

“Horizomatic Representation and Formal Materialism in Lismanis' Work”

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Lismanis offers a critical inspection of the materiality of contemporary visual representations (CVR). By “critical”, I refer to Lismanis’ practice to *expose* the hidden relational processes that partake in the production/constitution of CVR; “critical” also refers to the tendency in his work of pointing at the critical *limits* of CVR. By “materiality”, I refer to material causal relations that *constitute* CVR, which Lismanis’ work thematises.

Lismanis’ work formally indicates material structures and relations; as such – and herein lies its remarkableness – it is formalist materialist. Involved here are non-standard notions of materialism/materiality and formalism,¹ which I will try to explain. The materiality of CVR, which Lismanis’ work critically inspects, does not correspond to the philosophical position of materialism as normally understood. Materialism is traditionally understood in opposition to formalism. But the materiality which Lismanis’ work thematises is not opposed to formality. Rather, materiality corresponds to a distributed-state materialism (DSM), which is an expanded phenomenological notion where matter and form are not seen as opposites. It is crucial to understand this because it explains how Lismanis’ work is both materialist and formalist (“new formalism” has been used by others to refer to Lismanis’ work²). Materialism in Lismanis’ work is formal, insofar as the materiality of CVR is *formally* indicated in Lismanis’ work.

The next question is how matter can be formalised in a non-reductive way, i.e. in a way where matter is not reduced to aesthetic form. Apart from the unconventional materialism in Lismanis’ work (DSM),³ his work also involves an unconventional, nuanced sense of formalism, which is not reducible to either standard aesthetic formalism or standard philosophical formalism (formalism) because: (i) it exceeds formalist conceptions of beauty that strictly identify beauty with formal qualities (sensuous qualities inherent in the artwork); in Lismanis’ work, the artwork and its beauty is never reduced to its formal conditions, such as its lines and colours, but rather incorporates procedural

¹ Philosophical formalism and aesthetic formalism must not be conflated. In order to distinguish between the two, I will resort to a neologism: philosophical formalism will be spelled with “φ” (φormalism) and aesthetic formalism as per customary spelling.

² Curators Arnis Balčus and Alnis Stakle have described Lismanis’ work thus, in the context of the artist’s installation *Comfort Aware* at exhibition *New Chic* (Riga Congress Hall, 2018).

³ I shall analyse distributed-state materialism (DSM) in the last part of this essay. However, it may help to keep this in mind: DSM holds that the material identity of an artwork is not identical to material parts. This is too static an identity, which misses physical relational *processes*. DSM expands materiality to involve all the physical relational processes, and these include things such as the body of the artist, his environment, his vision, his hopes and aspirations, the techno-science in operation, etc.

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elements and relations that lie outside/hidden. (ii) Lismanis' work does not reduce the materiality of the processes it thematises to uniformity, as formalism does. In formalism, matter becomes the undifferentiated resource for techno-artistic production, whereby the world is formally ordered (and orderly formalised) in a way that the subject becomes in fact *indifferent* to the material and the concrete – all interactions, all productive processes and representations thereof, become equivalent quanta.

In what follows, I will try to make sense of Lismanis' work from two interrelated perspectives: (i) the perspective of the manifest/hidden and the “horizomatic”; (ii) the perspective of distributed-state materialism.

The manifest and the hidden, and the horizomatic

As mentioned previously, one of the reasons Lismanis' work does not fit the description of standard formalist aesthetics is because of the way the works exceed the sensuous form, i.e. the form intuitively/immediately given, and bring into relief procedural aspects of artworks that are concealed. His work thematises hermeneutic complexity in the art praxis that is of no special value to the standard formalist view – hence, it goes beyond the formalist view.

