

Soft Eyes: Marxism, Surface, and Depth

Jason M. Baskin

“You know what you need at a crime scene? Soft eyes. You got soft eyes, you can see the whole thing. You got hard eyes, you staring at the same tree, missing the forest.”¹

Trained to see objects of perception as traces of an absent event, the detective remains a prototypical figure for practices of critical reading, particularly the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that have lately come under scrutiny.² Critics have begun recently to question the continuing efficacy of the pervasive reliance on interpretive models that take meaning to be “hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure.”³ They point out that suspicion has become second nature to literary critics who only know how to approach the text as an illusion or secret to be “exposed.”⁴ Prizing detachment, distance, and abstraction, suspicious reading assumes a negative, even “adversarial” relation to the text that fails to make room for other, more affirmative responses, which might be equally valuable.⁵ Many advocates of moving beyond suspicious reading believe that its goals — critique and demystification — are no longer as politically efficacious as they once seemed.⁶ They claim that suspicion may have outlived its usefulness and needs at least to be supplemented, if not replaced altogether, by other forms of engagement.

Of the critiques briefly outlined above, perhaps the most compelling — and certainly the most wide-ranging — attempt to conceptualize an alternative to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” is “surface reading,” formulated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their introduction to a 2009 special issue of *Representations*. Best and Marcus note that the forms of suspicion and critique recently questioned by scholars such as Eve Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and Rita Felski, among others, are underwritten by a hermeneutic of depth that has remained a fundamental assumption of literary and cultural analysis since the 1970s. They argue that the most decisive and influential expression of this depth hermeneutic is the model of “symptomatic reading” Fredric Jameson theorized through an amalgam of Marxism

and psychoanalysis in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). Because symptomatic reading seeks a “latent meaning behind a manifest one” it proceeds on the assumption that “the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses,” not its “literal meaning.”⁷ They insist that in order to retrieve what has been lost through this pervasive focus on depth, readers should instead “attend to the surfaces of texts.” For Best and Marcus, symptomatic reading perpetuates a “heroic” vision of the critic’s role. By aligning reading with perception rather than interpretation, surface readers seek only the “minimal critical agency” that emerges from “attentiveness” to literal meaning and surface appearance through, for instance, “accurate” or “neutral” description of the text. “[W]hat lies in plain sight,” they argue, “is worthy of attention but often eludes observation — especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it.”⁸

Surface reading has tapped into an apparently widespread frustration with the long-standing critical neglect of what seems most apparent — and perhaps even most engaging or pleasurable — in literary and cultural objects. Indeed, many scholars sympathize with Best’s and Marcus’s feeling that a reductive, knee-jerk impulse toward demystification has become an overly familiar, even inert, critical gesture and that readers today need to engage in more varied ways with the objects they analyze. Despite an avowed methodological pluralism, however, Best’s and Marcus’s rejection of depth poses severe limitations to any mode of analysis — particularly Marxist analysis — that explores the agency of cultural production or critical practice by locating these activities within a socio-historical totality.⁹ Crystal Bartolovich and others have convincingly responded by pointing out that the commitment to this critical project remains absolutely vital today.¹⁰

I support these defenses of suspicion and critique and agree that Best’s and Marcus’s analysis of symptomatic reading misses its target in crucial ways that need to be addressed.¹¹ At the same time, the emergence of surface reading reveals a need not only to defend but to reimagine and extend these Marxist critical commitments through new models of reading. This is not only a question of employing specific methodologies or affirming particular political positions, though these are both important topics of discussion. It is necessary also to consider how we conceptualize the nature of both the textual object and the act of reading. The separation of surface and depth, attention and suspicion that generally has underpinned the debate over surface reading inhibits Marxist analysis. Instead of articulating “new” methods of reading, we need to think more carefully about the ontology of that which is read. Marxist criticism needs to produce conceptual models for reading that foreground the relation between surface and depth, cultural text and socio-historical totality. This effort is particularly important today, at a moment when a Marxist critical orientation is as relevant and necessary as ever, yet theoretical debate within the academy is increasingly pluralized and unmoored.

