

# EDITORIAL: DEPTH OF FIELD

By Florian Hadler & Daniel Irrgang

*“There is nothing you can dominate as easy as a flat surface [...].”  
– Bruno Latour (1990)*

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In cinema and photography, depth of field marks the spectrum in which the camera can focus on targets with sufficient sharpness.

There are six different categories of depth of field:

*Deep focus* refers to a technique where all elements in the image, no matter the position in depth, are in focus, thus presenting all details in a vast depth of field and with the same priority or urgency.

*Rack focus* relates to the point in a continuous shot where the focus is newly adjusted, e.g. in order to highlight a detail in the frame or a significant change in the story.

*Soft focus* consciously leaves the outlines of entities in the picture slightly out of focus, to give them a gloomy or luminous aesthetic, e.g. to provide pictures with a transcendent atmosphere.

*Split diopter* as a technique makes it possible to focus on two layers simultaneously to draw the attention to two entities or events at the same time, e.g. for comparison or to highlight their contrasts.

*Tilt shift* couples the motion of the camera directly with the adjustment of the camera lenses. Usually, this technique makes objects or sceneries appear like miniatures or dioramas.

And last but not least the *shallow focus*, with which one can focus on one specific plane while keeping the others

out of focus.<sup>2</sup>

These six different layers of focus may highlight objects, subjects or other elements of spatial depth. The lack of depth of field allows to hide elements or to only subliminally indicate them through blur. In essence, cinematic depth of field actively reveals certain aspects while necessarily concealing others, guiding the perception and aligning the intentions of the film-maker – dramatic composition, suspense, etc. – with the emotions of the spectator. This alignment is often referred to as *suture*, an initially psychoanalytic principle<sup>3</sup> that migrated into film studies,<sup>4</sup> which stitches together the film and its subject. The subject is then put

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2 Florian Cramer referred to this technique as *bokeh porn*, a prosumer culture focusing on the aesthetic quality of the blur outside the focus, which is produced by the lens design of DSLR cameras and can have different qualities such as swirly or polygonal shapes: "A great percentage of content on video sharing sites belongs to this genre. As opposed to Hollywood and Andy Warhol's screen tests, cameras have become the new superstars. They fuel a booming contemporary film genre whose medium radically is the message. This talk will focus on the phenomenon of DSLR cinema, as a discourse of no budget empowerment and the tool that gives you instant magic." See Florian Cramer: "bokeh porn poetics: On the Internet Film Genre of DSLR Video Camera Tests", talk at the conference Videovortex #6: Beyondyoutube, Institute for Network Cultures, March 10, 2011.

3 Jacques-Alain Miller, *Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)* [1966]. Transl. Jacqueline Rose. *Screen* 18/4 (1977), pp. 24–34.

4 Stephen Heath's adaptation of suture for film studies is also a plea for interdependence (between spectator and film) and for heterogeneity or non-determinacy – a plea valuable for the scope of *Interface Critique*: "The subject of a film is the play between its multiple elements, including the social formation in which it finds its existence, and the spectator; no film which does not grasp the spectator in terms of that heterogeneity, which does not shift the spectator in ties, joins, relations, movements of the symbolic and the imaginary, with the real a constant and impossible limit [...]." Stephen Heath, *Notes on suture*. *Screen* 18/4 (1978), pp. 48–76, here p. 74.

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**Quote title page:** Bruno Latour, *Drawing things together*, in: *Representation in Scientific Practice*, ed. Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (Cambridge, MA 1990), pp. 19–69.

in its place as a spectator. Depth of field helps to create this suture, as it allows elements to disappear or to emphasise them, thus guiding the viewer's perception while sewing together the structure of the film with its intended audience.

These simple dialectics of the hidden and the visible guiding the human subject are well known in interface theory. Visibility implies invisibility, perceptibility implies imperceptibility. But while interfaces create zones between the outside and the inside, where the inside is not only black-boxed but dissolves into the background of networked on-demand resources and globally spread data centres, the cinematic and photographic notion of depth of field implies a much broader range between the obvious and the hidden. It is not only about hiding complexity, but also about revealing depth. It is not only about immediate and intuitive understanding, but also about enigmatic, mysterious or puzzling hints.

The concept of suture is also at work in interface design – User Experience (UX) Design aims at aligning the structure and surface of the service, apparatus or application with the expectations and emotions of the intended user.<sup>5</sup> But while

UX mostly focuses on the happiness of the user and is driven by metrics such as conversion rates, involving the users in a seemingless flow of the given surface while fulfilling the tasks the application was designed for, suture addresses a much broader range of relationships between the film-maker and its audience. It is not only about keeping the flow going and the viewer immersed and happy, but also about creating a variety of emotions – fear, relief, tension, anger, compassion and so forth. Thus, it is not only about reaching the goal of a predefined conversion, but about creating a space where the viewer can experience the unforeseen and unexpected while developing their subjectivity.

