

## I'M ALWAYS TOUCHED BY YOUR PRESENCE, DEAR: BLONDIE ALBUM COVERS AND THE CONCEPT OF PRESENCE

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### **Abstract**

Often, works of art are praised for their “presence”. What exactly this term means, however, is less frequently specified. In this article, presence is defined as a trait of an artwork to cause the vague and possibly subconscious feeling in a viewer that a depicted figure is a living being that is really there, although the viewer is aware that this is not actually the case. By means of an extensive literature review, this article provides criteria for the assessment of presence in any work of art. A methodology for applying these criteria is presented, which is put to the test by assessing the degree of presence in the cover art of the New Wave band Blondie's first six albums (1976-1982). The results of this analysis are then compared to two test samples: other New Wave album covers, and Heavy Metal covers.

**Keywords:** Blondie album covers; concept of presence.

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*Something in my consciousness told me you'd appear  
Now I'm always touched by your presence, dear*  
(Blondie, "(I'm always touched by your) Presence, Dear",  
1978).

The term "presence" is often used when describing works of art, and especially portraits. For instance, in an interview about portraits by Leonardo da Vinci, art historian Horst Bredekamp (2009) states that they "unfold, time and again, a current presence, which tears down again this distance [of almost half a millennium of time between their production and now; my translation]." But what does he mean by "presence"? Does he mean that a portrait, as an artefact, is present in the same room where a viewer sees it, e.g. in the Louvre? That would be stating the obvious and hardly worth mentioning. Or does he mean that the women portrayed are actually present, today? That would be highly unlikely. The concept of presence, as used by Bredekamp and so many other art historians, is more complex than that.

A fair amount of literature (some of which will be reviewed in the next section) has been written on presence and related concepts, so that a theory--or theories--of presence already exists. However, that theoretical literature has not yet produced an operationalisation of the term "presence", i.e. a catalogue of criteria that determine when to apply this term. This article proposes such a set of criteria, some of which are derived from previous relevant scholarly works which are reviewed in the following.

First of all, though, it should be noted that the word "presence" can basically be used in any of four different meanings: a) physical (or bodily) presence--something is actually there and can be experienced in all its material aspects; b) magical or illusory presence--the viewer erroneously believes something to be bodily present, although objectively it is not; c) technological presence (including telepresence)--certain aspects of an object are medially transported or (re)created; d) the kind of presence I am talking about here, in the context of art historical reception aesthetics, which is unlike any of the three other kinds. As a short working definition--which is not entirely new; cf. the next section -, this kind of presence denotes the vague and possibly subconscious feeling (or rather, a trait of an artwork to cause such a feeling) in a viewer that a depicted figure is a living being that is really there, although the viewer is

aware that this is not actually the case. I suggest that this is the kind of presence that Horst Bredekamp and most other art historians mean when they use the term when talking about art. Some texts that deal with presence tend to mix those four different meanings, but in the end, we will hopefully arrive at a better understanding of the fourth kind of presence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The art historian who has written most extensively on presence is probably Michael Fried. The term "presence" is featured prominently in his essay "Art and Objecthood" (1967/1969), but he revisits this and related concepts in several later texts (which will be covered here, too). In "Art and Objecthood", Fried's topic is sculpture, but as we will see, the presence of sculptures and the presence of figurative images have some things in common. Referring to Clement Greenberg, Fried says, "Presence can be conferred by size or by the look of non-art." Fried elaborates on what he means by that: "[...] the size of much literalist work [...] compares fairly closely with that of the human body. [...] One way of describing what [Tony] Smith *was* making might be something like a surrogate person". Furthermore, he says: "I am suggesting, then, that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of literalist theory and practice. The concept of presence all but says as much." So, in essence, Fried suggests two prerequisites of presence that can be applied to two-dimensional, figurative art too: the size of the work, as well as its general look, should resemble that of a human body. The effect that this has on the viewer is described by Fried like this: "[...] the things that are literalist works of art must somehow *confront* the beholder--they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his *way*." This already hints at the deictic disposition (meaning here to include all positions, movements and poses of bodies that refer to other objects--see also Kemp 1996/1985) of the artwork that will be discussed later. The effect that Fried's minimalist objects had on him--the effect of presence on the viewer in general, one might say--is further described in Georges Didi-Huberman's reading of "Art and Objecthood" in his book *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (1999/1992, p. 220; my translation):

“Wasn't Michael Fried in front of Tony Smith's big black cube faced exactly-- and in a highly concerned way--with his double? And wasn't it the intensity of the *Uncanny* [in the sense of Sigmund Freud] that he regarded with a sense of dismay in this object, that he perceived as 'aggressive' and 'attractive' at the same time, as too close and too far, too dead and too alive, as silent and obtrusive 'like a person'?”.

It must be noted that in this book, Didi-Huberman emphasises the distinction Fried makes between the terms "presence" and "presentness", and that Fried favours the latter over the former. However, the opposition of these two terms does not have the same importance in the context of this article. Apart from the appearance of being alive, Didi-Huberman notes another effect of presence here; the ambivalence of aggression (cf. "confront the beholder") and attraction. This ambivalence will become important later in this article.

Fried's next major work that is relevant here, the book *Absorption and Theatricality*, starts by using the term "presence" in a different sense: the presence of the beholder in front of a painting, which can be "implied" by the composition of the painting (1980, p. 4). On the whole, he rarely mentions presence explicitly in this book, but focuses on a central pair of terms, the eponymous "absorption" and "theatricality". Simply put, in an absorptive painting, figures are absorbed in their action or state of mind, whereas a theatrical painting "includes" the beholder in front of the painting, usually by the gaze of its figures, as it were, meeting that of the beholder (Although there are exceptions; cf. FRIED, 1980, pp. 61, 69). Theatricality obviously has a lot to do with presence, although they are not synonymous. For instance, Fried describes "the chief female figure's frontal gaze in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*" as "alienating" and "distancing" (1980, p. 4), not unlike the aggressive and confrontational character of presence noted by Didi-Huberman and Fried earlier. (It must be noted that in a later book, Fried said, "the *Déjeuner* and *Olympia*, while wholly non-absorptive, are anything but simply theatrical in the Diderotian sense of the term" (cf. FRIED, 2011, p. 17). This is not made clear in *Absorption and Theatricality*, however, and it does not convince me.) On the other hand, absorptive paintings are more likely to have an immersive effect, that is, they invite the beholder to imagine "entering" the painting (FRIED, 1980, p. 121). However, Fried's book is more concerned with an art critical paradigm of that time ("the age of Diderot") that favours absorption over theatricality, and thus he focuses on painterly strategies to "negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder". Fried even connects the strategy of absorption to the critical ideal of the aim of painting being to

"attract", "arrest" and "enthrall" the beholder (FRIED, 1980, p. 92; see also FRIED, 2008, p. 127). Unfortunately, the effect of theatricality on the beholder, which would come close to the effect of presence, is not really Fried's topic in *Absorption and Theatricality*.