Drawing on the ideas of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams, in this essay I put forward the concept of “soft eyes” in order to develop one such model of critical engagement. Exploring what he calls “the originality of depth,” Merleau-Ponty argues that the object of perception cannot be separated into “surface” and “depth” because in embodied experience they are interrelated.¹² Depth provides the very thickness and texture that allow surfaces to be perceived. Though he likely never read Merleau-Ponty, Williams grasps this phenomenological insight when he argues that totality should not be conceived of as an object of focus in itself. Rather, totality is the constitutive dimension of the act of reading. It makes reading possible because it includes both reader and text in a whole social and historical process. Marxism, then, is not neglectful of surface details at all. Its depth hermeneutic makes possible a form of acute perception that not only engages surface, but does so more fully than surface reading itself. Because “soft eyes” perceive the interrelation of “surface” and “depth,” they take in the critical relation to social totality on which Marxist criticism depends. “Soft eyes” thus offer one possibility for sustaining the values of critique and suspicion amid what Timothy Bewes has identified as the recent “decline of the symptom.”¹³

My use of the phrase “soft eyes” aims to revise Best’s and Marcus’s characterization of critical readers as “suspicious detectives” who neglect the text’s surface. I take the phrase from a scene in the television series *The Wire* in which the veteran Baltimore homicide detective Bunk Moreland trains a rookie detective, Kima Greggs, to work a murder scene. Later in the season, Kima returns to the crime scene and locates a crucial piece of evidence by following Bunk’s advice: “You got soft eyes, you can see the whole thing. You got hard eyes, you staring at the same tree, missing the forest.”¹⁴ Kima finds this piece of evidence (a bullet) not by surveying the crime scene from the outside, but physically entering and inhabiting it. She imitates physical movements the suspects might have made, tracks minute and seemingly random details, and follows out multiple lines of sight. From this active and embodied perspective, she ultimately locates the bullet, which she cannot see directly because it is lodged *inside* a block of wood.

So what kind of reader is Kima? Clearly, she is not fixated only on the “hard” and immediate surfaces of objects. Yet she also does not merely ignore the surface to “plumb hidden depths.”¹⁵ I want to suggest that surface reading cannot account for Kima’s discovery because it is predicated on a fundamental separation of surface from depth. Kima’s discovery is only possible because depth is not, as Best and Marcus assume, a separate space located “behind” the object’s surface. Since perception is a bodily process that takes place in a whole, three-dimensional world, even surfaces have depths that cannot be seen, yet still can be accessed. By inhabiting the constitutive three-dimensionality of space and any perceivable object in it, Kima recognizes that depth is what makes surfaces available for perception in the first place. Thus she does not venture “behind” or “beneath” the surface. Rather, she sees *into* surfaces, in order

to access the depths of surface itself. Her success shows that “suspicious detectives” don’t neglect the surface for hidden depths, but work “softly” through depth to engage surface more fully.

The Originality of Depth

The notion that successful reading requires “soft eyes” means that despite the limitations of surface reading, Best’s and Marcus’s turn to the category of perception in order to reconceptualize the act of reading can be surprisingly useful — just not in the way they intend. In order to correct the bias towards hermeneutic depth and redirect readers to what is immediately available, given, and manifest, surface reading replaces interpretation with perception. Many of the responses to surface reading have highlighted the preference for attentive description over critical interpretation, but none have considered the particular model of perception that makes possible this recourse to surface description in the first place. While Best and Marcus clearly define their concept of surface, they don’t address the model of perception that underpins it:

[W]e take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*.¹⁶

Perception, here, describes a primarily passive encounter with immediate physical appearance. The object of perception is flat: it has “length and breadth but no thickness.” By construing the perceived object to be a concrete, two-dimensional presence fully visible to the perceiving subject, Marcus and Best present surface in such a way as to make the engagement with depth (through interpretation) unnecessary. Completely lacking depth, the object can be said to have a “literal meaning” that can be mimetically represented simply through an “accurate” description.¹⁷ This concept of perception renders the object mere surface while relegating depth to a space separate from (beyond, or behind) the object.

