

hidden forms: the role of the blur in art

I recently visited the Gerhard Richter retrospective at the Tate Modern and, on a late evening walk home, I listened to both Vladislav Delay's latest album *Vantaa* and Motion Sickness of Time Travel's *Seeping Through the Veil of the Unconscious*. These events converged in my mind and brought me to reflect upon a noticeable fascination with *the blur* or *haze* in a great deal of art. If it's not immediately evident what I mean by these terms, then I hope to make it clear (or unclear?) in the following paragraphs. What I believe is involved in blurring artworks, is an attempt to mask, render indistinct or diminish forms in order to open the work out to a greater perceptual involvement on the part of the viewer or listener. Ultimately, the shift is one from (shallow) clarity and fixity, to a blending that reveals a multi-focal, infinite and mutable reality. I explore a range of other sub-effects that derive from this grander artistic aim but maintain that the blur is a lens through which revelation and a paradoxical clarity is achieved.

Richter's Blur

Richter joins a host of other obscurantists in the visual arts, devotedly shrouding images underneath layers of haze; the Impressionists strike me as the most notable example, finding their Modernist expression in the radiant film that emerges from Bridget Riley's stripe paintings. Similarly, there has been a great shift towards 'fuzzy', ethereal sounds in both the visible underground of pop music as well as the consciously cerebral avant garde. This stretches right back to the echo chamber experiments of early dub and has a clearly traceable lineage through the muffled, reverb-soaked vocals of Joy Division; the grey, aquatic techno of the Chain Reaction/Rhythm & Sound stable; the layered Cathedral harmonics of Panda Bear; and the lo-fi distortion of No Age, Youth Lagoon and other indie melancholics. One wonders what provokes artists to employ this technique, what effect it has on us who engage with the work and how *convincing* this aesthetic might be.

At first glance it may be easy to dismiss the use of a blur or haze as something of an easy, sentimental shorthand for melancholy, romance and mystery. It recalls a Romantic naturalism that renders a misty landscape pregnant with dewy-eyed significance or a cheap, soft-focus lens that filters a scene through trite nostalgia. Nevertheless it makes its appearance in some of the great artworks of the last two centuries and, in the case of Richter, it constitutes the signature characteristic of his oeuvre, occupying a complex position in his artistic vision. True, Richter is not shy about flirting with cliché or the mawkish; just look at his softened paintings of mist-obscured icebergs and flickering candles. Critics have wondered whether these images are knowing re-contextualisations of hackneyed images, but this interpretation doesn't sit well with anything Richter says or does. He is far too serious, far too sincere to waste time painting navel-gazing images. Not only does Richter claim that he spent time contemplating loss, death and silence while painting these pictures, but he also lauds the role of the artist as one of genuine truth-making:

Art plays a formative part in [the] manufacture of truth.

...One ultimately carries it to the point of believing that one might change human beings through painting. But if one lacks passionate commitment, there is nothing left to do.

He has an old fashioned sincerity that steps outside of postmodern reflection; although Richter goes beyond the modernist fetishisation of the purity of medium, he only does so with the express aim of, quaintly, *saying something* (although, slightly pace this interpretation is his association with John Cage's: 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it'). His multifarious techniques and styles – squeegee swathes, palette knife gashes, dry-brush blurs, corporate abstraction, 'Capitalist realism', Iron Curtain landscapes – are the product of a hungry creativity, not an exploration of devices *for its own sake*. Read the famous interview conducted by Benjamin Buchloch in which Richter responds with bemusement and a little resentment to Buchloch's suggestion that Richter might simply be exploring painterly technique without delivering any 'content'. Indeed, this content isn't to be thought of as a coherent 'meaning' ready for interpretation, but it is there all the same. Richter's artistic pay-off retains many facets, obtaining an ineffable and intangible quality that aids in bringing to the fore a particular human reaction to reality.