In a later book, *Courbet's Realism*, Fried describes Gustave Courbet's self-portrait *The Desperate Man* without using the word "presence", but in fact saying a lot about how presence is achieved: it

“presents the young Courbet [...] looming, almost lunging, directly toward the beholder. [...] [It shows an] impulse toward extreme physical proximity [...]. Such a notion helps explain the otherwise arbitrary lighting, which calls attention to features--the desperate man's nose and left elbow--that thrust forward toward the picture surface, as well as the billowing of his loosely tied blue-gray scarf across most of the bottom framing-edge, which has the effect of softening that edge, of making it billow slightly too, in short of preparing it to be transgressed. It is as though Courbet's object in this eccentric canvas were by an act of almost physical aggression to cancel or undo all distance not merely between image and picture surface but also, more importantly, between sitter and beholder, to close the gulf between them, to make them one” (FRIED, 1990, p. 61).

Again we read about aggression and confrontation, but this time they are not achieved by the gaze of the figure: "the all but palpable interposition of a mirror holds to a minimum any sense that it is *we* who are confronted by him." Instead, Fried emphasises the orientation of the figure's body towards the picture surface and thus towards the beholder. Generally speaking, this passage points out two characteristics that are relevant to presence: *deixis* (here, the deictic orientation of the figure, pointing towards the beholder) and *proximity* (between figure and picture surface, and thus, ultimately, between figure and beholder), the latter of which corresponds to what Fried said about the size of sculpture.

In another book, *Manet's Modernism*, Fried introduces the related terms "instantaneousness", "strikingness" and "facingness" as pictorial properties (1996, p. 397), but more interesting is the response that this book provoked in Michael Lüthy's dissertation. Lüthy says about Eduard Manet's paintings, "through the gaze out of the picture, he [the beholder] is directly addressed and drawn into the action" (2003, p. 20; my translation). This kind of immersion seems to contradict Fried's view, who associated immersion with absorptive paintings, in which usually the figure's gaze is not directed at the beholder. However, Lüthy sees Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* as far less immersive, since the central female figure's face is

"expressionless" (Fried spoke also of "blankness"; FRIED, 2011, p. 16) and thus "not narrative". The face is not an invitation to the beholder to participate in any action; its "turning out of the interior of the picture shows only primarily one thing: that the beholder outside of the picture is being seen." (LÜTHY, 2003, p. 27; my translation) It seems as though this aspect, the feeling of being seen by a figure in the picture, is central to the concept of presence, far more so than the feeling of immersion.

As examples mainly from the field of photography are discussed later in this article, Fried's book *Why Photography Matters as Art as never before* is of particular interest here. Fried starts by applying his terms of absorption and theatricality to Cindy Sherman's series *Untitled Film Stills* (FRIED, 2008, pp. 7-10). On the one hand, the "stagedness" of the depicted scenes is a theatrical feature, but this is outweighed by anti-theatrical features:

“in most of the *Stills* Sherman depicts characters who appear absorbed in thought or feeling [...]; or who look 'offscreen' in a manner that suggests that their attention has been drawn, fleetingly or otherwise, by something or someone to be found there [...]; or who gaze close up at their own image in a mirror [...]; or who are viewed from the rear or the side, from an elevated or 'depressed' viewpoint, from a considerable distance, or under other circumstances that rule out the possibility of any implied communication between the personage in the photograph and the viewer [...].”

If we turn these statements into their opposite, we obtain instructions on how to achieve the possibility of communication between figure and beholder: by having the figure looking at the beholder, by having the figure's body facing the picture surface, by placing the figure on eye-level and near the camera. These are, for the most part, criteria of presence that were already pointed out in this article. When Fried turns to Thomas Ruff's "early color head-shots of students and others", he actually applies the term "presence" to such criteria:

“by virtue of their frontality (with some profile views and oblique angles thrown in), repetitive structure, and psychic blankness--also of their colored backgrounds--they implied a particular mode of relation to the viewer, one of mutual facing, indeed confrontation, that somehow exceeded, in fact subtly negated, the conventions of the traditional frontal photographic portrait. Their subsequent increase in scale therefore seems right, as if only then did they assume the dimensions and sheer 'visual presence' (Valeria Liebermann's phrase) proper to their idea” (2008, pp. 17-18).

Of course, these criteria—frontality, blankness of expression, and size—had also been mentioned before. Fried uses the word "presence" in another sense when talking about Jean-Marc Bustamante's *Tableaux*; they establish "physical presence" through their large size on the one hand, and the small size (i.e. great distance) of their motif on the other (2008, pp. 20-21). Here, the different meanings of presence clash: the 'real', bodily presence of these photographs *as objects* is intensified by their small degree of presence *as images*. This latter effect is amplified by "the sheer density of visual information contained in each print, a factor that far from drawing the viewer 'into' the work tends to distance, in that sense to 'exclude,' him or her". In other words, presence can be established by reducing the density of information, e.g. by showing only few, possibly recognizable objects in a clear and unambiguous way. On two Jeff Wall transparency photographs, Fried says they "thematize the motif of persons walking more or less directly away from the photographer/viewer [...]. Again, I see this as an antitheatrical motif". This, a figure's body moving away, is a heightened form of a figure's body merely turning away, so conversely it must be true that a figure seemingly moving towards the beholder increases the presence of the image (FRIED, 2008, pp. 88-89). Fried's book must also be noted for using "presence" in the narrower, more specialised sense of one object in an image having more presence than another (which is usually on another diegetic level), thus drawing attention to itself and away from the other. For instance, one group of figures is "too 'present'" relative to painted figures on the same photograph (FRIED, 2008, pp. 125-130). With reference to another photograph, Fried (2008, pp. 129-130) notes that two figures are "overmatched" by the "vastly superior 'presence'" of a painting within the same picture (however, note the quotation marks in both examples). This is surely an aspect worthy of its own discussion, but outside of the scope of this article, which is only concerned with presence of pictures as a whole. (There is another passage in Fried's book in which the word "presence" is used several times for describing sitters in Thomas Struth's family portraits, but it does not become clear what exactly is meant by that; see FRIED, 2008, pp. 203-205.) Another important point in this book is a remark that further specifies what Fried had said earlier about proximity:

"The new work, however, is conceived for the wall from the start [...] with the result that it enters into a new kind of relationship with its viewers, who are themselves transformed, reconfigured as viewers, in the process. A crucial aspect of the new relationship, [Jean-François] Chevrier rightly suggests, is an enforced distance between work and viewer, without which the mutual facing off of the two that underlies the notion of confrontation would not be possible" (FRIED, 2008, p. 144).

The point here is that the picture, or, more precisely, the figure on it, has to be large enough to be considered by the beholder as a double of him or herself, or at any rate as a possible partner in a face-to-face communication in order to evoke a feeling of presence. This is more or less what Fried had already said in "Art and Objecthood", but in *Why Photography Matters* he applies the criterion of size (or the criteria of proximity and anthropomorphism) to two-dimensional art. Naturally, a large picture size is not sufficient if the figures are too small, as Fried illustrates with Andreas Gursky's photograph *Klausenpass*; its figures

“are instantly recognized by the beholder to be too far away to be engaging (that is, to have engaged) in any act of reciprocal seeing. Even more than the sheer fact of distance, this negation of the very possibility of reciprocity has the distinct effect of 'severing' the human subjects, and in effect the picture, from the beholder, thereby declaring the picture's antitheatricality” (FRIED, 2008, p. 158).

Vice versa, if the figures are large enough, the illusion of reciprocal seeing is made possible, they are connected to the beholder rather than severed, and the effect of presence ensues. Still talking about Gursky, Fried lists seven more features of anti-theatricality, most of which, when turned into their opposite, can be seen as features of presence. One of them has not been mentioned before in this article: Gursky's photographs often contain "the presence of fences, glass walls, windows, and similar elements that intervene between the viewer and the (ostensible) principal motifs" (FRIED, 2008, p. 166). I conclude that presence is heightened when there is no barrier between figures and picture surface, and even more so when the barrier between the space of the picture and the space of the beholder is negated, so that the picture space ostensibly crosses over into that of the beholder or vice versa. The result is that beholder and figures seem to share the same space--another means of "closing the gulf" between figure and beholder. An example of this, I would argue, are Beat Streuli's photographs, which Fried describes in a later passage of the same book as "an impressive series of pictures, in some of which his subjects are cropped just below the waist and in others at mid-chest or even above, forcing confrontational intimacy" (2008, p. 247). By not showing the figures' feet, their connection to the space they are in is hidden, thus making the illusion more plausible that they could inhabit the same space as the viewer. (Finally, Fried introduces another term in this book, "to-be-seeness", which is neither synonymous with theatricality nor with absorption, but a feature of otherwise absorptive pictures that works against their absorption--see (FRIED, 2008,



pp. 226-256). However, this term does not add anything to our understanding of the concept of presence within Fried's works.)

So far, the following criteria for presence can be derived from Fried's texts alone: anthropomorphism, which can be divided into *naturalism* (as this article is only concerned with the presence of figurative art, and with portraits in particular, a certain degree of anthropomorphism can be taken for granted, but the degree of naturalism, or realism, can still vary and thus influence the degree of presence) and *size* (a human-like size can be achieved through a combination of absolute size and proximity), and *deixis* (the figure seemingly points at or turns to the beholder). Within the deictic repertoire especially the gaze (the figure seemingly looks at the beholder) is important, though it has not yet become clear which expression--inviting, blank, or even alienating--is most likely to heighten the sense of presence. *Naturalism*, *size*, and *deixis* appear to be the three main criteria of presence. Of lesser importance seem to be the (reduction of) *density* of information and the conflation of the figure's and the beholder's *space*. We will now turn to other authors to see if this list of criteria can be augmented, specified or confirmed.

Another author who was concerned with the concept of presence at an early point in time is Rosalind Krauss, in her seminal essay "Notes on the Index". There, she says about a work of art, "[t]he meaning of this work is focused on the pure installation of presence by means of the index." (1977, p. 80) By "index", Krauss means various kinds of connections to an external object, though a photograph is already indexical in itself and thus has a "heightened presence" (1977, p. 78). The idea of photography as an inherently indexical medium is not new. Already C. S. Peirce had noted that, since a photograph is a physical and chemical imprint of an object, it always refers to that single and specific object which brought it into existence, and thus must be considered an indexical sign (DUBOIS, 2010/1998, pp. 109-113). It seems likely that a photograph, or a work that the beholder identifies as one, has a higher degree of presence due to its indexical nature. Usually, a photograph has the additional advantage (in terms of presence) of having a higher degree of naturalism than, say, a painting, but that has to be clearly distinguished from the effect of the index. In a possibly subconscious way, the connection between the photographic print and the object it shows, which is proven by the indexicality of the medium of photography, extends into a connection between beholder and figure. This is a similar effect to, in a lesser degree, the connection between portrait painting and sitter (both had once been in the

same room), and, in a higher degree, the connection between screen image and filmed figure in a closed circuit video system. Thus, the higher the degree of indexicality, the higher the feeling of presence. Another author to note this subconsciously perceived connection between photograph and figure is Susan Sontag. In her book *On Photography*, which was first published in the same year as Krauss's essay, she says: "those ghostly traces, photographies, are now responsible for the symbolic presence of dispersed relatives" (1978/1977, p. 14; my translation), and "yet the trace of the magical remains: it becomes visible in our hesitation to throw away the photograph of a beloved person" (1978/1977, p. 148; my translation). More recently, Philippe Dubois used the term "presence" to describe the indexical character of photography, when he said that a photograph "maintains a relationship of complete immediacy, of real co-presence with its referent" (as cited in GEIMER, 2009, p. 61; my translation). Gerhard Plumpe (2001) even calls photography a "medium of presence" (*Präsenzmedium*), by virtue of its capability of instantaneous reproduction.