Perception, however, may not be so wedded to the surface of things as all of this suggests. In fact, phenomenology offers an alternative to this naturalized, “objective” understanding of perception as akin to a photographic reproduction.¹⁸ Perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, is an embodied activity: not a detached representation of the world but a fully immersed, three-dimensional mode of bodily engagement. In order to see anything at all, one must be physically “situated” in a whole spatio-temporal environment composed of innumerable points of view.¹⁹ One never sees an object from all sides at once, but only from a particular point of orientation within the same world. There is always a hidden aspect of the object, e.g., its back side. From the traditional, objective perspective, this is a merely contingent product of

one's limited point of view. These visual gaps are simply absences that one's brain unconsciously fills in, for instance by imagining another viewpoint on the object. But Merleau-Ponty argues that these absences retain a concrete and productive presence within the field of vision. What one sees depends on what *cannot* be seen. "We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon," Merleau-Ponty writes: "there occurs here an *indeterminate vision, a vision of something or other*, and, to take the extreme case, what is behind my back [or the back side of the object] is not without some element of visual presence."²⁰ As Francisco Varela explains, phenomenology rejects a fundamental assumption of the traditional, objective worldview: "the sort of determinateness one finds in physical objects must not be assumed a priori to be applicable to perceptual experience."²¹

The incompleteness that defines Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of perception entails an alternative understanding of surface and depth from that presented by Best and Marcus. The opacity of perception is a direct result of the fact that, because the eye (indeed the perceiving subject as a whole) is part of the field of vision, depth is an essential, structural condition of perception. Best's and Marcus's pure, flat surface — "with length and breadth but no thickness," immediately available to perceptual "attentiveness" — is an idealized abstraction that can only exist in thought. By contrast, phenomenology recognizes that because perception takes place in three-dimensional, lived space rather than in some ideal, objective space, any perceivable surface is both immediately present and, at the same time, latent, mysterious. Embodied perception, Merleau-Ponty argues, is always "thickened" by the negativity of these "indeterminate presences," the aspects of the object that cannot be seen, but have a presence in the perceptual field.²² The irreducible "thickness" of surface is what Merleau-Ponty calls the "originality of depth."²³ Depth differs from the "geometrical" dimensions of length and breadth highlighted by Best and Marcus, which simply define objective position in space. For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, depth does not refer to location in space: it is the fundamental, structural property of space itself.²⁴ Though depth can be measured like length and breadth, unlike these other dimensions it performs a more essential function, one not captured by objective measurement: depth constitutes the world as a "thickened" social space that subjects inhabit and explore but can never exhaust.

By recognizing the "originality of depth," phenomenology discloses the "indissoluble link between things and myself" that makes perception possible, revealing the viewer to be actively "involved" in the world rather than a detached observer.²⁵ Depth is a consequence of the fact that one does not experience the world from the outside, but only from within it. Yet the "originality" of depth means that neither subject nor object are simply "in" the world: in fact, each is part of it. Depth is therefore the source of that "tacit sense of belonging" that comes with one's inhabitation of a whole lived world that includes innumerable points of view.²⁶ It is what characterizes perceptual experience as not only embodied but also social and historical.²⁷ Because it takes

place in depth, for Merleau-Ponty perception is more than the mere presentation of a discrete object to an isolated subject: it opens the subject to a whole social and historical world — a totality — on which subject, object and the act of perception all depend. Properly understood as a spatial dimension, depth thus marks the presence of social totality as the medium through which both subjects and objects (readers and texts) are actively constituted.²⁸ Surface reading loses sight of totality as this constitutive dimension of reading because Best and Marcus rely on a naturalized, objective model of perception in which the immediacy of surface is abstracted out from a depth that remains mere background. Therefore, though Best and Marcus assert that surface reading is “not antithetical to critique,” their separation of surface from depth — the separation of the text from the social totality that constitutes it — erodes any basis upon which social critique could be sustained.²⁹ By contrast, the phenomenological approach that underpins my concept of “soft eyes” offers an alternative model in which surface and depth are mutually intertwined.