Lismanis' work focuses on elements that constitute the larger systems at play, reflecting on the materiality of the “behind the scenes”. His work is reflective, in the sense that it takes an introverted step into the hidden aspects of the artistic-representational process. But what is this hidden aspect? Is it like a hidden world beyond the one we see? Not at all: it's the very same world, the very process in which we have been partaking all along, but which has remained hidden precisely *because* we have been non-reflectively absorbed in it. The point here is that the apostasy between the manifest image and the hidden stratum is not so much a matter of amplification of focus (where a technologically enhanced visual field would bear better resolution and reveal the microscopic), as it is a matter of a shift of focus on that which has been already there in plain sight, albeit conveniently too close to notice – objectively present yet perceptually absent.

This interplay of presence and absence is typical of any human action whatsoever, specifically of purposeful action, such as all actions that involve the utilisation of tools. Technology is purposeful handling of tools and artistic production – CVR being one such example – involves tools. This also holds for artists that use digital technology: when the photographer uses his/her camera, the camera, and all pertinent apparatuses, become *lost* from his/her attentive field insofar as they are being actively used; the camera – the main tool – becomes absorbed in the photographer's action, while the photographer is shooting away, busy changing the settings, measuring the light, pressing the

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buttons... The photographer properly notices the camera only once he/she thematises it, and this happens once he/she *stops* using it, and reflects on it, perhaps because something broke, something went wrong in the photoshoot, someone commented on the model of the camera, and so on and so forth. Normally, the camera and the photographic apparatuses remain hidden; likewise, many other things that partake in the photographic and curatorial process remain hidden. *In effect, there exists an enormous amount of hidden beauty.*

The hidden in Lismanis' work is not simply a detail, an epiphenomenon, or a minor decorative feature. Rather, it is crucial matter that partakes in the constitution of CVR – the constitution of the *beauty* in CVR. For example, the archival pigment prints, or the important task of calibration, or printer tests, or even the walks an artist takes that co-constitute his stream of thought and subjective/aesthetic outlook.

Indeed, more often than not the hidden is the casual, the mundane that is always already there. However, the hidden in Lismanis' work is often more than the mundane; it is the techno-scientific background that enables digital technology to work. The hidden in Lismanis' work is reminiscent of the Sellarsian “scientific image.”⁴ Lismanis' work turns towards this technological character and affirms it by showing that it is in fact fundamental – a fundament that is normally hidden. Even the title of his first solo exhibition, *Trial and Error*⁵, betrays an integral technique of the arts and crafts, but also of experimental physics (experimental science in general), computer science, algebra, etc. Techno-science lies in the very core of the digital – anything digital – and that surely includes digital CVR. In this very sense then, the hidden is very often the *techno-scientific matter*, which corresponds to a very specific framework of conceptual thinking (what Heidegger calls “Gestell”).⁶

Going deeper into Lismanis' work, we can say that the hidden brought into relief operates like a *horizon*, in the sense that it is a background condition that enables phenomena to appear to light. Lismanis' work offers a critical inspection of the material horizon of CVR. The horizon of something is its condition of possibility, which is not always coextensive with, or adequately analysed in terms of, “form”, especially if it is the material conditions themselves that enable new forms to emerge. All entities and all activities have a horizon; an entity and an activity can only be realised in a horizon. The horizon is the formal background that remains an unthematized mediating ground in which “things” (but also the productive activities) can become concretely determined, i.e. attain material

⁴ Wilfrid Sellars (1912 – 89) was a very influential American philosopher who is known for his attack on phenomenology and the “myth of the given”. According to Sellars, the major problem confronting contemporary philosophy is the clash between the “manifest image” and the “scientific image” of the world.

⁵ *Trial and Error*, Arsenāls Exhibition Hall, Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, 17 November 2017 – 21 January 2018.

⁶ In his later work, Martin Heidegger (1889 – 76) developed a famous critique to modern techno-science, the essence of which he calls the “enframing” (*das Gestell*); his verdict was that modern science is in fact a radicalised offshoot of technology, which reductively enframes all entities in the world, and the very world itself, as “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*).

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concreteness and appear to the eye. “Things”, in this case, are photographic representations, and the “horizon” we refer to is the material complex background that constitutes the photographic practice.

