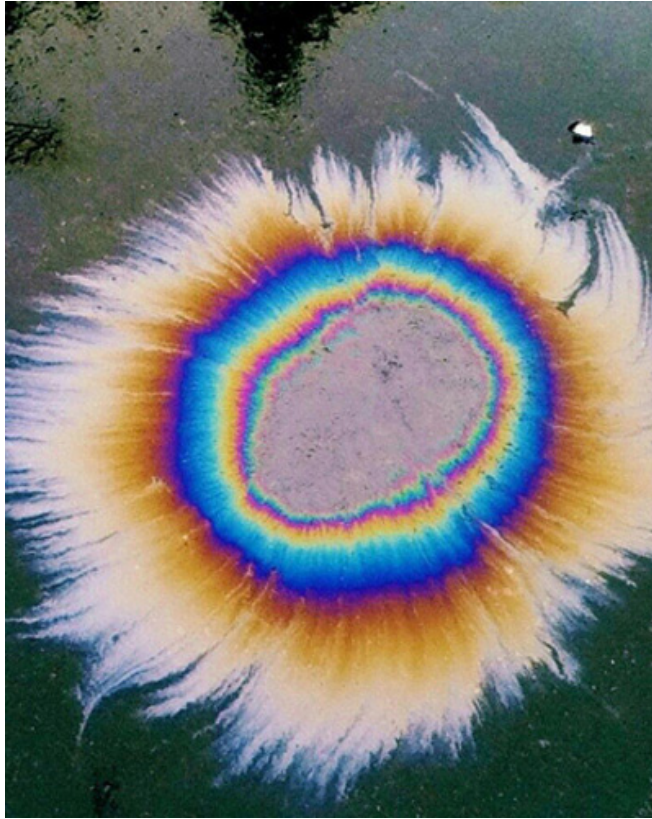
In another consideration of screens, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, Kate Mondloch traces the trajectory of screen presence in installation art. Focusing on a selection of artworks in each of the book's chapters, Mondloch ultimately considers the real space of virtual reality that is generated by the insertion of screens into installation art. This interweaving of real and virtual is best captured, Mondloch writes, by pieces such as EXPORT's *Ping Pong* or Peter Campus's *Interface*, because of "how they ask their spectators to remain fully present in *both* temporal and spatial realms," proposing a "dual-spectatorship," one that makes the spectator part of the illusionist representation while he or she remains very aware of the material conditions of the viewing experience.¹¹ Mondloch proposes a consideration of the simultaneity of two different spaces: the space in front of the screen and the representational space inside the screen. This view is clearly related to another conception, which she later cites – Oliver Grau's suggestion that the spectator of a computer screen is in fact in three different places at the same time: the spatiotemporal location of the viewer's body, the teleperception of the simulated space, and teleaction that happens when one manipulates a robot's actions with one's own movements. This multiplicity – or more specifically, this simultaneity – of being present in multiple realities suggests that the key issue here is reality and how it is defined, staged, and refined. It is not merely the simple binary of real versus virtual, but rather the kind of vibrating virtuality that is unconcealed precisely by the juxtaposition.¹²