Probably the earliest relevant work to feature the word "presence" in its title is Robert Plant Armstrong's book *The Powers of Presence*, in which he discusses traditional African art. At the beginning (1981, p. 5), he gives a definition of presence:

"It is for this reason that I tend not to use the word 'art' [...] speaking rather of such things as 'works of affecting presence,' denominating thereby the fact that they are special kinds of things ('works') which have significances not primarily conceptual (they are 'affecting'), and which own certain characteristics that cause them to be treated more like persons than like things ('presence')".

In this sentence, as in the whole book, there is a clear tendency of seeing presence as what I have called magical presence, i.e. the superstitious confusion of objects and real persons. However, Armstrong's presence has some characteristics mentioned earlier in this article, too, for example the beholder's feeling of being seen by the figure, which Armstrong describes in a poetic language:

"The work of affecting presence--sharing psychological processes with persons--sometimes seems as much to apprehend its witness as its witness apprehends it. This phenomenon is especially apparent in the instance of a danced mask. I myself have felt scrutinized to my essence, turned nearly into an object before the insistent confrontations of a mask danced. It is much the same with a portrait--this is easy enough to see. But the case becomes more difficult when we consider a landscape. [...] Still we know that something is abroad there, something akin to but yet not ourselves--something existent there, *something being*".

Apart from that, Armstrong's focus is on magical or superstitious presence – an interest shared by another art historian, Hans Belting. The English edition of Belting's book *Bild und Kult* is actually titled *Likeness and Presence*. In his book, Belting primarily discusses Christian artifacts, but these are, as the ones discussed by Armstrong, works that "are treated like a person" (1993/1990, p. 9; my translation). He uses the word "presence" several times and mentions criteria that were already established in the earlier discussion of Michael Fried in this article, namely the frontality of figures (1993/1990, p. 197) and their gaze (1993/1990, pp. 335, 408). Of greater interest here are Belting's remarks on space, in which he refers to Otto Demus's discussion of Byzantine mosaics: the figures "are so much attached to the church space they inhabit, that it becomes their proper pictorial space. The borders of real and imagined space are [...] deliberately crossed, so that the beholder can experience himself with the depicted saints in a common space." (BELTING, 1993/1990, p. 197; my translation) This is, of course, a special way of "closing the gulf" between beholder and figure, but in essence not unlike the heightened presence achieved by merging the beholder's space and pictorial space into one, which was noted in this article regarding Michael Fried's discussion of Andreas Gursky and Beat Streuli. Another similar device is described by Oliver Grau (2001): by placing three-dimensional objects before the canvas of a panorama (a *faux terrain*), the transition between beholder's space and pictorial space is made more seamless. Grau makes another intriguing point in his essay; if the beholder is shut off from sensory input other than the picture, the degree of presence is heightened. He even says, "without hermetic sealing [*Hermetik*], [there is] no feeling of presence" (2001, p. 162; my translation).

In the last few years, there seems to have been a renewed interest in the term presence, judging from the sheer number of works that use it. In their essay "Zum Begriff der Präsenz in Literatur und Kunst" ("On the Concept of Presence in Literature and Art"), Marco Baschera and André Bucher (2008) distinguish two kinds of presence. Basically, all figurative art "re-presents" real or imaginary objects and "makes them present" (my translation). This is the symbolic character of works of art; they "refer to something which they themselves are not." The second kind of presence, however, is the "sensory presence" of the works themselves when they are not merely regarded in their referential capacity. This kind of presence can neither be reduced to the bare materiality of artworks (what was called "physical presence" above). In placing the concept of presence within a semiotic framework, Baschera and Bucher have made an interesting

contribution to the definition of presence. It is certainly true that the feeling of presence cannot originate from the mere reference that a work of art makes to another object. However, what Baschera and Bucher do not seem to acknowledge is that the feeling of presence is not entirely unconnected to the referred object. Presence is caused precisely, I would argue, by the viewers' feeling that the perception of the referred object is direct, or unmediated--against their better knowledge.

This contradictory nature of presence is a point that has been made before by Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd. In the introduction to their anthology *Presence*, they put great emphasis on the distinction between the feeling of presence and "simple visual mistakes" (2006, p. 16; see also HARRISON, 2006, p. 165), which was referred to earlier as "illusory presence". Instead, "[o]nce we accept that viewers could hold mutually contradictory attitudes to objects at the same time, we are better placed to understand the ways in which they perceived presence. [...] Might not ambiguity be *vital* for the 'representation' of presence?" (MANIURA & SHEPHERD, 2006, p. 17) This is a valid point. However, Maniura and Shepherd then survey a wide range of examples and theories of presence, including what I call "magical presence" (MANIURA & SHEPHERD, 2006, p. 21; see also DEAN, 2006), which I will not discuss here. Their conclusion is "that presence is not a property which is internal to the object (which verisimilitude might be considered to be), but something invested from outside, by the viewer" (MANIURA & SHEPHERD, 2006, p. 25). Still, regardless of whether presence is an internal property or externally invested, the degree of the feeling of presence varies not only from beholder to beholder, but also from object to object. The latter seems to be the more rewarding to investigate within a reception aesthetics approach, but Maniura and Shepherd do not determine a fixed canon of features in a work of art that increase or decrease the feeling of presence it instils. While it seems reasonable that external factors such as the culture of the viewer, the context in which the work is placed and the way the viewer interacts with it have an effect on the feeling of presence (MANIURA & SHEPHERD, 2006, p. 24; see also PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS, 2006, p. 206), I deliberately exclude such beholder-centric factors here on the grounds that they inhibit, if not prohibit, the project of producing a universally applicable operationalisation of the concept of presence.