It is in this context that Richter employs his notorious 'blur', *instilling* his images with an 'openness' that enables the viewer to perceive reality in all its glorious multiplicity. Richter describes it with a disarming simplicity:

A landscape painted with exactness forces you to see a determined number of clearly differentiated trees, while in a blurry canvas you can perceive as many trees as you want. The painting is more open.

It is, paradoxically, this indistinctness that provides a great deal of clarity in Richter's work. A similar paradox is at work in the Impressionists' oeuvre, in which they follow the great Russian pioneer Vrubel into an intense study of nature that sought greater veracity in increasing abstraction. Reaching its logical conclusion in the Cubist deconstruction of the visual universe, this attitude saw artists attempting to analyse a given scene in order to present all of its facets within a single composition. Richter is attempting to do exactly the same thing, but through a more sensual and emotional deconstruction of reality that recalls the Impressionists' heightened perception. The multi-faceted reality that Richter's paintings reveal is more fine-grained than the Cubists', being at the level of visual interpretation, rather than spatial orientation.

The 'blur' is fundamental to this project – Richter achieves his desired openness by creating muted, blended representations that do not force themselves upon the viewer, but invite close and unfettered engagement. What results is a representation of reality that both reveals its 'infinite variety' and *binds* separate entities within a compositional, aesthetic unity. Richter manages to maintain an almost contradictory simultaneity by presenting a unified, enveloped image that reveals its infinitely splintering but inseparable aspects. To this end, his art is an exercise in *evasion* and *balance* – he wants to give us the subject but strip it of its subjectivity (that is, to make it submit itself to the picture), and he wants to present a compositionally unified and *painted* image of a scene but not determine any particular visual or emotional interpretation. This is how Richter says nothing, and says it – he paints a positive absence (hence his obsession with grey).

I believe Richter's works all share this sophisticated response to our human experience of the world, but the blur is a flexible technique that provides individual works with subtle qualities of their own. For instance, in many of his representational works the subjects are infected by the blur with a commonality that reminds the viewer of their identical status as objects in a cultural and temporal context. Richter has said that he is keenly aware of things being 'of an age' – he paints this being-of-an-age by weaving the figures, the trees, the buildings into his monochrome, hazy fabric. A striking example of this is his painting *Two Couples*; the two pairs of teenage lovers merge into each other and the background as they are swallowed up by the grey mist that bleeds into the pictorial surface. They are presented as distant and out-of-reach, belonging to a particular time: this specific image, then, confronts us with youth, decay, transience (as do many others) but it still belongs, as a member of a subset,

to his greater artistic project of revelation.

This project, of course, carries over to his abstract works – although I have spoken of *representation*, *reality* and *images*, the abstract paintings are still revelatory in this way. Richter agrees with Greenberg that there are no a priori reasons for preferring the abstract over the representational; they ‘do the same work’. Greenberg explains it by noting that the ‘object’ of any work – whether overtly representational or not – is already abstract in essence, albeit ‘out there’ in-the-world. Painting, for Greenberg, is successful when it captures the unity that is manifest in reality; as such, the painting can be of anything or nothing, as long as it maintains an aesthetic, compositional coherence that bestows it with artistic significance. I believe that Richter shares something of this viewpoint in that his abstracts continue the work of the representational paintings by possessing a ‘blur’ of their own. By inviting us to explore the abstracts’ equally ‘infinite variety’, Richter presents a parallel to that which is evident in reality, fulfilling Greenberg’s demands.

Riley’s Glow

So, Richter’s blur is a device that, yes, at times, invokes melancholy, nostalgia and, unfortunately, sentimentality but it is also a device that he employs with great artistic skill to achieve some pretty profound and refreshingly sincere aims. In the previous paragraphs I brushed over Richter’s similarity to the Impressionists, and it is interesting that it is this common, hazy source that inspires Bridget Riley’s perceptual take on the capturing of reality.