3. Stereoscopy and Virtuality

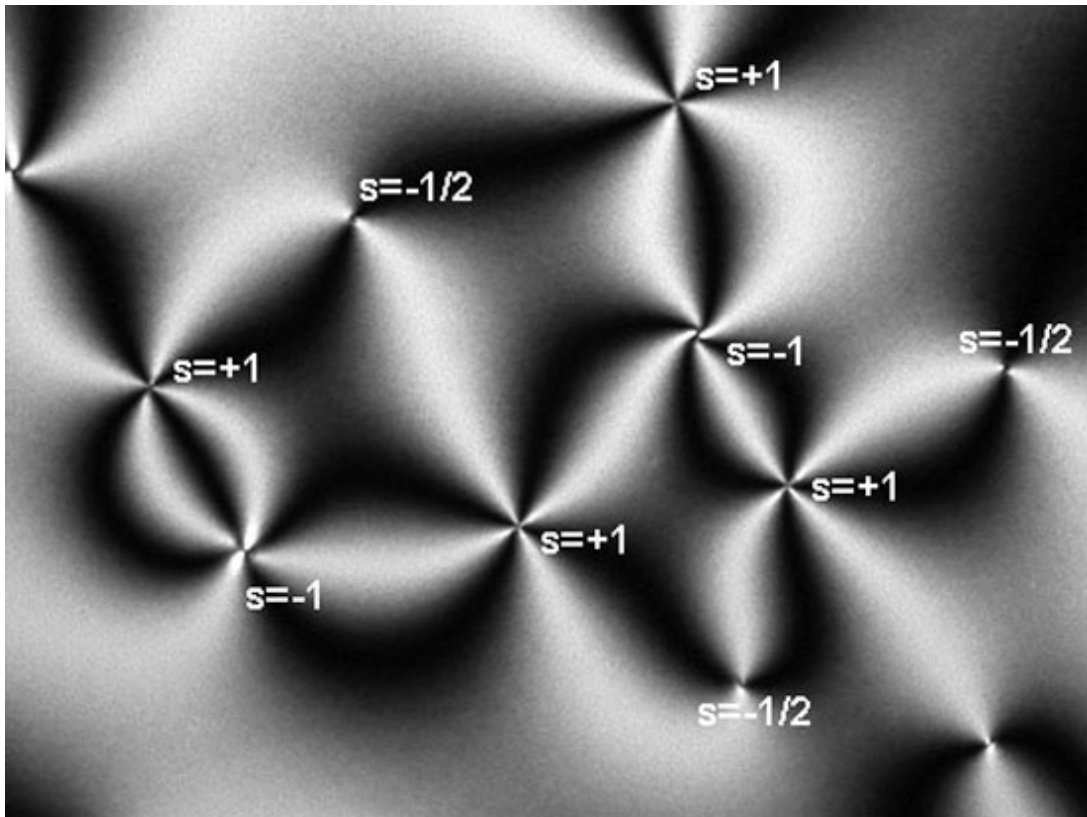
If surfaces as screens and sites of virtuality are symptomatic of something moving towards transhumanism, we can backtrack a bit – not to *humanism*, but, more modestly, to simply the human and perhaps less modestly to the

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A photograph by moonfuzzies on Tumblr comes with an accompanying explanation: "Found this walking to my car after a storm." #mine #anesthetic #puddle #rain #oil spill



conception of modern man according to a particular story that can be traced across various representatives of Western philosophy (though, the danger here is that all these persons are involved in so incestuous a conversation that they might as well be mumbling to themselves).

Consider this proposal: surfaces are a distinctly human problem. What this statement is hinting at is that the beginning of modern philosophy (when man itself becomes a philosophical problem unto himself) is in fact a twinned birth: the birth of modern philosophy and the birth of the problem of surfaces. The following will try to constellate how surfaces are totally wrapped up with this particular conception of the modern human. This invocation of “modern”¹³ can refer, as is perhaps most familiar, to the Cartesian intervention. This refers to different aspects of Descartes’s philosophy, but for our story here we can identify him with inaugurating the philosophy of conscience, which has since become a perennial preoccupation. And it is in this story of the philosophy of conscience that we come across another key intervention, namely the Kantian, which further refines the focus on man.

The birth of the “modern” human as we are using this term is marked by the event of man attaining something like another dimension – when consciousness becomes a problem because man seems to attain consciousness (and consciousness of this consciousness). To use “modern” in this sense isn’t my original suggestion – here I have in mind, for instance, Foucault’s account of the modern episteme, and the claim that what sets this period of knowledge (of the human relationship to and with knowledge) apart is precisely that man himself won a particular pride of place (and so many problems with it). According to Foucault’s story, Kant inaugurates this other, problematic dimensionality of man, “modernity.” What is inaugurated is the notion that, weirdly, in the afterglow of the sun being established as the center of our solar system, man becomes the center of the universe.

But – and this is the story I am trying to tell – what happens with this birth of the modern man, when the human becomes a problem to itself, is that not only does man itself attain another dimension; as this other dimension is attained, the division between theory and the everyday is also configured in a particularly perplexing way. And this configuration, in turn, is a rehearsal of this searching for the real. I will try to sketch this in the following.

Consider the oft-heard pairing “theory and practice,” and revise the latter term to be more deeply inflected by the notion of the quotidian. With the emphasis on the everydayness of

practice, it begins to be possible to recognize the contours of something like different aspects of thinking: practice is the aspect of thinking as it forms in the everyday, and theory is the more removed or rarified aspect of this same thinking.