Lambert Wiesing's 2005 essay collection, *Artifizielle Präsenz*, is notable for two things in this context. On the one hand, he quotes an early account of the feeling of presence by

Edmund Husserl, who wrote in 1904/05 that a portrait makes us "feel as if the person itself was there" (WIESING, 2005a; my translation). On the other hand, Wiesing distinguishes "real presence" and "artificial presence" (my translation). For an object with real presence, all the laws of physics apply, whereas an image is an object that can only be seen (WIESING, 2005b). A similar distinction was later made by Kristin Marek (2010), who uses the terms "real presence" and "visual presence" (my translation). Such a phenomenological definition of artificial or visual presence (which is equivalent to the kind of presence I discuss here) is intriguing, though rather categorial, that is, it does not say anything about different degrees of presence.

Finally, an interesting concept of presence is presented in a recent essay by Kathryn Brown (2010). She investigates whether paintings by Edgar Degas "suggest the presence or absence of a spectator in a manner that affects the interpretation of the works' pictorial content." This "spectator" is different from the "viewer"; a viewer is a person looking at the painting, whereas a spectator is a protagonist within the narrative of the picture and can be interpreted either as the painter or as a fictional character in the same time and place as the depicted figures. Such a presence of a spectator is often only implied by certain compositional features. In a way, this phenomenon is the opposite of what Wolfgang Kemp (1996/1985, pp. 247-251) calls "personal perspective", i.e. "figures excluded from the pictorial narrative and ranked among the viewer's side" (my translation). Brown's observations are surely a valid concept of presence in its own right, but quite different from the kind of presence I am concerned with: the presence of a work of art is established by the illusory gaze of a figure towards a beholder, whereas the presence of a spectator is established by the fictional gaze of a third character--the spectator--towards a figure. Naturally, these two kinds of presence can influence and reinforce each other, especially when the spectator and the viewer share the same point of view.

Moving away from art, another contribution to the concept of presence comes from the field of rhetorics. In his essay "The Psychology of Rhetorical Images", Charles A. Hill (2004) uses the term presence too, defining it (with reference to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca) as "the extent to which an object or concept is foremost in the consciousness of the audience members." Hill connects this presence to the terms power, persuasiveness and vividness. While Hill's concept of presence is narrower than mine, the important term here is *vividness*, which seems to be a feature of an object not unlike what I have called *naturalism*. Just as I have established naturalism as a prerequisite of presence, Hill sees presence to be achieved

through vividness. He presents a "comprehensive continuum of vividness," which contains, from "most vivid information" to "least vivid information": "actual experience", "moving images with sound", "static photograph", "realistic painting", "line drawing", "narrative, descriptive account", "descriptive account", "abstract, impersonal analysis", and "statistics". The relevant media types in my context, photographs, paintings and drawings, are clearly ordered by the degree of naturalism (or realism) they usually exhibit, even if some drawings can be more naturalistic than photographs. However, what is important to that is that Hill makes the connection between vividness and presence, thus reinforcing my claim that *naturalism* is an important prerequisite of presence.

At the beginning of this article, the concept of presence in works of art was distinguished from technological presence. However, both concepts of presence have common criteria, and technological literature needs to be given credit for determining them. The most relevant text in this sense appears to be a paper by Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton (1997). Lombard and Ditton define the sense of presence, not unlike in my own view, as "a type of mediated experience [...] that seems truly 'natural,' 'immediate,' 'direct,' and 'real,' a mediated experience that seems very much like it is not mediated", although they primarily encounter this experience in new media like "Virtual reality", "3-D IMAX films", "State-of-the-art video conferencing", etc. To illustrate the parallels between Lombard's and Ditton's understanding of presence and mine, I will list no more than six of the criteria for presence determined by Lombard and Ditton.

- "Image quality"--Lombard and Ditton report that electronic images with high resolution evoke a higher sense of presence. This is similar to what I have said about the *naturalism, realism, or vividness* of analogue images.
- "Image size"--by this, Lombard and Ditton mean the size of electronic displays, but it follows that on larger screens, the objects displayed on them are larger too, and are thus more likely to fulfil my requirement of the anthropomorphic size of figures.
- "Image size and viewing distance: Proportion of visual field"--Lombard and Ditton raise the question as to whether the proportion of a beholder's visual field which is occupied by the image is proportional to his or her feeling of presence. This seems indeed to be the case, since the more of a viewer's visual field is occupied, the closer he or she

feels to the figures in the picture (not necessarily the picture itself), and the less the pictorial space is seen as distinct from the viewer's.

- "Camera techniques"--studies cited by Lombard and Ditton have found that close-up framing led subjects "to report a greater sensation of realism". It is hard to distinguish this factor from the factors of size and viewing distance, but as I have said, a close-up view suggests a small distance between figure and picture surface, which in turn increases the viewer's feeling of proximity towards the figure. Furthermore, Lombard and Ditton discuss "subjective camera shots" which emulate the point of view of a diegetic figure. This is a technique that also has the effect of seemingly placing the viewer into the pictorial space and thus conflating the two spaces. In the same section of their article, Lombard and Ditton also list "direct address" (a figure seemingly turning to the viewer, "breaking the fourth wall") as a method for increasing presence, which parallels what I have said about the importance of deixis and especially gaze.
- "Obtrusiveness of medium"--the medium "should not draw attention to itself and remind the media user that she/he is having a mediated experience." This is yet another device that suggests to the viewer that he or she is sharing the same space with the figures of a picture.
- "Content variables"--under that heading, Lombard and Ditton summarize content that "makes sense" or "rings true" within the narrative of the medium, i.e. a consistent and "realistic" narrative is more likely to evoke presence. This is a factor that I have not discussed before, but which seems likely to be a universal criterion for presence. Figurative two-dimensional still images always have a more or less narrative content (Steiner, 2004), and if that narrative seems likely to take place in the 'here and now' (from the viewer's perspective), then that surely increases the feeling of presence.