The Impressionists drove home an artistic revolution that sought to overturn the staged realism of the dominant strand of academic painting. This saw the dawn of the modern in art; just as philosophy’s arrival in modernity began with Descartes making the human mind (or reality as constructed by the human mind) the subject of inquiry, the Impressionists (and their counterparts worldwide) turned the painter’s focus away from Platonic mimesis and towards the phenomenological – reality as presented to the consciousness via *the eye*. The result was a perceptual and sensual painting that, like Richter’s work, rendered reality more *indistinct* and possessed a greater truth or clarity for doing so. Again, the techniques and subjects that the Impressionists employed have been criticised as schmaltzy and empty – Cézanne famously remarked of Monet that he was ‘just an eye. But my God, what an eye’ – and this will have something to do with the mushy, soft-focus quality that the Impressionist mist possesses. However, Riley saw in this ‘mist’ something of a profound quality. She studied Seurat intensely and noted that he didn’t paint light, but, through his significant arrangement of colour, *generated* light as an organic perceptual output of the colour composition. As such, the light lifts off the canvas and the painting approximates a natural phenomenon.

Riley, along with the Impressionists, could be seen as being interested, perhaps somewhat prosaically, in *nature* rather than the deeper, abstracter ‘reality’ that Richter investigates. She talks of the importance, in her artistic development, of learning to ‘look’ via a sensitive engagement with nature as a youngster and, later, through life-drawing lessons. It would seem that Riley’s focus on recreating our perceptual experience of nature is an old-fashioned mimesis of sorts. However, she isolates the significant aesthetic/spiritual/transcendental aspects of this perceptual experience and, by exploring that gap between nature-as-reality and the very human cognisance of it *through art*, Riley transcends the pedestrian copying of nature:

“For me nature is not landscape, but the dynamism of visual forces.”

As such, Riley explores this dynamism by setting up visual situations in which colours and forms are left to play freely. She builds and releases tension, generating sensations that reflect the natural dynamism of perception

itself. Central to this activity is Riley's focus on the strange optical phenomenon that Seurat uncovered and that Monet et al developed in the great Impressionist works. In many of her pictures, particularly the colourful stripe paintings she produced in the 1970s, she makes the Impressionist 'mist' itself the focus of the works, freeing it from landscapes and letting it exist alone as pure colour. Riley, in a sense, dismantles the Impressionist landscapes (as well as the mythological and historical scenes depicted by Titian, Poussin and El Greco) and reveals the compositional magic at work in the construction of great art. The paintings, when viewed at the right distance, *radiate* and possess a contemplative, engaging, dynamic quality that many artists have explicitly attempted to produce using disparate techniques (e.g. Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock). These paintings' similarity to Richter's work lies in their revelation of an open, mutating reality that isn't fixed by a single interpretation or viewpoint. She says:

"There was a time when meanings were focused and reality could be fixed; when that sort of belief disappeared, things became uncertain and open to interpretation."

Since Riley's geometry and line are precise and distinct, her 'blur' isn't generated, like Richter's, through a disruptive brush-stroke. Instead, the intricacy and dynamism of her structures generates a haze or perceptual film – the work takes place *between* the painting and the eye. Again, there emerges the idea that indistinctness, the image viewed through a veil, reveals a truer vision. So, where Richter's blur absorbs, Riley's radiates and there is a resonance to her paintings that produces a very different emotional response to Richter's. Riley's 'veil' is not so much a blur as a glow.

Music that Blurs and Glows

There is a similar distinction to be made between different uses of indistinctness, masking or haziness in music. Richter's blur, I would say, is akin to the muffled, swampy texture of Motion Sickness of Time Travel or Vladislav Delay, while Riley's resonant 'glow' is to be found in the joyous, spiritual sounds of dub or the isolated resonant frequencies generated by Alvin Lucier in his landmark *I Am Sitting in a Room*. The effect in all these examples is, again, the openness, immersion and multi-focal quality seen in the paintings that I have discussed. There seems to be something in the *masking* of an otherwise apparently fully-formed object that allows for a lot of experimentation and the elicitation of a variety of effects. Strong commonalities lie in (a) the use of repetition as an artistic device to produce organic perceptual activity that supersedes any underlying structure, and (b) the focus on an indistinct, fuzzy *texture* to produce particular emotional/aesthetic responses.