It is in this way that Edmund Husserl began his philosophical project of phenomenology. He identified something he called the “natural attitude” and contrasted it with what he called the “theoretical attitude” (later he went on to identify a third attitude, the “phenomenological attitude,” but the three-way comparison is beyond the scope of the present discussion). Husserl writes that the transcendental problem, which we can understand as another way of putting the philosophical problem (par excellence for Husserl),

arises within a general reversal of that “*natural attitude*” in which everyday life as a whole as well as the positive sciences operate. In it [the natural attitude] the world is for us the self-evidently existing universe of realities, which are continuously before us in unquestioned givenness.

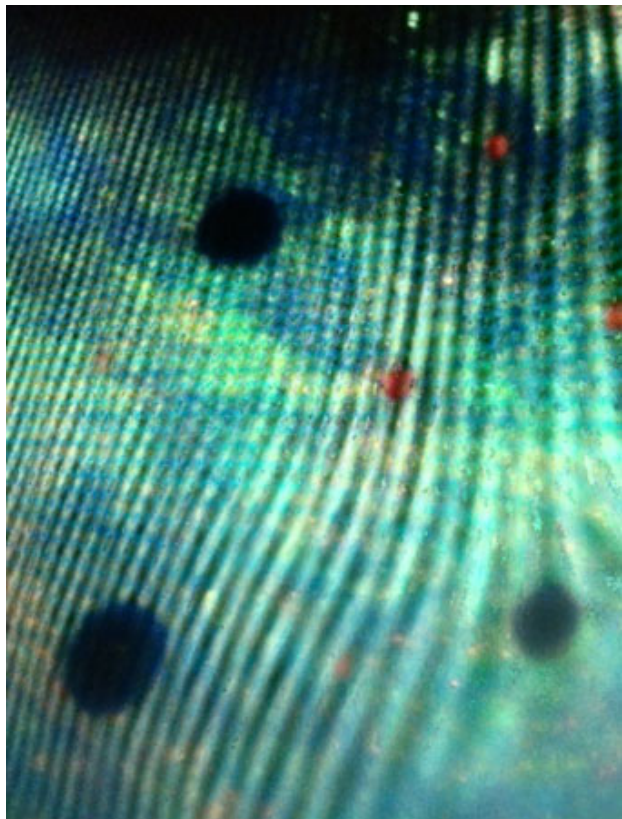
In a lecture Husserl gave in 1928, he offers another, slightly modified definition of the “natural attitude”:

[It is] the natural focus of consciousness, the focus in which the whole of daily life flows along; the positive sciences continue operating in this natural focus. In this focus the “real” world is pre-given to us, on the basis of ongoing experience, as the self-evidently existing, always present to be learned about world to be explored theoretically on the basis of the always onward movement of experience.

The relationship between what Husserl calls the theoretical attitude and the natural attitude is not so straightforward as was initially suggested; a closer look into his work quickly reveals that he took the theoretical attitude to ultimately belong to the natural attitude, and both get suspended in the phenomenological reduction. It is not my intention here to examine the problematic subtleties of this discussion. I only want to refer to the distinction, indeed the *reversal* (a “general turning around of our regard”) as Husserl himself calls it, between something like the everyday orientation towards the world and the orientation that precisely begins to probe that undifferentiated landscape. The link to “the real” can be more easily recognized when one considers the philosophical trajectory to which the specific project of phenomenology belongs. It

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Tavi Meraud, *iridiphores*, 2014.
Image on monitor (dimensions variable).

is important to recognize that the origins of phenomenology, specifically Husserlian phenomenology, differ in a crucial way from how this word gets most often deployed these days.

Today one hears the word “phenomenology” most often in conjunction with subjective experience or the experiential sphere; indeed, this word seems to often function as a stand-in for that sphere as such. What is obscured in this usage is that the original scene, so to speak, where phenomenology began to be developed was rather a rehearsal of the problems of the theory of knowledge and epistemology, of the debates on psychologism that were rampant at the time of Husserl’s writing (a bit before and around the turn of the last century). The particular project of Husserl, then, can be considered – as he himself considered it – to belong to the tradition of transcendental idealism, that perplexing variety of idealism inaugurated by Immanuel Kant with his first critique. Recall that the revolutionary element of Kant’s proposal is indeed schematically analogous to Copernicus’s revolutionary suggestion – just as the sun no longer revolves around the earth but the earth around the sun, objects do not form our cognition of them but rather we form them. The locus of the production of reality has shifted.

