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Introduction: Scrutinizing Surfaces in Early Modern Thought

Liz Oakley-Brown & Kevin Killeen

[1] By examining the relationships between inanimate and animate matter in early-modern Europe, this special issue on *Scrutinizing Surfaces in Early Modern Thought* takes up and develops Joseph A. Amato's trans-historical investigation of how 'humans, ourselves a body of surfaces, meet and interact with a world dressed in surfaces' (2013: xv). The past three decades have witnessed an 'emergent field of critical, surficial thought' (Forsyth et al 2013: 1017) with theoretical curiosity in, for example, flatness, topology, networks and relationality (Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Latour, 2005; Adkins and Lury, 2009; Lury, Parisi and Terranova 2012; Bennett, 2010; Hodder, 2012). In material terms, landscapes, water and the ecological impact of the Anthropocene have been surveyed (Forsyth et al 2013; Gooley, 2016; Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000) alongside terraneous particles such as dust (Amato, 2000) and soil (Eklund 2017). Zooming in and out to examine both minute and capacious things, writers such as Vivian Sobchack (2004), Tim Ingold (2007), and Glen Adamson and Victoria Kelly (2013) analyse line and surface; literary, historical and semiotic theorists, for instance Claudia Benthien (2002), Steven Connor (2004), Elspeth Probyn (2005), Patricia Cahill (2009) and Tanya Pollard (2010), study the significance of cutaneous coverings.<sup>[1]</sup> However, amidst this profusion of twenty-first century interest, the historical, cultural and social specificity of surfaces *per se* have been largely overlooked. While some essays are explicitly informed by Jacques Derrida, Daniel Miller and Michel Serres and others are more broadly influenced by the general concepts of 'surficial thought' outlined above, each article in this special issue works toward the inauguration of what might be termed sixteenth- and seventeenth-century surface studies.

[2] The accomplished metaphor of depth and profundity worked to the full in early modern thought, but by no means did it monopolise the era's ontologies or its poetics. Renaissance rhetoric's bad conscience and delicious secret was that it was all surface, decorative, gilded, cosmetic. Rhetoric was paint and gloss, and one could never plane the wood down finely enough to be unadorned. We could surely not reckon up the number of abject apologies in which the author insisted he or she was without craft, unadorned and naked in what they write, thrown upon blunt *res* when *verba* failed. This too, the era knew, was rhetoric, the *parrhesia* of the crafty Iago as much as the candid councilor. Hence Francis Bacon's 1625 essay 'On Simulation and Dissimulation' discussed how the manipulation of surface-depth dynamics were important components of Tudor and Stuart realpolitik. Likewise disguise and guile, the outward surface that belied the inner, was a compelling metaphorical trope. Early modernity was fascinated with the lie, its beauty and horror. And the lie was a thing that always had something of the material to it, a grossness.<sup>[2]</sup> However, over the past decades, early modern studies has been intensely focused on interiority, the apparently fathomless depths beneath. The essays here aim to focus attention on the ways that the surface mattered in the literary, musical and the scientific, as well as the material experience of the era.

[3] The early modern period's well-known interest in the Ovidian myth of Narcissus helps to articulate that fascination. The first vernacular episode from the Latin mythopoesis to be published in Elizabethan England, the anonymous *The fable of Ouid tretting of Narcissus, translated out of Latin into Englysh mytre, with a moral there vnto* (1560), describes how the titular youth, exhausted by his flight from Echo's advances, stops to rest in a conventional locus amoenus:

\_\_A sprynge there was so fayre, that stremes like sylver had  
whiche nether shepardes happe to fynde, nor gotes that vpwarde gad  
\_\_Uppon the rocky hyls, nor other kynde of beste,  
wyth flashyng feete to foule the same, or troble at the leste,  
\_\_Wherin them selves to bathe, no byrdes had made repare,

nor leffe had fallen from any tree, the water to appeare,  
—About the which the grounde had made some herbes to growe  
and eke the trees had kept the sunne, from commynge doune so lowe  
(A.iiir-Aiiiv)