In the first instance, we can draw direct parallels between, say, the focus on repetition in New York minimalism (Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Philip Glass), along with other loop-based musics, and Riley's repetitious stripe paintings (or the Islamic tiling that she and Reinhardt drew inspiration from). As Pierre Schaefer's early *musique concrète* experiments demonstrated, the drawn-out repetition of simple sounds alters our perception of the sound and subsumes it into the repetitious whole – the sound's 'meaning' changes, much like a word that is repeated until we hear only the *sound*, and not its connotations. In the same way that Richter's figures are swallowed into his hazy fabric and Riley's stripes become simple vehicles for colour and light, the violin stabs and vocal 'ahs' in Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* are altered in the phasing process and a continuous, aching hum lifts out of the orchestra, swallowing all the individual elements to produce pure sound. It recalls Riley's description of the Islamic art that uses repetition of abstract forms to produce an intricate structure that lets off 'clusters of colour sensations' and 'dynamics' that go beyond the basic elements. Change the word 'colour' to 'aural' in the previous sentence, and we have a great description of Steve Reich's phasing works.

Similarly, samples are re-contextualised into spiritual, hypnotic compositions by a host of electronic producers

(The Field, Co La, DJ Rashad to name but a few recent examples) and the 'haze' or blur is even more at play here, since the texture of the music is so manipulable and important to the particular appeal of a given track. Just skip through the 'best album' lists of the past few years in those music mags most enamoured with the cutting edge – Pitchfork, Boomkat, The Wire, FACT – and you'll find bags full of album reviews that make reference to the record's 'fuzz', 'sonic swamp', sounds 'steeped in reverb'. This territory has always been well-trodden by the dub-inflected kin of Basic Channel and shoegazers like My Bloody Valentine, but, recently, this sound has become a norm. Burial's *Untrue* was all the rage a couple of year's back; The Weeknd, with their hollowed-out, shimmering R'n'B are currently top of everybody's lists and, in the world of hipster rock, No Age, Tennis and Youth Lagoon represent a filtered-pop aesthetic that holds sway over a significant portion of the underground.

We can point, perhaps a little banally, to the association of this masking quality in music with drugs – the heavy flanging on 60s psychedelic tracks invoked the blurring of the senses that intoxication produces, as did the trove of production techniques employed by Lee "Scratch" Perry and King Tubby to create music to get stoned to. It's no coincidence that the psychedelic movement in music latched onto the more *perceptually* challenging artworks of the 60s, including Bridget Riley and other 'Op' artists. This tradition has endured, and contemporary come-down music is often packaged in sleeves bearing mind-fuck abstractions or mysterious, grey minimalist fields. It seems to be a mark of the modern, this interest in perceptual activity that is untethered and left to be stimulated and manipulated in isolation – what else is the psychedelic movement if not an exercise in pure perceptual, sensual experimentation? It helps us to *literally* see things and hear things in an entirely new way, or even for the first time, recasting perception itself as the object of artistic inquiry.

Besides the obvious 'trippiness' of much contemporary music, the effects produced by blurring and obscuring sounds can be remarkably subtle and varied. Witness Boards of Canada's sun-drenched nostalgia or Vladislav Delay's eerie, post-industrial bass-caverns. There's no doubt that these artists seek to create something elusive and, thereby, mutable, in the same way that Richter does. Boards of Canada's decaying, wobbling synth notes and filtered samples produce a similar effect to Richter's *Two Couples*, distancing and ageing the art in a highly subtle, multi-faceted fashion. By this, I mean that the music isn't anchored to a given time or location, but is imbued with the sense of time's passing per se. Equally, the dense, grey rumbling sounds crafted by Vladislav Delay (see *Multila* and *Vantaa* in particular) could almost soundtrack Richter's Baader-Meinhof portraits or his monochrome, Eastern bloc urban landscapes.