By positioning the subject in the transcendental configuration that is the core of the critique of pure reason, by making the subject be that transcendental locus of world-constitution, some account of what happens to that other side, the side of objects, was needed. Kant’s famous suggestion is to abstain from worrying about the real – that infamous thing in itself, *Ding-an-sich*, that can never be knowable. This sets the stage for a truly histrionic struggle with this real that may or may not be knowable, that may or may not even exist, and so forth. The history of philosophy, then, since this transcendental eruption has been a recurrent, consistent – if not constant – struggle to escape the infernal tug of the transcendental sphere.

It is within this trajectory, this accumulation of concerns, that phenomenology is produced. And now knowing where it is coming from, so to speak, the urgency of the apparent tension between something like the natural attitude and the theoretical attitude, between these two spheres, can be better appreciated. The real is implicated in all this when we consider the locus, as it were, of where this reversal is occurring. It is in the mind of the thinking subject as such; we are still dealing with something like the subjective, if not transcendently subjective, sphere. In trying to establish the strategy, if not the technique, of achieving an understanding of the world with the greatest epistemic security,

Husserl turns from the given, material world as such, towards the mind of the thinking subject. For it seems that we begin with conscience experience, we begin with an awareness of the world, and to begin to question the hows and whys of this awareness, to bracket all potentially dubious elements of that cognitive moment, it seems necessary to bracket everything that is foreign to consciousness. But then we ostensibly become stuck in the mind and cannot go back out to the world, the world that must be really out there. This is the problem that haunted Husserl, which one can recognize with a cursory glance comparing the early and late works of the thinker, specifically the fact that towards the end of his life, he dedicated his efforts no longer to philosophical but almost purely to anthropological concerns. This tension between how we negotiate between the sphere of the mind, populated by ideas and theories (in a word, Theory) and the real, the material world (the Practical) does not describe the isolated struggle of this one philosopher.

It is certainly beyond the scope of the present discussion to provide an account of the ways in which a later, American philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, is related to our older Moravian founder of phenomenology. But in Sellars’s famous essay “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” he discusses – similar to Husserl – different orientations toward the world, or in his language, different “images of man.” Sellars’s manifest image is precisely not the simply naive everyday conception of man. It is rather a conception that is already inflected a bit by the theoretical, to continue the language I have been using thus far – inflected insofar as this is the image of when “man first came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world.” The relevance to the discussion above is that this manifest image is contrasted with the scientific image, which refers to the various conceptions of man provided by the different sciences. Sellars uses stereoscopy to refer to that phenomenon in which two images are brought into coherence. This is, then, one way of dealing with two spheres that initially seem too distinct to be properly unifiable. This is the stereoscopic back and forth, a dynamic stability – the scientific image conditions the revision of the manifest image and the manifest image conditions the enablement of intervening at the level of reality through the scientific image. What I tried to delineate with the screen can now be applied back to this Sellarsian discussion, and we can understand the screen as dynamic stability.

We can now constellate the different elements – of the multiplicity of images, and of the stereoscopic coherence possible between them – and bring into clearer focus the element

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of the real (the concern with seeking out the real, trying to achieve the real, delineate the real as such) wrapped within this talk of stereoscopy. The very phenomenon – or more accurately, the mechanism – of stereoscopy was developed as a technique for creating the illusion of three-dimensionality. But there is also an interesting, deeper physiological consideration behind this apparatus of mostly entertainment: we humans are creatures, among others, who are naturally susceptible or prone to stereoscopic vision because of the placement of our eyes. What is at stake when there is talk of multiple realities coming together, or when the stability of the apparent given reality (cf. natural attitude) is stirred and shaken by the insertion of a screen, is precisely stereoscopy.

This figure depicts liquid crystals forming a schlieren texture, occurring between crossed polarizers in a polarizing microscope.

4. Really, Apparently

What may seem like a digression into philosophy above appears to be much more a part of the fundamental scaffolding of the construction of our experience of screens. The potentially twisted implication of bringing together the philosophical story sketched above with the specific aspect of screens in the discussion of surfaces can be considered more of a chiasmic (than helical) twist. Does the screen/surface become an emblem for the philosophical story, or does the philosophical story become an enhancement of the screen? The urgency of teasing out chiasmic entanglements is implied in the coherence mechanism that I am trying to attribute to the screen.