Normally, we speak of these conditions in terms of form, but in Lismanis’ case we should avoid the parlance of formalism, because, as mentioned earlier, his work is also about materiality, which he does not reduce to uniformity, as formalism does. In Lismanis’ work, materiality does *not* become the undifferentiated resource for techno-artistic production, and he does *not* become *indifferent* to the material and the concrete. For this reason, the paradigm of horizon offers a non-reductive, non-oppressive way to analyse his work. “Horizon”, when taken literally (from the ancient Greek “horizein”), means: that which separates, delimits, divides. It is the process that enables something to become differentiated from other things and become determined *as* something. For example, take a digital photograph: it is an aesthetic product, a thing that has its own identity as distinct from other things and other products; the way this thing becomes determined (differentiated/separated/delimited from other things) depends on the material operations of the camera and its apparatuses. These things give the aesthetic product its shape, its form.

Indeed, the horizon has a similar function as form. Just as the form delimits, gives shape, so does the horizon. And so it has been customary in formalist parlance to conflate and reduce the “horizon” in a “horizontal” project, i.e. a project that tries to thematise the horizon of something, with the “form”. But a distinction between “horizon” and “form” needs to be maintained here: while the form is a structure that is immediately evident in the end product of the artistic process (i.e. the artwork), simultaneously demonstrating the visible limits of the artwork and the form itself, the horizon provides all of these things (the creative limits) while itself remaining in the background. Furthermore, form and horizon also differ in the following way: the form extinguishes materiality, it does not allow matter to partake in constitution by oppressing it, whereas horizon allows precisely that, namely it lets materiality freely show itself.⁷

The horizon is like the source of both light and darkness – an opening into the world. In this sense, Lismanis’ work is both radical but also traditional: photographers have always been interested in horizons!

⁷ Even if we try to make sense of Lismanis’ work using the standard form-matter dualism, we run into conceptual problems. In digital technology and the digital arts, form and matter are not as firmly distinguished, because digital mediums are prime examples of complex hylomorphic relations. In digital technology, our understanding of “materiality” becomes radicalised, and extends beyond the customary understanding of materiality qua physical substance. For, what is the “matter” of the digital image? Is it the software or the hardware? Is it both? Is hardware the “matter” and software the “form”? In other words, is the plastic and metal out of which mechanical components are made, such as the camera shutter and the electronic image pickup device (which replaced the chemical elements in the film) and a complementary metal-oxide-semiconductor (CMOS) image sensor, and liquid crystals or electronically charged ionised gases or light-emitting diodes, out of which most flat-panel displays are made, the matter? And is the discrete data represented in binary numbers (mathematical form), which make up the binary code, the form? Just think about this: regardless of how the photograph appears to you while you are looking at it, the photographic archive is not an archive of images, but rather it is reduced (and often compressed) to an exclusive computational structure and content which represents said images.

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However, Lismanis' work goes even beyond the horizontal, to the "horizomatic" – another neologism. The "horizomatic" is a notion that combines the notions of "horizon" with the Deleuzian-Guattarian notion of "rhizomatic". The rhizomatic is a structure of "immanently arrayed material systems without reference to an external governing source."⁸ The rhizome refers to self-organising material systems. The *horizomatic*, therefore, is a complex term that refers to the hidden albeit immanent material complexes that constitute the artistic praxis, which do not have a particular hierarchy (hence: every little material aspect partakes in the artistic praxis in an equal, albeit irreducibly *different* way).

Distributed-state materialism in digital visual representation

Lismanis' work has been described as "new formalism", and here I have argued that indeed his work is formalist but only in a non-standard sense. His work is not formalist in the aesthetic traditional sense, and it is not compatible with formalism either. In what sense is Lismanis' work formalist? How does formalism manifest itself in his pictures? I have argued that we need to rethink form in terms of the horizontal. But Lismanis' work does not only necessitate a new sense of the formal, it also pushes us to rethink the materiality of the formal. We need to rethink matter in a non-reductive way, so as to be able to talk about the materiality of the art process/praxis in an expanded way, i.e. in a way that will include intention, feeling, tendency, interpretation, as well as the hidden forces of potential, which are normally excluded from narrow conceptions of materiality. In other words, we have to rethink formal constitution from the perspective of distributed-state materialism (as opposed to central-state materialism).