### **Blondie album covers**

Leaving behind the literature review, I will now apply the criteria of presence that I have established to actual pictures. The hypothesis here is that the selected works of art are held together by their creators' aim of providing them with a high degree of presence. Applying my

criteria will put this hypothesis to the test. At first glance, selecting album covers by a single band or recording artist may seem like a poor choice, as each of those covers was made by a number of creators and these creators have changed from album to album. This makes it more difficult to speak of an authorial intent to establish presence. On the other hand, this choice ensures a certain continuity of the figures on the covers (i.e. the represented band members stay largely the same) as well as a continuity of purpose: a band wants to communicate a certain image to the public via its record covers. I believe that presence plays an important role in Blondie's image.

To a significant extent, this image is shaped by Blondie's lead singer, Deborah Harry. For instance, several posters were made that featured Deborah Harry alone without the other band members. This approach was approved by Blondie's record company and management as well as by at least some of the band members (CHE, 1999, pp. 21-23, 41-44, 55; HARRY, STEIN, & BOCKRIS, 1998/1982, p. 47), although there had also been efforts by the band to counter that focus on Harry when they felt that it became too exclusive (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, pp. 47, 131; CHE, 1999, pp. 87, 43-44, 58-59). The band name "Blondie" is another clue for this tendency, as it can be interpreted as the name of a fictitious character, or stage persona, embodied by Harry (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, pp. 26, 29; CHE, 1999, pp. xvi, 88). Such personal dynamics of the group may explain why their record covers are figurative rather than abstract, in which case they would hardly instil any sense of presence at all. However, this still does not explain why Blondie covers have a higher degree of presence than those of many other artists.

The reason for this lies in the effects of presence I have mentioned: the installation of a concept in the viewer's consciousness, as observed by Charles A. Hill, and the ambivalent feeling of attraction on the one hand and confrontation, aggression or distance on the other. Blondie (and their business partners) wanted to achieve these effects because of the kind of music they made and promoted, a flavour of New Wave with a marked leaning towards pop. Therefore, like mainstream pop musicians, the Blondie band members, and particularly Harry, needed to be made visible as figures on the record covers--to occupy the viewer's consciousness--because both they as people and their appearance were part of the product that was being sold. They wanted to be stars, in contrast to the iconoclasm of the punk subculture that asked to "kill your idols". And yet, they did not want to lose touch with their punk background, which gave them underground



credibility and a distinctive edginess. Therefore, their image needed to retain an element of punk attitude, a certain nonconformity, negativity and detachment. Accordingly, Deborah Harry

“was never merely the object of the gaze--its passive, powerless victim. Harry always stared right back at the camera, those luminous eyes full, not of submissive desire or even smouldering passion, but radiating fearless, hungry intelligence and a 'fuck you' smirk” (CHE, 1999, xv).

Says Evelyn McDonnell in the foreword to Cathay Che's biography of Harry. Additionally, in the same book, photographer David LaChapelle says about Harry that “[s]he looked detached and like she didn't give a fuck--she was the opposite of eager to please.” (CHE, 1999, 101) It seems likely that for many other New Wave bands, the need to establish a similarly ambiguous image led to a high degree of presence in their album covers. This is a hypothesis that is going to be tested later in this article.

The album covers selected for analysis here are from the first six albums released by Blondie; the self-titled *Blondie*, *Plastic Letters*, *Parallel Lines*, *Eat to the Beat*, *Autoamerican* and *The Hunter*. Later albums were not included because of the long hiatus following the release of *The Hunter*, after which the New Wave era and its associated stylistic period were over and record cover design had undergone major changes, for example, the switch from vinyl records to CDs as the primary album format. Vinyl single (7”) covers were not included for analysis here because there is a greater variety of cover motifs per release (some singles were only issued in specific countries) and because the covers were not as closely connected to the music on the singles, (the A side of) which could be listened to on the radio or in clubs without seeing the sleeve.

In order to determine the degree of presence of each album cover, the following criteria based on the preceding section will be applied:

- *deixis*: are the figures seemingly looking at, orientated towards, or even pointing at the beholder?
- *size*: do the figures occupy a large ratio of the cover?
- *naturalism*: are the figures vividly and realistically depicted?
- conflation of *space*: is the pictorial space seemingly extended into that of the beholder, e.g. by cropping of the figures or of the room they are placed in?

- plausibility of *content*: could the depicted scene really be happening?
- *density* of information: are there only a few, easily discernible objects?

The more positively these questions can be answered, the higher the degree of presence, albeit the former criteria seem more important than the latter.

[Fig. 1: David Perl/Shig Ikeda, front cover of *Blondie* by Blondie, 1977, Chrysalis CHR 1165, 12" vinyl record cardboard cover].



The first album cover that I am going to analyse is that of the self-titled debut album, *Blondie*, which was designed by art director David Perl (who nowadays works as a photography artist) based on a photograph by Shig Ikeda (spelt "Ikeida" on the back cover). The album was first released in 1976 and re-released on the label Chrysalis (as CHR 1165) in 1977. The cover of the latter release is being used for this analysis. It fulfils the criterion of *deixis* to a high degree; all five band members are seemingly looking at the viewer, their bodies are orientated towards the picture surface, with only the heads of some figures slightly angled. The effect of presence could be even higher if the musicians' hands were visible and seemingly being used to communicate with the viewer. The gazes of the four male members would be more intense if their faces were not partially concealed by the figure in front of them. Still, the five-fold direct address creates a strong feeling of presence. The criterion of *size* is also met: the figures take up almost all of the cover, except for a strip at the top in which the "Blondie" logo is placed and some smaller patches between them. Like most photographs, the image is also *naturalistic*, although one could argue that the dramatic lighting somewhat reduces its vividness. The

conflation of pictorial *space* and beholder's space is less clear; the figures are cropped on three sides and thus seemingly extend beyond the pictorial space, and the camera angle results in them being on eye-level with the viewer so that he or she can imagine standing on the same ground as them. The background, however, is only a black surface, giving the impression of an abstract room with unclear dimensions, which can therefore hardly be said to extend into the viewer's space. The picture's narrative *content* is not realistic in the sense of an everyday life situation; the regular, unnatural placement of the band members in a shifted line is an artificial pose that could have only been adopted for a photo shoot, the unlikely lighting and Harry's streaming hair being further giveaways. Therefore the viewer is denied the illusion of having a chance encounter with the band, thus reducing his or her feeling of presence. Finally, the *density* of information is very low; the five band members, the band logo and a monochrome background are all there is to see on this picture, resulting in a striking image. Overall, the cover of *Blondie* meets almost all criteria to a high degree and is therefore likely to instil a strong feeling of presence in the viewer.