Beyond mere mutual illumination or superficial affinity, one could say that according to the definition of modernity proposed above, the birth of modern man is twinned with the birth of the problem of surfaces. But I think the deeper consequence of bringing together these two disparate discourses – by dint of both being shot through with this concern with the real – illuminates, precisely, different components of this reality problem.

In my analysis I have only reached the point where I can suggest that it is not merely thematic resonance but an actual isomorphism that is going on. It is no trivial conclusion that in different aspects of our experience, of our being in the world, we are constantly stereoscopically negotiating between real and unreal realms. The designation of a realm, a layer – a surface as it were – as “the virtual” suggests a locality, in some sense, that has been firmly established. Though it seemed that the iridescent epigram initially oriented our thoughts to consider the surface no longer as a monolithic concretion but

rather more akin to an accretion, now with the notion of virtuality, we seem to once again face something solid. It seems we have created an image of coherence (referred to above, occasionally, as dynamic stability) negotiating between the real and the unreal.

Virtuality shifts the locus of reality away from the thing in itself but not entirely back to the perceiving subject. It seems rather to suspend the issue altogether and rather suggests another locus of reality that is neither here nor there, which shimmers between revealing itself as thing-in-itself and purely experiential (subjective). What these considerations of virtuality ultimately suggest is that the difference between appearance and reality is not merely suspended, but actually collapsed.

For example, camouflage is precisely that. It is not merely perception being tricked, but in that instant of recognition – recognizing something as something *else* – it is rather that another reality has been momentarily illuminated. The locus of reality is no longer in the perceiving subject, nor is the reality of the perceived object itself altered. The blending of reality and the apparent is precisely the mechanism of camouflage.

This shifting of the locus of reality, then, has important consequences for our thinking about the surface. The surface *is* only insofar as we, the perceivers, encounter it. The surface *is* only so long as it is perceived. In this way, surface itself becomes a locality, a point of experiential densification. The experience of surface, then, is an experience of recognition – recognizing that shimmering neither here nor there. This means that surface is a kind of densification of information and material. It has accrued and calcified, hypostatized into a plane of perception – the surface. And it is in this way that the surface can be read as a symptom – as a precipitate, as a densification, as an accumulation in a particular, specific locality. Hence I began this section with the suggestion that the surface is not a monolithic concretion, but an accretion.

Our perception, we could say, is the analogue of the water strider’s feet on the surface of the water. The moment our perception makes contact, the surface tightens into itself; it becomes. Our experience of surface, our experience of how the surface operates, is a localization of a densification, of multiple images/elevations/layers cohering in that moment of perception. This is the operation of surface tension, when the surface of the water becomes the surface. We may still encounter the surface as monolithic, as a solid integument, though it is in fact a series of elements brought

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together into a scintillating plane of perception.

5. Intimacy

Amidst all this talk of surfaces, I think the most urgent surface is the surface of the skin (for it is the closest to us), and thus of touching. And touch is the marker of intimacy. But beyond the necessary role of touch in our ontogenetic and phylogenetic survival, it has become something of a presiding metaphor in this talk of surfaces. It would thus be remiss to speak of surfaces without at least a passing glance at intimacy.

Intimacy is sex, maybe – it's hard to say definitively because this is a euphemistic deployment of the word, and I think a somewhat antiquated one at that. These days, "intimacy" seems most close to closeness, that ineffably singular experience of feeling connected to another person. When speaking of intimates, there is an emphasis on the proximal, in the emphatic, spatial sense of the word – those who are close to one another, those who are close to me. It describes – in a phrase – the logics of proximity. This superficial closeness, literally proximity understood through the metrics of how much of my private sphere comes into contact with that of another, is rather a foil for an even deeper sense of spatiality, that of interiority.

Resuscitating this deeper sense of intimacy here is rather an attempt to highlight a tacit aspect of the earlier considerations of screens, surfaces, screening surfaces, and so forth – trying to enter the interiority, neither here nor there, of virtuality. This tacit element I now want to exhume is namely the *architectonics* of intimacy, or even more strongly: intimacy as architectonics, as fundamental, essential – as first architectonics. And it is as first architectonics that we should consider intimacy a heuristic of proximity and closeness, techniques of baffling the superficial. Surface negotiations are not merely just making contact, getting in touch, but rather a more consequential playing with the integument of reality.