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Photographic representations are things we are all very familiar with. A photograph is an end product of a process, which is a combination of matter and form. As such, its essence is twofold: (a) it is a

⁸ Daniel Smith and John Protevi, "Gilles Deleuze", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/deleuze/>, Retrieved 01/08/2018.

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form; (b) it is matter. Formalists attribute precedence to the former, materialists to the latter. The former speak about constitution, the latter about causation.

Formally, a visual representation is *constituted* by spatially and materially coincident objects of different kinds. For example, Lismanis' *Archival Pigment Prints* are constituted by (but not caused by) pigment ink and paper. The relation between the *Prints* and the ink and the paper is what it is at any moment and this does not change. If x constitutes (or composes) y, then x and y exist at the same place at the same time and they share the same material parts: form is equivalent to the identity of the material parts. This classic notion of formal constitution, however, does not account for *processes* such as the artistic praxis, because constitution is understood as material or compositional constitution: a *synchronic* relation between spatially and materially coincident objects of different kinds. In the case of a visual representation then, the thing *represented* is not a constitutive part of the artwork (the representation) itself, because the representation and the thing represented do not coincide, despite the fact that the thing represented is part of the artistic process/praxis and the systems at play.

The difficulty here for formalism (and the perspective of formal constitution) lies in the fact that a process is hard to define, and even harder to analyse and represent in terms of the preceding parts that make up the subsequent whole – the end product: a photograph's form is way more than the sum of the matter; the photograph is not exhausted by the ink and the paper. For if that were the case, then where do the things represented go, and where do the camera's settings go, the intention of the photographer, the anxiety of the photographer, his/her narration and self-interpretation unfolding over time? Where does the photographer's, or the viewer's, "mind" go, if not in the interpretation of the photograph, that is, in the sense-making of the photograph, all of which exceed the sum of material parts? A photograph *makes sense* → interpretation is part of the sense-making process → the sense of the photograph exceeds the sum of the materials (but this is missed by formalism [and formalism]).

This standard way of understanding formal constitution excludes causal relations, and hence it excludes bodily and environmental factors (bodily and environmental materiality) that partake in the essence of CVR. In other words, the standard formalist view has a restricted sense of matter and materiality: whatever isn't *present-at-hand* in the immediate form doesn't count as constitutive matter/materiality.

The constitution of an art praxis, the materiality of an art praxis, is way more than a formal mechanism, because we are talking here about a *dynamic, relational, expansive process*. We therefore need to rethink constitution in a way that grasps materiality differently: a way that includes causal mechanisms that are not present-at-hand in the end product and also does not reduce materiality to discrete material parts that make up the whole.

To account for the constitution of processes, enactivists appeal to the ideas of a dynamical system (remember: Lismanis' work focuses on elements that constitute the larger "systems at play",

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and the “materiality of the ‘behind the scenes’”⁹) and diachronic constitution. In this context, the artwork’s form, matter, and *environment*¹⁰ are said to be dynamically coupled in a way that forms a system, which is not equivalent to the identity of material parts; rather it involves physical relational processes. Hence, speaking about the materiality of CVR involves all the physical relational processes, and these include things such as the body of the artist, his/her environment and vision, the artist’s hopes and aspirations, the techno-science in operation, etc. This is what nuanced distributed-state materialism allows for, which is made possible by Lismanis’ horizomatic approach.

⁹ Latvian National Museum of Art, “Reinis Lismanis. Trial and Error”, Press release, URL = [http://www.lnmm.lv/images/ADMIN/ARS/Izstades/2017/Reinis_Lismanis/ARS_RLismanis\(EN\)_LNMA_2017.doc](http://www.lnmm.lv/images/ADMIN/ARS/Izstades/2017/Reinis_Lismanis/ARS_RLismanis(EN)_LNMA_2017.doc), Retrieved 22/03/2019.

¹⁰ By environment, I refer to *everything that environs* the artwork and the artistic praxis, across both the spatial and temporal dimensions.