Though Best and Marcus derive their concept of surface and depth from Jameson’s symptomatic reading, Jameson’s work also includes this phenomenological concept of depth articulated by Merleau-Ponty. Returning to Jameson’s definition of the “political unconscious” with this phenomenological emphasis in mind, it becomes apparent that he collapses these two incommensurable models of the text. As Jameson explains: “the literary structure, far from being completely realized on any one of its levels, tilts powerfully into the underside of *impensé* or *non-dit*, in short, into the very political unconscious, of the text.”³⁰ However, the “underside” of an object is *not* a separate “level” of a structure: an object with sides and a multi-leveled structure imply two different models of surface and depth. A multi-leveled structure — a more familiar critical conception of the textual object — implies the separation of surface from depth. This allows for the possibility of a surface reading, in which the surface of the text becomes a distinct object of focus from the social totality that lurks “behind” it.³¹ However, by contrast, locating the text’s political unconscious on the “underside” of the object emphasizes the “originality of depth,” the constitutive interrelation between surface and depth that emerges in perceptual experience. The “underside” of the object is the aspect of the object that is necessarily hidden from view because perception always takes place from a particular point of orientation in a whole, “thick” three-dimensional environment. Rather than a simple absence hidden beneath a surface presence, the “underside” of the object has an “indeterminate presence” in the field of vision. Thus, instead of separating the object into distinct levels, surface and depth remain intertwined, as they are in lived experience.

“Soft eyes” engage depth as this constitutive dimension of the object, rather than as mere background, or a separate level of a structure. Let’s recall that Kima finds the bullet *inside* a block of wood. Objects have front and back sides, and therefore an inside, only because depth is the constitutive dimension of space, rather than a separate object or position (a “level”) located *in* space. Therefore, it would be wrong to

say that in locating the bullet, Kima ventures “beyond,” “behind,” or even “through” the surface to locate the bullet “hidden” “beneath” it. Rather, the object’s surface is inextricable from its depth. Surface reading cannot access this space because Best and Marcus understand surface as purely flat (without sides, surface has inside, no depth). Kima’s “soft eyes” see that depth is not the hidden background of surface appearance but the constitutive dimension — depth — of surface itself.

Kima’s success suggests that totality is best understood not as a distinct level of reality on which the reader can focus — and ultimately map, as Jameson has put it — but the spatial dimension that constitutes the object itself. “Soft eyes” recognize that depth makes the surface of the text available to apprehension (reading) in the first place. I take this to be the force of Marxist conceptions of totality, including Jameson’s. Successful detection, the reconstruction or unfolding of a text’s meaning and significance depends on an awareness of totality (“the ability to see the whole thing”), the larger whole through which surface takes on presence and meaning. Surface reading forecloses this awareness through its separation of surface and depth. Rather than moving beyond surface details into a detached and epistemologically secure critical “metalanguage,” “soft eyes” grasp these details as pieces connected within a larger, structured whole that determines the limitations and possibilities of any critical reading.³²

Learning to See

As far as I know, Raymond Williams never encountered Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception. Nevertheless, Williams develops a concept of socio-historical totality that carries through the implications of a phenomenology of perceptual depth. Like Merleau-Ponty, Williams recognized the active, embodied, and fundamentally social nature of perception: “each of one us,” he pointed out, “*has to learn to see.*”³³ Williams argued that perception does not record objective data but actively constitutes the object through a complex negotiation that involves the evolution of the human organism together with the individual’s previous perceptual experiences and the social codes (the rules of interpretation) one has already learned. Without the interpretive structures provided by actually lived social relationships — the “depth” immanent to perception — one cannot register the “literal meaning” of the immediately given surface of things; one would simply be blind.³⁴ There is no such thing, for Williams or for Merleau-Ponty, as a straightforward or literal descriptive account. Description already includes both interpretation and creative production; it partially creates the reality it “describes” because description depends on the immersion of both subject and object in a whole social process.

Williams’s insight that even the most basic and seemingly subjective experience of perception is an active social production, a process of communication and learning that involves a whole social world, had far-reaching consequences for the theory of cultural materialism he develops from the early 1960s through the late 1970s. Most