In these works, Richter modifies our perception of the Baader-Meinhof members by enshrouding the chilling, remote qualities of the Mass Murderer in delicate, misty portraits. Similarly, he re-contextualises grey townscapes as seductive quasi-abstract paintings; in both examples, the atmosphere of unease is still present, despite the painterly treatment. Richter does manage to open up potentially loaded images by unlocking their ability to be conceived of as beautiful, fragile and appealing at all, but I feel that the very emotive subject matter in conjunction with Richter's, at times alienating, grey blur sets up an uncomfortable tension, rather than an open, revealing space.[1]

It is, however, a similar uncomfortable tension that associates Vladislav Delay's sounds with Richter's monochrome images. Vladislav Delay (real name: Sasu Ripatti) employs textures that evoke similar themes – the industrial world, smog, urban futurism – to produce a human, close, warm sound that is simultaneously tinged with an alienating machine-aesthetic[2]. The overall effect in *Multila* – as well as in parts of his latest, *Vantaa* – is of a fragmented and suppressed whole that glacially drifts into new, but unresolved shapes. The burbles and washes of soothing, beautiful sound are kept at bay with the heavy shrouding effect of an inverted equaliser and thick layers of silver noise; also, any stable rhythmic impulses are suppressed, and the music booms and stutters along with a disarming fragility that threatens to break up the whole structure at any point. Like Richter's

portraits, the alien and threatening is given an aesthetic make-over that renders it fragile and possibly even attractive. Also, as in Richter's landscapes, the grey and industrial is evoked with ambiguous textures that situate it anew, being explored as an intricate and multiplicitous terrain, albeit one that is still menacing and inhuman. Herein lies Richter's contradiction: he hopes to reconcile the Romantic, aesthetic response to nature with its apparent inhumanity and remorselessness. The shrouding and blurring is a means toward that end. Similarly, in the liner notes to Vladislav Delay's more recent work *Vantaa*, Ripatti declares that the album is directed towards conciliating his 'decadent greyish post-industrial sound' with the natural, glacial terrain of his native Finland. It seems that he, too, hopes to resolve inherent tensions by constructing elusive, shifting, misty works.

Summing Up – Hidden forms

The cloaking effect in music, then, produces strikingly similar effects to those found in paintings. It provides a wide palette, evoking variously: nostalgia, the ethereal, darkness, closeness, alienation, intoxication and fragility. In all the disparate examples discussed above, the artistic technique at work involves the creation of a sense of shifting, semi-tangible forms attempting to coalesce into something stable. The sound or image's inability to achieve this coalescence – an arrest sustained through various different, but related ways across the artworks – locks us in stasis, draws us in to the piece, encourages contemplation and, ultimately, leads us to experience our own perception more deeply.

As a stark example of such perceptual manipulation, radical minimalism in both music and the visual arts literally strains our perceptual extremities in order to produce a quasi-spiritual engagement – Rolf Julius' barely-there soundworks require a completely rapt listener to even hear anything, let alone come away with any tangible experience, and the Reductionist music coming out of Berlin and London nearly approximates 4'33" in its extreme flirtation with silence. In the world of the visual, Ad Reinhardt painted his 'black' paintings with an incredibly subtle colour modulation across the surface, forcing the viewer to look long and hard to find 'the image' that Reinhardt had 'painted out'. These are extreme examples of an art that hides itself under barely audible volumes and minuscule tonal differentiations, but the impulse towards creating an almost spiritual reflection [3] by masking and blurring the apparent object is the same as Richter's or Riley's. While Richter's abstracts are maximal by comparison, they contain teasing fragments of hidden layers – splinters of contrasting colour emerging through the dominant field or shimmers of exposed aluminium – that manufacture a sense of something beyond our reach, giving the artworks extra facets and a greater hold over us [4]. (This hiding or painting-out is made overt in the 'Übermalungen' of Pierre Soulages or Arnulf Rainer in which painted canvases are obscured by thick, black washes and scribbles of paint).