If the superficial is itself a collation of so many layers, then intimacy would insist that it goes beyond these layers. Intimacy seems to insist on a realer real than the apparently given. Intimacy purports to access the realer real. If, then, the surface is already an issue of negotiating between the real and the apparent, what would the realer real mean here – to settle on the suspension between reality and appearance? Intimacy may apparently be an insistence precisely on the distinction in order to get to the depths of something, that is, insisting that the surface is merely superficial. (And hence the familiar insistence on touch, on the perpetuation and fulfillment of the haptic

injunction.) However, we have established that the surface cannot be considered a site of monolithic concretion but rather at most a locality of perceptual density.

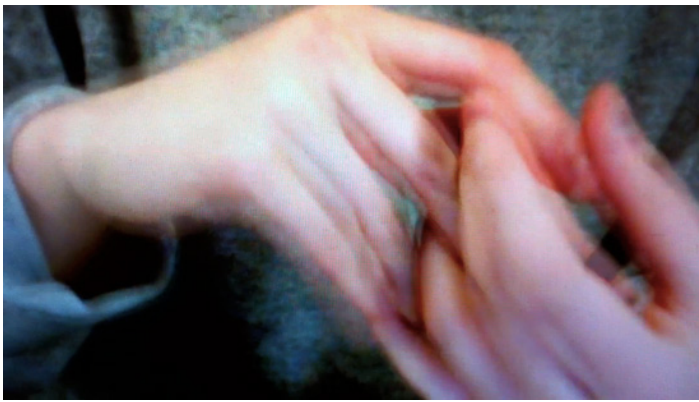
The suggestion here, then, is to recast intimacy, to reconsider its logics of proximity and interiority – its haptology – as the impulse, the drive to seek out, to identify the locus of the real. Intimacy is that drive to naturalize the other into a subject of our inner kingdom, to coproduce a trenchant reality, one that heterotopically blossoms in the "real" reality. This is precisely the rehearsal of virtuality as I have tried to sketch it above. Intimacy is that sphere of reality that is not quite the real of the mundane given, and yet could be considered to exude a more intense reality, in the sense that it is like the ultimate confirmation of the first, inner reality. Instead of becoming a mere idiosyncrasy, the intimate encounter is a confirmation of that reality, but due to its complicity, also, with the material reality, it emerges as that scintillating virtuality.

When we understand intimacy as this drive towards, this navigating for, the locus of the real, we begin to be able to see how intimacy becomes an essential component of negotiating surfaces as we have come to understand them. Intimacy, understood in terms of degrees of proximity, is symptomatic of operating in a world where surfaces are taken to be boundaries, as monolithic concretions. But when we begin to see more clearly that surfaces are in fact these zones or localities of iridescently shifting, at-once-elusive-and-alluring shining – projecting into the space of the given reality and undermining its hegemony – intimacy becomes the drive towards palpating, recognizing, appropriating these heterotopic regions. Surface becomes a localization of stereoscopy, a site where the perennial problem of appearance and reality is rehearsed.

We live in a time of iridescence, of scintillation between the virtual and the real – an *iridereal* perhaps, where surfaces are no longer concretions to be encountered but rather sites of dazzling encounter. The very experience of touch must be conceptualized anew. Intimacy in a time of iridescence should go by another name.

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Tavi Meraud, *subcutaneous*, 2014. Video still on monitor (dimensions variable).

6. Transintimacy

“Transintimacy” is not simply a neologism for the necessarily transformed forms of intimacy, or possibly intimacies, afforded by the configurations of space and surface suggested thus far. Though the earlier story on surface concentrated on screens, the intention has been to sketch the ways in which the surface as such should be reconsidered.

Intimacy becomes relevant when it is recognized that these negotiations operate according to a logic of proximity and haptology, which is the essence of intimacy. Transintimacy, then, is a proposal for something that should be for now understood as a catchall term. It includes the love of cyborg love. It includes the love that grows because I survey my love through screens; I can screen myself and project myself, and bask in the glow of the screened image of my love. But I think these are all relatively flat senses of enhancement, flat compared to the absolutely voluptuous possibilities indicated by the surface. These instances of electronic or techno-love, for lack of better word, have anyway been considered to be troubling, for these scenarios of contact precisely lack *contact*, cannot fulfill the haptic injunction decreed upon humanity. Consider transintimacy, then, as an iridescent intimacy, one that is no longer flat contact between two integuments, a closeness and possession negotiated through touch, but rather a more penetrative possession – possession in that doubled sense of to own but to oneself be owned, haunted.