As Narcissus stoops to drink from the spring, the unsullied water provides the ideal conditions for his tragedy to unfold: ‘the image of hys grace/ therewyth he rapt, fell streight in loue, wyth shadowe of his face’ (Aiiiv). In the moralised tradition of Ovidian translation, and as is well known, the tale is often read as an allegorical warning against the dangers of self-love: Arthur Golding’s slightly later rendition starkly states ‘lyke a foolish noddye, / He thinkes the shadowe that he sees, too bee a lively boddye’ (1565: BIII<sup>t</sup>). However, in the moralised drama between body and reflection, it is all too easy to miss the importance of the water and how Narcissus’ plight engages with early modern Europe’s attraction to surfaces and their significance for sensation, for selfhood.

[4] In this way, sensual efficiency depends on the interplay with surfaces. While its narrative core features a mythic meditation on sight and touch, ‘the presence of Echo adds a dimension of hearing, sound and voice to the scene’: Ovid’s tale is thus ‘intensely multi-sensory’ (Moshenska 2014: 94) and, accordingly, suffused with surfaces (Kenaan 2014: 50) from the evidently physical to the profoundly auditory. Indeed, Ovid’s myth recounts Narcissus’ misrecognition while toying with its audience’s understanding of *mise-en-scène*. In typical Ovidian fashion, Narcissus’ pause in a ‘pleasant place’ ultimately refutes what its surface suggests (Phillips 2014).

[5] Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pictura* [On painting] (1535) engages with the poem’s self-reflexive qualities. Alberti recognised the Ovidian myth as an aetiology of figurative art. ‘I used to tell my friends’, Alberti explains, ‘that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus...What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool’ (cited in Ruffini 2011, n.6; see also Kennan 2014: 49). This may be the case when a rapt Narcissus observes that the ‘lytle water here, dothe seuer vs in twayne’ (Aiiir<sup>t</sup>). Here, as Hagi Kenaan shows, ‘the mirroring surface’ presents ‘the enabling condition of visual illusion’ (2014: 48). Yet,

it is Narcissus’ tears, disturbing the pond as they fall, that draw our attention to his reflection. This troubled surface provokes a peculiarly destructive form of self-knowledge by allowing Narcissus to see that he is looking at an *imago*.  
(Enterline, 1995: 1)

Lynne Enterline’s focus is firmly on *The Tears of Narcissus* (the title of her monograph). Even so, her compelling description of the youth’s realisation brings the agitated water into view. Reading *with* the surface means that Narcissus is not guilty of neglecting insight. Rather, he is guilty of not understanding the nature of surface, and of sheen, the mutually insubstantial image in ripple and beauty in transience. In phenomenological terms, Narcissus is at odds with the life-world he inhabits. At the same time, Ovid’s myth bespeaks the centrality of the surface for early modern thought.

[6] As each of the essays in this special issue suggests, the period’s enchantment with and concerns for surfaces is wide-ranging. **Helen Smith’s** essay explores the ways in which the surface of paper engrossed the attention of writer after writer, its massy and material form as much as its capacity to generate metaphor. Taking her cue from Derrida’s suspicion of the ‘blank paper trope’, the essay explores early modern understandings of paper that might be plain, proverbially blank and passive, but which was also an object whose spongy volume and absorbency, and whose pliable multi-functionality exemplified the idea of the virtual, the latent potential of things. This was a culture, Smith shows, in which paper was deployed in myriad ways – medical, culinary, artistic – beyond writing; it was a vital commodity, a product manipulated with oil, akin to cloth, sometimes layered, such that users, domestic, commercial and scientific, were regularly engaged in quasi-artisanal processes with this most malleable, as well as philosophical and poetic, of materials.