famously in his essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” Williams argues that Marxist cultural analysis has been perennially hampered by a problem of surface and depth: a dualistic and mechanistic separation of base and superstructure, production and reproduction, in which the cultural object is conceived separately from — and a mere “reflection” of — the more fundamental productive forces that organize social life.³⁵ For Williams, writing in the 1970s, this dualist error is reinforced by formalist tendencies within contemporary Marxism, namely the importation of Althusser’s structuralist Marxism into the British intellectual Left. Williams regards structuralist Marxism as tending toward a treatment of social or superstructural depth as merely another level of reality, rather than a constitutive dimension — a whole social process — through which subject and object are related. From Williams’s perspective, then, the problem with “symptomatic reading” and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” becomes, *pace* Best and Marcus, not an excessive investment in social or historical depth but a reduction of depth simply to another level of surface. Surface reading then compounds this error by attempting to return to surface, which it imagines as separate from depth. In other words, inasmuch as both symptomatic and surface reading seek to differentiate and separate depth from surface rather than theorize their indissoluble connectivity, they both reinforce a dualism that separates the reader from the text and both from the world. No mode of attentiveness can bridge this gap.³⁶

For Williams, a phenomenological view of perception (though he did not call it that) works against this tendency towards dualism by dispensing with the concept of reflection altogether and revealing instead a whole, three-dimensional social process. As we saw, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology uncovers the totality that makes possible the seemingly punctual moment of perception. Williams’s cultural theory moves in the same direction. He wants critical analysis to unfold the social processes that constitute the text as an “object” in the first place. “[I]t is not the base and the superstructure that need to be studied,” Williams argues, “but specific and indissoluble real processes.”³⁷ This leads Williams to conceptualize the “object” of analysis as a historically situated practice. “Now I think the true crisis in cultural theory,” he states, “is between [the] view of the work of art as object and the alternative view of art as a practice.”³⁸ The concept of practices necessitates the idea of social totality. But totality here becomes immanent to a cultural product — a dimension of the object of analysis, not a separate plane of reality beyond it. Understanding totality in these terms depends on recognizing that depth is a constitutive dimension of the textual object: not its mere “background,” but something more like its “back side,” the part of the object that remains within one’s visual experience, even though it cannot be seen. For Williams, approaching cultural objects as historically situated practices captures this constitutive three-dimensionality: “what we are actively seeking is the true practice which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practice...which have been alienated to components or mere background.”³⁹ For Williams, as for Merleau-

Ponty, in the act of reading/perception, the object loses its determination and the critic recognizes the totality that constitutes both the object and her relation to it.

Foreclosing the separation of surface from depth, Williams's move from objects to practices locates agency within both the cultural text and critical reading. Reading, Williams has reminded us, is as "active as writing."⁴⁰ But he does not assign the critic a heroic autonomy or epistemological security above and beyond the text. This is why he insists that the move from objects to practices may not produce a coherent methodology — a specific "way we read," as Best and Marcus put it.⁴¹ Williams argues that, by giving up the "built-in procedure" that comes out of identifying an object of analysis, critics can better grasp the relationality of all social practices — from simple perception to reading, writing, and political organization — within a structured social totality.⁴² Critical reading can by no means replace, nor can it be "equate[d]" with, political activism.⁴³ But they are related practices: "the whole point of thinking in terms of totality," Williams points out, "is the realization that we are part of it; that our own consciousness, our work, our methods, are then critically at stake."⁴⁴

The idea of "soft eyes" aims to bring Williams's recognition that totality means "we are part of it" into critical practice today. Williams's statement necessitates that totality can be grasped not solely as an object seen from the outside, from an objective "bird's eye view" — as a map, for instance. Rather, totality can also be grasped phenomenologically — from the *inside*, in other words — by unpacking the ways that it already necessarily limits and conditions one's perspective. This phenomenological reorientation does not render the contingency of one's position absolute, but works in the opposite direction, toward the recognition of the conditions under which all practices, all forms of agency and action are both limited and made possible. Rather than the result of the heroic act of critical reading — something the critic adds to or extracts from the text — totality is what makes reading possible in the first place. Totality puts our methods of reading in question, but in so doing it renders them significant.