We move from *Schein*, the appearance of things inflected by a sense of dubiousness, something deceptive, to being blinded by the shine, to now penetrating it to seek out what it essentially is – a dynamic coherence of multiple images, each operating at varying degrees of reality, brought together into a scintillating iridescence, resulting in a dissolution of the strict duality of reality and appearance and

instead illuminating the virtuality that is the site of this negotiation.

I have tried to describe this movement, or more accurately this transformation, in terms of accentuating the inner aspects of intimacy, focusing on the drive towards locating the real implied by this interiority. Hence the very pointed proposal for another neologism, formed by the simple addition of the prefix “trans-,” so that we may consider something like transintimacy as love in a time of iridescence.¹⁴ A transformed intimacy which goes beyond a mere rehearsal and proselytization of haptology – ever negotiating surface as boundary – but rather the iridescent mechanism of, or drive toward, complicity or collusion with the very conditions of superficiality, namely the stereoscopic (perhaps even polyscopic) probing for the real. It is not the conquest of the superficial that we seek in intimacy, but rather the innermost chamber of reality. The surface becomes the locus where this is rehearsed.

The experience of surface might not be a palpation of boundaries but a bounded palpation. Instead of us pouring vision out of ourselves and recognizing boundaries, our encounter with the surface is rather our perception beginning to hit upon, and be hit upon itself by, the different depths of the apparent surface – we become coconspirators of the iridescence glimmering. In inquiring into the nature of surfaces, one touches upon that perennial problem of what happens, what is to be found, between reality and appearance. The surface deepens in that it reveals itself to be not merely the apparent integument but a site of the rehearsal of the negotiations between the apparent and the real, where things at once operate through seeming to be and being that seeming, through the chiasmic intertwining of reality and appearance and the scintillating undermining of the hegemony of both. We are no longer subjects of and to touch, in the sense of blunt contact with the other, but rather in each experience of encounter, we are always already emitting the glow of our interiority and basking in the iridescently shared shine of transintimacy.

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12/12

e-flux journal #61 — January 2015 Tavi Meraud
Iridescence, Intimacies

1

I am borrowing this terminology, “viewing geometry,” from the definition set by Stephanie M. Doucet and Melissa G. Meadows. They also define iridescence as “colors that change in hue or intensity with viewing geometry.” See their “Iridescence: A Functional Perspective,” *Interface* vol. 6 (2009): 115–132.

2

Olivier Deparis et al. “Structurally Tuned Iridescent Surfaces Inspired by Nature,” *New Journal of Physics* vol. 10 (Jan. 2008): 10.

3

Doucet and Meadows, “Iridescence,” 116.

4

Ibid., 115.

5

Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 18.

6

Ibid., 19.

7

The equivalent in mammals are melanocytes, in part responsible for skin color in humans.

8

Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Aberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 178.

9

Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 80–81.

10

Ibid., 90.

11

Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 74.

12

A more recent book, one that concentrates even more intensely on surfaces – *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* by Giuliana Bruno – examines exactly the material avatar, as it were, of the screen. Bruno concentrates on the material substrate of the surface specifically by way of studying the screen and linking it to architecture literally through and with fabric, tissue. This insistence on tangible materiality points us toward a tacit aspect of these discussions on the screen, an aspect that needs to be made more explicit. I think that lurking among the layers of these discussions, very much like the iridophores waiting to activate and illuminate, is this tacit concern with what we could call the real, or more precisely, a

search for the locus of the real.

13

This term is inherently nebulous and part of my aim here is to retain some of this ambiguity, as I am referring to the general aspect of when the human earns a certain pride of place within history. So I have in mind not only more canonical conceptions, such as from the history of philosophy, but also designations from other discourses, such as that not entirely uncontested geological term “Anthropocene.”

14

The choice of this particular prefix is a non-subtle reference to the “trans-“ of transhumanism, the prefix that flags that desire towards enhancement. Here, then, I am speaking of something like an enhanced intimacy.