[Fig. 2: Ramey Communications/Phillip Dixon, front cover of *Plastic Letters* by Blondie, 1978, Chrysalis CHR 1166, 12" vinyl record cardboard cover]



By the time the photograph for the cover of the second album, *Plastic Letters* (released in 1978 on Chrysalis, CHR 1166), was shot, Blondie had shrunk to a four-piece. This cover, designed by the company Ramey Communications with photography by Phillip Dixon, is not quite as simple and frontally orientated as the previous album cover. While Harry, Chris Stein (upper left) and Jimmy Destri (lower right) are still seemingly looking at the beholder, Clem

Burke is not. In addition, none of their bodies are fully turned towards the picture surface. Still, the overall *deictic* disposition of the cover allows for a certain degree of presence. This time, the *size* of the figures (occupying approximately 60% of the picture) can be regarded as neither particularly large nor small, thus neither enhancing nor reducing the degree of presence. The degree of *naturalism* of this cover is high, like that of most record covers that feature photography. All figures are cropped, but not as extensively as on the debut album cover, and the background is again almost undefined, which leaves the pictorial *space* and the viewer's space largely separate. This depicted scene is of a more narrative nature, but the narrative implied by the inclusion of the police car remains vague: is the viewer supposed to believe that the band stole a police car? Or that they came across an abandoned police car? Did a police officer take them for a ride in a police car? The most plausible explanation is that the police car was specifically rented for the photo shoot--and in fact it was (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, p. 87). The stagedness of this situation is somewhat countered by the less stiff poses of the figures. The fact that two of them can be seen smoking cigarettes contributes to an atmosphere of casualness, resulting in a content of mediocre plausibility. The *Plastic Letters* cover is *denser* than the *Blondie* cover, with the figures arranged more irregularly and the additional elements of the police car prop and the "Plastic Letters" sign. However, the cover is still simple enough to enhance its degree of presence. The overall degree of presence of this cover is smaller than that of the previous one, but still rather high.

[Fig. 3: Ramey Communications/Edo, front cover of *Parallel Lines* by Blondie, 1978, Chrysalis CHR 1192, 12" vinyl record cardboard cover]



In the same year, 1978, the third Blondie album *Parallel Lines* was released (CHR 1192). Ramey Communications was again responsible for art direction and design, while photography was carried out by Edo (i.e. Edo Bertoglio). With the addition of Frank Infante and Nigel Harrison, the band line-up consisted of six members at that time, so more figures than before needed to be fit onto the album cover. As a result of tensions within the band, their manager Peter Leeds, who came up with the idea for the *Parallel Lines* cover design, had the band members photographed separately rather than in a group shot, and had the individual photographs assembled later (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, p. 131; CHE, 1999, pp. 58-59). This circumstance explains the incongruous facial expressions of the figures: all the male band musicians are smiling, while Harry is not. This contrast was not intended by the band, but rather due to the selection of the individual photographs by Leeds. Although the band was not happy with this outcome (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, p. 131; CHE, 1999, pp. 59), the contrasting expressions contribute significantly to the overall expression of the cover, heightening a sense of detachment, distance and confrontation in Harry's look. These are characteristics which were noticed in other figures in works of great presence earlier in the article.

Returning to my six criteria of presence, the *deictic* features of the cover are found to strongly enhance its degree of presence. With the exception of Harrison on the far right (who instead extends his hand vaguely towards the camera), all band members seem to be looking directly at the beholder, who must feel watched by a row of pairs of eyes. The frontality of the composition is further marked by Harry's gesture, in which her arms are brought into a position parallel to the picture surface. As for the *size* of the figures, they are not as large as on the first album cover, due to them being depicted in a full shot here. Still, they take up a large share of the picture surface. The degree of *naturalism* is high in this cover, except for the abstract background into which the figures do not fit seamlessly. For instance, there are no shadows visible at their feet. The figures themselves are, however, sufficiently vivid. The pictorial *space* is more defined here than in the previous covers, since the background is not a monochrome surface, but might suggest a transition between a wall and a floor in the blurry area towards the bottom of the cover, where the colours of the stripes are inverted. On the other hand, the stripes remain parallel at the bottom, rather than becoming rays in a linear perspective. This is a pictorial space that can hardly be perceived as extending into the viewer's space. The abstract background, together with the musicians' obvious posing for a camera, prevent this image being perceived as depicting a

*plausible* non-mediated situation. The *density* of information is low, as there is nothing to be seen except for the band members, the still relatively simple background, the band name and the album title. As a whole, the degree of presence of the *Parallel Lines* cover is to be located between those of the previous two covers, that is, its effect of presence is palpable.

[Fig. 4: John Van Hamersveld/Billy Bass/Norman Seeff, front cover of *Eat to the Beat* by Blondie, 1979, Chrysalis CDL 1225, 12" vinyl record cardboard cover].



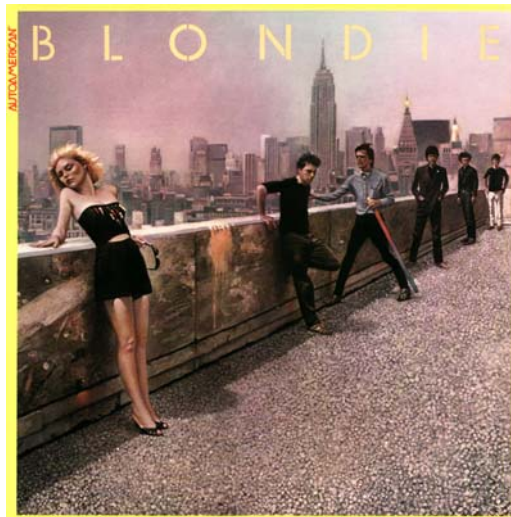
In *Making Tracks*, Blondie say:

“Getting to do our own album covers and exactly what we wanted musically without having to make concessions had always been such a struggle for control. Control came with financial leverage and by *Eat To The Beat* we had complete control” (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, p. 159).