This allows us to imagine reading as a form of agency that is not limited to either of the options imagined by Best and Marcus: the "heroic" "freedom dream [of] demystification" (symptomatic reading) or the "minimal critical agency" of mere "attentiveness" (surface reading).⁴⁵ Best and Marcus assume that agency necessitates a heroic freedom from constraint that allows the symptomatic reader to reveal the totality lurking behind the text. When surface reading gives up this "freedom dream," critical agency becomes attenuated. Yet, this logic presumes that agency is underwritten by a prior freedom from constraint. What if agency is not predicated on freedom, but rather is itself freedom's precondition? Seeing totality through "soft eyes" does not privilege the critic's heroic freedom, nor does it settle for a minimal agency. It uncovers the irreducible social and historical conditions that both limit and make possible the act of reading. "Soft eyes" affirm the agency of both critical reading and cultural production not on the basis of a putative freedom, but as a product of

location within a larger social and historical totality.

“Soft eyes” would animate any reading driven by this recognition of totality as a process that constitutes — rather than simply constrains — the critical agency of reader or text. Yet I want to refrain here from suggesting that “soft eyes” entails a specific method of reading at all (i.e., “soft reading”). Instead, I would like the idea of “soft eyes” to remain something like a guiding principle based on the insight registered above: critical reading does not reveal totality as if from the outside but uses the concept of totality (“think[s] in terms of totality”) to grasp the limitations and possibilities of any reading of a text at a particular historical moment. We might productively locate useful tools or methods in any number of places, including in those critics working expressly within the tradition of suspicion and symptomatic reading as well as those working outside of it.

Not as method, then, “soft eyes” can serve instead to reorient the currently proliferating methods and modes of reading towards the horizon of totality that they often explicitly abjure. The question of how to respond to the increasing variety of reading practices that are currently laying claim to (or being claimed by) post-critical, post-suspicious, or post-symptomatic approaches is crucial to contemporary Marxist criticism. As I noted earlier, surface reading has proven so influential at least in part because it embraces the expanding methodological pluralism of the present — the wide variety of methods and practices that constitute “the way we read now.”⁴⁶ Here, Williams’s point about giving up a “built-in procedure” for cultural analysis becomes significant. Certainly, one must defend precisely the value and complexity of the methods of symptomatic and suspicious reading that Best and Marcus critique. Yet it will also prove worthwhile to work on another front to channel the energies, methods, and insights of surface reading, and other emerging scholarly modes, in a more critical direction.⁴⁷

Thus, I have undertaken here to show that surface cannot be separated from — or conceived without — depth. Merleau-Ponty and Williams both remind us that to focus on surface in isolation would not make us “attentive” readers, but simply blind. What we see with “soft eyes” is the central place of totality to any act of reading. Marxist thought and criticism will remain a depth hermeneutic. But as such, Marxism is actually the best means of engaging surface most fully. I would suggest that surface readers like Best and Marcus take Bruno Latour’s often-cited call to move “closer” to objects of study less literally.⁴⁸ As new modes of post-symptomatic reading increasingly look to take up questions of significance and attachment — what Latour has called “matters of concern,” rather than “matters of fact” — it becomes increasingly important to insist that this is not best accomplished by the pursuit of immediacy, the “hard eyes” that look ever more closely at the surface. It is only possible “to see more clearly” by learning to read with “soft eyes” that can grasp the complex, dynamic, and structured social totality through which reader and text are related.⁴⁹ Reading needs to come closer to the insights of Marxist analysis, not farther away.