[7] **Anna Reynolds** furthers this attention to paper, in her account of its recycling, or rather its very particular repurposing in the bindings of books, the pasted layers that might serve both practical purposes and be strategically demeaning, in the evident Tudor enjoyment of putting monastic waste to the servile work of flyleaves and pastedowns. She traces the dissolution and the scattering of manuscripts, the melancholy, sometimes ritual and sometimes accidental demotion of the material remnants of no-longer-sacred texts, and the acts of retrieval that saw in them the story of a precarious national history. Dealing primarily with John Leland and John Bale in the sixteenth century and the later attentions of John Aubrey to this same matter, Reynolds demonstrates how significant a set of memories inhered not just in things written, but in the rough touch of books.

[8] It is clear that paper, its feel under the fingers and the tactility of engaging with it, mattered – any reader of a kindle, or indeed an online journal knows the difference, the thing missing. The electronic scroll is a lovely motion, but the turn of the page, **Craig Farrell**'s essay shows, is its own particular action, whose uses – unveiling, turning over a new leaf, variations in presentation – were well known and played upon by early modern poets, including Thomas Watson, Edmund Spenser and George Herbert. The physicality of poems that emerges, whose typographical tricks might echo and involve the reader's hand and eye, speaks to a culture attuned to the material, and aware of the rhetorical value in the pause of the turning page. The poets here are shown to pay close attention to the print shop, to the appearance on the page and the reader's engagement with the physical object.

[9] **Claire Canavan** notes how early modern book production was not only lavish, but produced a large number of elaborately well-dressed books, embellished with covers that proved in turn irresistibly and emblematically attractive to painters, who regularly included them in their compositions. Books' outer surfaces produced their own orchestration of symbolic meaning. The embroidered, the textile and the stitched were not mere ornamentation, but could work as their own hermeneutically challenging addition to the text itself. The textile cover, folded, pleated and embellished, was a rich interpretative resource, complementing and complicating the text, particularly the biblical text, in a culture with a ready sense of the emblematic, and which augmented the text and the reading experience with bookmarks and book-bags, whose ribboned, knotted and shredded fabric, the essay shows, were accorded exegetical as much as decorative weight.

[10] With a keen focus on the discursive ramifications of the term 'sur-face' – a word simultaneously connoting position, body and book – **Lucy Razzall** examines how the title page is a singularly striking material and intellectual plane. In many ways, and in contrast to bindings, covers and the other pages that make up the rest of a book, she suggests that it is a 'defining surface': the title page delineates the contents of the ensuing text and the material circumstances of its production (for example authors, editors, printers, publishers, date and place of publication). Like the foregoing essays, Razzall is invested in materiality and tactility. At the same time, her discussion draws specific attention to the ideological dimensions surrounding the cautious translation of 'surface' in the Book of Genesis, from William Tyndale's Old Testament to the King James Bible and a variety of creative uses of the 'title leaf' in William Shakespeare, *The seconde part of Henrie the fourth* (1600), Barnabe Rich, *Faultes faults, and nothing else but faultes* (1606), Thomas Dekker, *A strange horse-race* (1613) and John Taylor *Eniautos* (1653).

[11] Moving from title-pages to literal and figurative vocal tracts – and from England to Europe – **Richard Wistreich** considers the relationships between singing and 'the surface of sensual experience' in the court of Alfonso d'Este II at Ferrara. Impelled by the Aristotelian notion of voice as 'the impact of the inbreathed air against the windpipe' (*De Anima*, 1993, 420b 27) and new materialist perspectives on early modern anatomy, Wistreich's close reading of Giovanni Battista Guarini's 1582 poem 'Mentre vaga Angioletta' (subtitled 'Gorga di cantatrice' ['the singer's throat']) – explores the fluid interactions between literary and corporeal boundaries. By moving beyond the classical focus on human voice, syntax and grammar, this critical attention to philosophical and medical vocality

provides a suggestive view of early modern physiological and emotive surface effects: the emphasis is on how, rather than what, a song might mean.