Considering this terminological strength, depth of field presents itself as a powerful leitmotif to think about interfaces. Where and how can we find or create new and surprising relations between the surface and its depth? Where and how can we design experiences that are open rather than narrowly focused on functional user flow – experiences that allow for unexpected events to occur and which foster serendipity? How can we think about and focus on the depth of the interface? In other words, how can we render visible the numerous layers that are hidden behind the interface?

The perspectives gathered in this volume access the notion of the interface from different angles and in various lev-

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5 "It has been a longstanding claim of science and technology studies (STS) of human-computer interaction (HCI) that shaping the user is a central concern of interface design (Woolgar, 1990)\*, particularly through forms of embedded and enacted scripting (Akrich, 1992; Suchman, 2007)\*." Michael Dieter et al., *Store, interface, package, connection. Methods and propositions for multi-situated app studies*. Working paper series / SFB 1187 Medien der Kooperation 4 (Siegen 2018), p. 4. [\*See Stephen W. Woolgar, Configuring the user: The case of usability trials. *The Sociological Review*, 38/S1 (1990), pp. 58–99; Madeline Akrich, The de-scription of technical objects, in: *Shaping Technology/ Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebke E. Bijker and John

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Law (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1992), pp. 205–224; Lucy Suchman, *Human–Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007) – cf. Suchman's article in this issue.]

els of depth. Some go deep beyond the surface and look into the algorithms, into the code and shine a light on that which usually remains hidden in the opacity of the inside.<sup>6</sup> Some focus on a specific aspect of the surface, like a long continuous shot that reveals details or significant shifts.<sup>7</sup> And some render the interface transcendent and other-worldly through its appearance.<sup>8</sup>

The epistemic detour towards the interface via cinema we suggest in this editorial is not completely new to us. And it aligns well with Siegfried Zielinski's obituary on Thomas Elsaesser in this volume, which is juxtaposed with the transcriptions of a lecture held by the latter and a subsequent discussion between the two media and cinema archaeologists.<sup>9</sup>

For us, the depth of knowledge in a

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6 Hannes Bajohr, *The Gestalt of AI: Beyond the holism–atomism divide*, pp. X–X; Jussi Parikka, *Working for systems that do not do the work*; Joana Moll's *The hidden life of an Amazon user*, pp. X–X; Matteo Pasquinelli and Vladan Joler, *The Nooscope manifested: AI as instrument of knowledge extractivism*, pp. X–X; Lucy Suchman, *Talk with machines, Redux*, pp. X–X.

7 Daniel Irrgang, *The Flusser-Hypertext: "Electronic Book Prototype 2,"* pp. X–X; Cherie Lacey, Alex Beattie and Catherine Caudwell, *Wellness capitalism and the design of the perfect user*, pp. X–X; Elisa Linseisen, *Girls and their cats: Zooms – high resolution – Making a difference*, pp. X–X.

8 Ulrike Beck and Martin Jess, *How a technical innovation in ancient textile industry pioneered a new way of thinking*, pp. X–X; Josephine Pryde, *lapses in Thinking By the person i Am*, pp. X–X; Emilia Tapprest and Victor Evink, *Ambitopia and affective atmospheres. How world-building and cinema can help unpack ideology inside pervasive systems*, pp. X–X; Jan-Henrik Walter, *Aesthetics of High-tech Intimidation. F-35 Lightning II and a Design for Human Reception*, pp. X–X.

9 Thomas Elsaesser and Siegfried Zielinski, *Conversations on Cinema and Media Archaeology*, pp. X–X. The lecture and discussion took place at Peking University, only two days before Thomas Elsaesser's sudden passing.

multitude of fields, revealed during this exchange and in all the other articles in this volume, shows the potential of an approach to interface studies that dismisses predetermined disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary endeavours like the work of Elsaesser and Zielinski, where technology, art and science are acknowledged as deeply intertwined and connected, are important points of orientation for the *Interface Critique* project.

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In volume 2 of *Interface Critique* we initiated the format of a special section with contributions provided by the Working Group "Interface" of the German Society for Media Science (GfM), and we are glad to now call this almost a tradition. The special section in this volume is dedicated to the "Materiality of the Interface". Stay tuned on the special section for the next volume, which is already in the making.

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Stay tuned for the upcoming book series that will complement this journal by offering a platform for more comprehensive single author positions. The series bridges gaps between the HCI community and research in arts and humanities and publishes artistic positions, theoretical and historical groundwork as well as exceptional qualification papers. The first volume, which is already in production and scheduled to be published in summer 2021, will be by the net art pioneer Olia Lialina and is titled "Turing Complete User. Resisting Alienation in Human Computer Interaction". Just like the journal, it will be available as Open Access and as Print on Demand. Please get in touch if you want to inquire about our publishing opportunities.

Looking forward to all things to come.  
– Berlin, June 2021

# References

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