Notes

1. David Simon, "Refugees," dir. Jim McKay, 2006, *The Wire*, season 4, episode 4.
2. The phrase is from Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977). Recent essays that take up the critique of suspicion discussed here include Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (Fall 2009): 1-21; Rita Felski, "After Suspicion," *Profession* (2009): 28-39, and *The Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004) 13-38; Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 123-53.
3. Best and Marcus, "Surface" 1.
4. Sedgwick, "Paranoid" 138-42.
5. "Surface" 16; Felski, "Suspicion" 33-34; Warner, "Uncritical" 13-15.
6. "Paranoid" 123-24 and 139-41; "Surface" 2.
7. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 60, quoted in "Surface" 3.
8. "Surface" 1, 5, 17, 13, 18. Best and Marcus characterize surface readers as "skeptical about the very possibility of radical freedom and dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation" (2).
9. The speed with which the concept of surface reading has caught on is due at least in part to Best's and Marcus's effort to link up with as many different modes of scholarship available, both new and old, including affect and ethics; the return to aesthetics; New Formalism; close reading and New Criticism; the material text and history of the book; literal and descriptive forms of reading; and discourse analysis. All of these and more are, according to Best and Marcus, possible resources for surface readers. I will return the significance of surface reading's apparent methodological flexibility in my conclusion.
10. See Crystal Bartolovich, "Humanities of Scale: Marxism, Surface Reading — and Milton," *PMLA* 127:1 (January 2012): 115-21, and Suvir Kaul, "Reading, Constraint, and Freedom," *Eighteenth Century* 54:1 (Spring 2013): 129-32.
11. For insightful explorations of these questions, see Ellen Rooney, "Live Free or Describe: The Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form," *differences* 21:3 (2010): 112-39, and Timothy Bewes, "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism," *differences* 21:5 (2010): 1-33. I believe that Best and Marcus overstate Jameson's commitment to depth and fail to recognize the attention symptomatic reading accords to the text's surface. Specifically, Best and Marcus ignore the extent to which Jameson and Althusser both presume — though they perhaps do not always foreground sufficiently — the relation between surface and depth. The goal of this essay is to produce an alternative conceptual model of reading that centers on the constitutive interrelation of surface and depth.
12. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1965]) 308.
13. For reasons I will discuss in my conclusion, I consciously avoid the temptation to counter surface reading with a specific method, i.e. "soft reading." Rather, I want to consider what can be gained from attending not to specific, practical questions of method and analysis, but rather to the conceptualization of the act of reading and its object. As Williams has pointed out, these models can limit possibilities for analysis

in surprising ways, sometimes working against the very aims of a particular methodology. And I take Marxism's critical strength to lie not in a dogmatic adherence to a particular method, but in its flexibility and openness to changing approaches and the variety of forms of knowledge that can contribute to a critique of the present.

14. This phrase actually recurs several times throughout the season in a variety of contexts, including as the title of an earlier episode. As Patrick Jagoda points out, the "soft eyes" trope is one of several cues to the viewer that the show's complex depiction of American society requires a particularly demanding form of attention. See Patrick Jagoda, "Wired," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Autumn 2011): 190.
15. "Surface" 18.
16. "Surface" 9.
17. "Surface" 12.
18. For Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the objective viewpoint, see the chapter entitled "Experience and Objective Thought," in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 77-84.
19. *Phenomenology* 114-15.
20. *Phenomenology* 7, 6. For useful accounts of Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, see Taylor Carman, "Sensation, Judgement and the Phenomenal Field" and "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) 50-73 and 74-110.
21. Evan Thompson, Alva Noë, and Luis Pessoa, "Perceptual Completion: A Case Study in Phenomenology and Cognitive Science," in *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*, ed. Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000) 191.
22. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the "thickness" of perception throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, but for the "thickness" of depth in particular, see 309-10. Merleau-Ponty's late work expands on this idea by developing the idea of "the fold" in an ontological direction. See "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968) 130-56.
23. *Phenomenology* 298, 308-10.
24. Merleau-Ponty insists that to grasp the specificity of the embodied experience of space, philosophy has to learn to speak of a phenomenological "spatiality of situation" rather than an objective "spatiality of position." *Phenomenology* 114-15.
25. *Phenomenology* 308, 298, 311.
26. William Connolly, "Materialities of Experience," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, ed. Samantha Frost and Diana Coole (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 192-93. Though I draw this useful phrase from Connolly's recent discussion of Merleau-Ponty, I want to point out that Connolly's understanding of belonging differs fundamentally from Merleau-Ponty's in that it remains a relation between discrete individuals. He does not recognize the social totality that, for Merleau-Ponty, negates any notion of the individual. This aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought — and indeed his Marxism more generally — is often elided in recent critical invocations of his philosophy (see note 28 below).
27. Merleau-Ponty explores this implicit but fundamental sociality more thoroughly in his late, unfinished work collected in *The Visible and the Invisible*. Recent readers have begun to return to this late work in order to correct longstanding assumptions about the latent subjectivism of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical

project. See, for instance, Diana Coole, *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007), and R. Radhakrishnan, *History, the Human, and the World Between* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

