The Revenge of the Surface: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg

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Rachel de Joode, A Peanut, Half a Horse, a Chicken-foot, a Burning Cigarette and a Black Hole (2011)
In the introduction to his major work Understanding Media, Marshall McLuhan reports the following anecdote. One of the editors of a British journal that reviews society, five percent of your material is new. Yet I will still risk something, since the remaining ninety percent will look like old wine in a new light. Above all it is a question of McLuhan, the celebrated media theorist, and Martin Heidegger, a philosopher as famous as he is contrary to McLuhan, who in the eyes of Greenberg, no less than Heidegger and McLuhan, is a thinker who privileges depth as opposed to those admirers of the surface who take the opposite view. Let’s begin with a brief overview of the theme. Why is “content” viewed with such a low estimate? 

1. Heidegger vs. Content

Heidegger was initially viewed as the crown prince of the phenomenological movement. The basic theme of phenomenology consists in the claim that, in order to understand the meaning of things, we must first explore the consciousness that bears witness to their presence. There is no concealed thing-in-itself, as we claim to know it in a different life-world. Praxis, that substance that only occasionally and accidentally observed. Reality consists fundamentally of its accessibility to human consciousness. If something is not in a person’s mind, then at least it could become present someday. But since you can’t score a goal in physics, the philosopher is no longer interested in anything unknowable, and is only barely interested in the objects of the natural sciences except as insular as they are directly given to us. Yet in any event, phenomenology is partly object-oriented, similarly the British Empiricist Bishop Berkeley, who, more than anything else, estimated the various properties or qualities of an apple than in the apple itself as a durable core beneath all swelling and changing forms of the apple. Berkeley’s famous question is that of the meaning of being, means that we do not take the presence-at-hand of the world too seriously, since the being of things is already clear at the beginning of his book Understanding Media.

In the works of McLuhan we repeatedly hear that “the medium is the message.” What does this mean? The core proposition of McLuhan’s thought is the assertion that the content of any medium is of no importance in comparison with its deep and invisible background. As McLuhan puts it, in his typically lively interview in Playboy, the content of any medium is not more important than the graffiti on the casing of a television set. Yet in any event, there is a difference between good and bad television shows is actually pointless. Of much more importance is television itself, rather than the content of the broadcast, instead of being listened to. The structure of any given medium shape our consciousness, unconscious.

In Greenberg’s case it seems to be otherwise, since he looks at first like the champion of the “flat canvas.” This could give the impression that Greenberg is entirely uninterested in the deep and invisible background. As McLuhan puts it, in his typically lively interview in Playboy, the content of any medium is not more important than the graffiti on the casing of a television set. Yet in any event, there is a difference between good and bad television shows is actually pointless. Of much more importance is television itself, rather than the content of the broadcast, instead of being listened to. The structure of any given medium shape our consciousness, unconscious. In Greenberg’s case it seems to be otherwise, since he looks at first like the champion of the “flat canvas.” This could give the impression that Greenberg is entirely uninterested in the deep and invisible background. As McLuhan puts it, in his typically lively interview in Playboy, the content of any medium is not more important than the graffiti on the casing of a television set. Yet in any event, there is a difference between good and bad television shows is actually pointless. Of much more importance is television itself, rather than the content of the broadcast, instead of being listened to. The structure of any given medium shape our consciousness, unconscious.
“Clement Greenberg is internationally known as the discoverer and promoter of Jackson Pollock. In this way he is one of the godfathers of the trans-plantation of advanced or avant-garde art from Paris to New York in the late 1940’s.”
sole function of collapsing before the might of invisible being. According to Greenberg, it is a unique medium that finally understands the nature of a painting’s meaning. The goal of painting in modernity is to represent that or that, then to take up the formal possibilities of the flat canvas.

The failure to take this task seriously leads the artist immediately back into academism, no matter whether the medium be entirely other than academic. A good example is surrealism, for which Greenberg has no little interest. Despite Rod's soft watches and long-legged elephants, Greenberg apparently never was a purely academic painter. Even if the surprising content of surrealism deviates so much from the laws of classical art, it is still a textbook example of the three-dimensional, illusionistic art—that no less than the boring salon art of the nineteenth century—trier to each accurate representation of the world.

A harsh judgment against surrealism! But an understanding of this can help us if we are in agreement with it. Yet it is not so clear why Marcel Duchamp is also described as an "academic artist," in the view of the fact that perhaps one no less took his medium for granted to a lesser degree than Duchamp. In fact, Duchamp’s entire career can be viewed (and usually is) as the constant questioning of the genuine medium of art. And here we encounter Greenberg’s unfortunate tendency to use "academic art" sometimes as a pejorative term, sometimes just as a global insult for anything that Greenberg happens not to like. On the whole, Greenberg makes six or seven charges against Duchamp: for example, that he only wishes to shock, and even to shock only in the social context of the gallery world without any genuine claim to fame; that Duchamp oversimplified art; that Duchamp overintellectualized art; or that he overestimates his own independence from art history, and so forth.

Yet the accusation of academism against Duchamp has become weakened as soon as we reflect on what dadaism and surrealism do not have in common. In fact, these two movements (despite overlapping membership and affiliation) are two different faces of one and the same coin: one and the same medium, which can be interpreted as opposite experiments. While surrealism uses a predictable technology of three-dimensional representation, all the better to enable the wildest variations in pictorial content, Duchamp in a certain respect makes the opposite maneuver. Namely, he has created an impossible, even unthinkably banal continuity (arrows, bottle rack, bicycle wheel, and so forth), all the better to raise questions concerning the medium of art. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself. It would merely be confusing to use both strategies simultaneously: if for example Duchamp created a ready-made itself.