[12] The relationship between bodies and surfaces is extended in **Stewart Mottram's** discussion of Andrew Marvell's writings. Taking inspiration from Nathanael Culverwell's *Spiritual Opticks* (1651) and contemporary discourses of religious tolerationism, Mottram probes connections between the textual, the corporeal and the lithic. In so doing, Mottram examines tensions between materiality and immanence in poems such as 'The Mower's Song', 'The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn' and, most notably, his epitaphic texts. Designed to record the deceased's lifetime achievement and thus forming a key component of the early modern sepulchre's composite surface, Mottram's essay shows how the combination of Marvell's Socinianism and marmoreal engagements unsettle epitaphic veracity.

[13] **Kevin Killeen's** contribution to this special issue looks at early modern encounters with the newly available experience of the magnified surface, the microscopic abominations in which things that were to common sense smooth and placid proved to the scientific gaze – if it could be trusted – rugged and pocked. The surface was found to embody not the plain and the straightforward, but rather to be the most counter-intuitive and mysterious of entities. The discussions of microscopy in Robert Boyle's and Henry Power's ostensibly empirical enquiries produced objects which needed a new way of describing as much as mere description. Out of this, the essay argues, the seventeenth-century fascination with Lucretius and the very particular Lucretian 'poetics of texture' emerge, against which Margaret Cavendish's vitalist natural philosophy took a brilliant and strange stand.

[14] Taking a frankly twenty-first century approach, **Hilary Hinds'** essay reflects on her own editorial engagement with the material surface of *Anna Trapnel's Report and Plea* (1654). Motivated by Trapnel's concepts of authorship and in the wake of modern practices where 'the editorial gaze is not directed at the compass of complexities or depths of meaning of the work' (Gabler 2009: 10), Hinds' task turns on the relationship with the complex textual surface of seventeenth-century life-writing. To help articulate what she calls 'the affective territory inhabited by editorial work', Hinds deploys Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on 'paranoid' and 'reparative' criticism. Here, Sedgwick's binary terms and their respective alignments with reading against ('paranoid') or with ('reparative') the grain of the text are analogous with concepts of depth and surface. Thus, the editor can either search for hidden tensions or try to understand 'the complexity of literary surfaces' that asked to be 'looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through' (Best and Marcus 2009: 1, 9).

[15] If Hinds demonstrates presentist concerns for the interpretation of early modern surfaces, **Liz Oakley-Brown** looks to William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (c. 1599) and its afterlives – Paul Czinner's 1936 film and Andrzej Krauze's artwork for the Old Vic's production (1989) – to show how surficial thought itself is subject to history. Building on Razzall's etymological interest, Oakley-Brown considers Shakespeare's marked avoidance of the word and the ways in which the play's modernist and postmodernist adaptations help foreground a cultural politics of surfaces. Shifting from England's second Elizabethan epoch to its first and finally the extraordinary inter-war year in which George V, Edward VIII and George VI were each crowned the nation's monarch, the comparative media of drama, film and image capture surface's ideological freight.

[16] In sum, the ten essays comprising *Scrutinizing Surfaces in Early Modern Thought* suggest how contemporary notions of surface ontologies add to our understanding of the period's social milieu and its sensitivity to the material world. They demonstrate the era's sensory engagements, with voice and stone, or with its newly profuse and most endlessly enigmatic material, paper. They show the ways in which early modern writing was alert to texture and the intricate, and the modalities of touch from the finger on cloth to the air in the throat. If this was an era that felt its duty was to plumb the self, to fathom the social and the philosophical in all their cavernous obscurity, it was no less a time attuned to the vertigo of the depthless. The articles here also conjure up ways in which those earlier superficial interests and anxieties underpin our own.



## NOTES

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[1] This overview of the current field is indebted to Liz Oakley-Brown's editorial collaboration with Rebecca Coleman for the forthcoming special section of *Theory, Culture and Society* on 'Visualising Surfaces, Surfacing Vision'. [\[back to text\]](#)

[2] See further Mary E. Hazard (2000) and Helen Smith (2012). [\[back to text\]](#)

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