28. For an analysis of the concept of totality in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, in the context of the broader Western Marxist tradition, see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: U California P, 1984) 361-84. My argument that a phenomenology of perception depends on the concept of social totality stands in direct contrast to Rita Felski's recent turn to "neo-phenomenology" as a way of "venturing beyond the safe haven of skepticism, suspicion, and critique." For Felski, phenomenology offers a mode of surface reading "ideally suited to thick descriptions of the intensities of affective and corporeal response." I argue instead that phenomenology reinforces the constitutive interrelation of readers and texts within a social totality, which sustains critique. Felski, "Everyday Aesthetics," *minnesota review* 71 (2009): 175-76.
29. "Surface" 18.
30. Jameson, *Political* 49.
31. Best and Marcus derive their notion of text as having a purely flat surface and a depth "hidden" "behind" it, from Jameson's apparent opposition between "latent" and "manifest" meaning (e.g., *Political* 60). However, Best and Marcus ignore the ways that Jameson (like Althusser) also foregrounds the relation between these "levels" of meaning. My shift to a phenomenological (rather than structural) model of the text as an object of embodied perception — of "soft eyes" — aims to emphasize this aspect of Marxist critical thought even more strongly.
32. "Surface" 1, 11. As numerous critics have pointed out, *The Wire* itself likewise compels engagement with totality by way of immersion in detailed depictions of everyday life in a contemporary American city (Baltimore). A specific case in point: over the course of the season, the murder that Kima investigates with "soft eyes" becomes crucial to the election of a new Baltimore mayor who runs on the issue of crime — even though Kima's evidence later reveals this particular death to be accidental. As the tagline to the show puts it: "it's all connected." Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle have used Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping to discuss the relation between realism and totality in *The Wire*. See Toscano and Kinkle, "Baltimore as World and Representation: Cognitive Mapping and Capitalism in *The Wire*," *Dossier Journal* (2009), <http://dossierjournal.com/read/theory/baltimore-as-world-and-representation-cognitive-mapping-and-capitalism-in-the-wire/>. Patrick Jagoda, by contrast, prefers the notion of a "network aesthetics," which he derives from the work of Bruno Latour. See Jagoda, "Wired" 190. For Jameson's own reflections on the show, see Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52:3-4 (Summer/Fall 2010): 358-72. Finally, Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro point out that, while *The Wire* presents the neoliberal city as an "imagined totality," the show is also "caught up in the conditions and contradictions of its own powerful social critique." Kennedy and Shapiro, "Tales of the Neoliberal City: *The Wire's* Boundary Lines," in *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre*, eds. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2012) 148-49.
33. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2001 [1961]) 33. This overlap is due in part to their shared investments in Marxism (see notes 26 and 28 above). Yet it is also important to note that unlike many Marxists — Althusser most famously — Williams and Merleau-Ponty both gave serious attention to what the former called "lived experience." For an analysis of Williams's concept of

experience, see Jason M. Baskin, “Romanticism, Culture, Collaboration: Raymond Williams Beyond the Avant-Garde,” *Cultural Critique* (Winter 2013): 108-36.

34. “Surface” 12.
35. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980) 31-49.
36. In her response to Best and Marcus, Ellen Rooney shows that Althusser himself does not accede to any simple dualism. In fact, Althusser’s account of reading relies on a conception of visibility and invisibility that echoes — perhaps surprisingly, given his rejection of phenomenology — Merleau-Ponty’s account of the constitutive blindness and incompleteness of perception that I have focused on here. See Rooney, “Live Free” 127-30.
37. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 82.
38. Williams, *Problems* 47.
39. *Problems* 49.
40. Williams, *Marxism* 170.
41. “Surface” 1-2, 19.
42. *Problems* 48.
43. “Surface” 2.
44. *Problems* 21.
45. “Surface” 17.
46. “Surface” 1.
47. In a different vein, Joe Cleary’s, Jed Esty’s, and Colleen Lye’s recent theorization of “peripheral realisms” could be seen as just such a practical attempt to shift current reading practices such as surface reading — part of what Esty and Lye identify as the “realist turn” in contemporary criticism — toward Marxist critical concerns. See Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, “Peripheral Realisms Now,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73:3 (2012): 269-88.
48. “Surface” 18. See Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30:2 (Winter 2004): 231.
49. “Surface” 18.