I have previously mentioned the way in which art has undergone a transition from the fixed, singular perspective found in the Renaissance and up to the birth of Modernism, to one of mutability and variation. It seems that the indistinctness, the masking, the instability of the works that I have discussed are products of this progression. I want to tie all these disparate effects together by discussing one of the most extraordinary encapsulations of the phenomena that I have been groping towards a description of: Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room*. In this piece, Lucier sits in a room (unsurprisingly), and records a short monologue. He begins: 'I am sitting in a room, different from the one you are in now, recording the sound of my speaking voice...' and the speech goes on to explain the process that is going to take place in the artwork. He then plays this recording back into the room and re-records the monologue as it is played back. The process is repeated, with each new recording slowly losing form and clarity to eventually take on the resonant frequencies of the room. The process is a slow one, with each new recording altering only slightly from the previous but, by the end, the speech is unrecognisable, and the sound we hear is one of raw, shimmering beauty. If anything aural recalls the visual 'glow' that I spoke of earlier, it is this sound. Just as astonishing is the outrageously simple (but ingenious) procedure that has produced

the sound. The reason that this work ties into the preceding discussion is that it is a perfect example of a clear, conventionally meaningful passage of sound becoming indistinct, masked and, eventually, completely lost in a resonant, gorgeous cascade. Just as Riley unhitches the Impressionist mist from landscape and explores the veil itself, Lucier takes the resonant frequencies of a room that give echo and texture to a sound and disentangles them from the prosaic speech that is their source. Music (or whatever you want to call Lucier's work) has a temporal dimension that painting lacks, yet the layers that add complexity to many paintings are laid side by side here, laying bare the strange, revelatory effect of the singular becoming infinite.

It is, of course, worth listening to *I Am Sitting in a Room* from start to finish, but I have been equally lifted by jumping from the first few re-recordings, right to the middle, and on to the end just in order to highlight the scale of the transition that takes place. The heart leaps slightly when we abruptly witness that translation of static reality into flux – a process that has taken centuries for Western artists to carry out, and Alvin Lucier around 30 minutes.

Notes

[1] As such, I think these particular works struggle to pull off Richter's desire to avoid placing an interpretive weight on an image and, for that matter, to avoid lending too much focus to the subject matter itself.

[2] I think this is at work in *Motion Sickness of Time Travel* (MSoTT) as well, albeit via a much more ethereal, radiant music than *Mutila*. By underpinning pretty synth-clouds and angelic vocals with digital, percussive pulses straight out of Berlin, MSoTT also constructs a tense aesthetic that marries a sinister, urban inhumanity with something that still emerges as beautiful and fragile.

[3] The 'spiritual' reflection I invoke is not intended to signal anything paranormal or otherworldly, but simply a profound distraction in Schopenhauer's sense.

[4] Physical and spatial effects are also engineered by this layering, as Richter reworks, scars, destroys and recreates to build complex textural qualities that, like Bryan Wynter's layered paintings or the ridges in a dry river-bed, provide a visual record of a transpired physical process. Similarly, the reverb, texture and haze involved in much of the music I have alluded to gives the sound spatial qualities, whether invoking a sense of scale by altering the frequency of an echo or by shifting textures to push sounds to the foreground or back. Vladislav Delay's music has a sculptural quality; its sound obtaining a heaviness and a body from the use of filtration, while a composer like Xenakis employs his architectural nous to bounce sounds around the room and create an immersive, multi-dimensional experience.