The fourth Blondie album, *Eat to the Beat*, was released in 1979 (Chrysalis, CDL 1225). This time, design and art direction were carried out by different people, John Van Hamersveld and Billy Bass, respectively. Norman Seeff was employed as the photographer and is also credited as designer on the inner sleeve. The *Eat to the Beat* cover is notable for being in touch with a tendency in the graphic design of that time which has been called "New Wave" too (BONNELL & GEISSBÜHLER, 1984, p. 39). The influence of this cover is described in *Making Tracks*: "Billy Bass invented those little squares on the cover that were to be seen in every music ad for the next year." (HARRY et al., 1998/1982, p. 145) Within the context of this article, the cover is exceptional for deliberately showing only half of the band on the front. The remaining three musicians are placed on the back cover. This provides the three head shots on the front

cover with a lot of space. In fact, this scale of the figures is the largest of all six album covers, thus fulfilling the criterion of *size*. The requirement of *deixis* is met as well: even though the photography is tilted, the heads are inclined and Harry's is turned slightly away from the picture surface into a half profile, all three figures are seemingly looking directly at the viewer. The *naturalism* of this image is lower than that of the others, because the photography is in black and white. However, it is still a relatively vivid image. The photography is cropped on all four sides, and especially at the bottom, where Stein's arm around Harry's shoulder is cropped, an extension of the figures beyond the picture surface is suggested. On the other hand, the abstract grid pattern framing the photograph separates the pictorial *space* from the viewer's. Therefore, this criterion is only partially met. Although the arrangement of the figures looks less stiff and staged than on the previous covers, there is not much of a narrative depicted that could be seen as *plausible*. The *density* of information of this image is on the one hand reduced, because there are fewer figures. On the other hand, it is increased because the close-up view allows us to discern more detail. The grid frame is an additional object that has not been in another cover before. Still, the density is low. Altogether, this is another cover with a high degree of presence.

[Fig. 5: John Van Hamersveld/Billy Bass/Martin Hoffman, front cover of *Autoamerican* by Blondie, 1980, Ariola 202 987, 12" vinyl record cardboard cover].



The cover of the fifth Blondie album, *Autoamerican* (Ariola 202 987, released on Chrysalis in 1980), is the only Blondie album cover that is based on a painting (by Martin Hoffman) instead of a photograph. (Ariola numbers indicate that the sleeve of a copy of the German pressing of this record was used for analysis, rather than the original US pressing.



However, the covers of the different pressings can be regarded as identical for the purposes of this article.) As in the previous cover, John Van Hamersveld and Billy Bass were responsible for the design and art direction, respectively. The painting (which continues on the back cover) shows the six musicians on a roof terrace, in front of the skyline of New York. At first glance, this cover appears to be the one which employs the effect of presence the least. The *deictic* features are less clearly directed towards the beholder: only the three figures on the right hand side--which are placed the farthest away--look in the direction of the viewer. The three nearest figures look elsewhere, even though their bodies are vaguely orientated towards the viewer. The criterion of *size* is also not met, as the perspective and arrangement of the figures means that they (especially the male members) are too small to evoke a feeling of presence. While the painting was executed in a *naturalistic* manner, its vividness is still reduced in comparison to a photograph, thus lessening the degree of presence. The conflation of pictorial and viewer's *space* is prevented, on the one hand, by the yellow border and the lack of cropping at the figures. On the other hand, it is enhanced by the well-defined pictorial space (the wall and floor of the rooftop) extending towards the left, bottom and right side of the cover. This criterion is therefore partially fulfilled. The discernible setting adds some *plausibility* to the scene, although there is no narrative content other than the shooting of the photo itself. This criterion is therefore not fully met either. Finally, the density of information in this image is higher than that of the others, as a result of the relatively detailed depiction of objects, such as the rooftop wall or the buildings in the background. This cover seems less "iconic" than the others, that is, less easily "readable", and is thus less present.

[Fig. 6: Brian Aris et al., front cover of *The Hunter* by Blondie, 1982, Ariola 204 697, 12" vinyl record cardboard cover].





The last album before the band split up (as noted earlier, the albums released after the Blondie reunion in 1997 are not considered here), *The Hunter*, was released in 1982 on Chrysalis (Ariola 204 697). For its cover, no fewer than five different people are credited: Brian Aris as photographer, Richard Raynis and Bruce Carleton as illustrators, John Holmstrom as letterer and Janet Levinson as designer. The *deictic* orientation here is unambiguous; all six band members seem to be looking at the viewer, even though the heads of all but Harry and Burke (bottom right) are slightly turned towards the centre of the image. We cannot see the figures' hands, so there are no gestures to enhance this address of the beholder. The figures are of medium *size*, occupying more than half of the cover but still leaving some space towards the left, top and right. The colour photograph allows for a high degree of *naturalism*. The pictorial *space* can hardly be said to extend into that of the beholder, as the figures are only cropped at the bottom and the background remains largely undefined. The *plausibility* of this image is again low, but this time there is some sort of narrative intention. Harry wears a "lion wig" and a leopard print top, while the male musicians have (barely visible) marks on their faces, which was part of the idea to give the band "morphed lion faces" (CHE, 1999, p. 81). This, in combination with the album title and the drawings of bones, leaves and animals around the letters, suggests an attempt of employing a fictional primeval, tropical or animalistic setting. However, this setting is not reflected in the black suits of the male band members and the neutral background, which makes this attempt seem half-hearted. In any case, there is no plausible scene depicted apart from that of a photo shooting situation. The *density* of information is, again, low (apart from the minute details of the lettering illustration). All in all, this is another cover with a relatively high (although not the highest) degree of presence.

This discussion of Blondie's first six album covers has shown that their inherent presence varies from album to album. This degree of presence is not determined by one single trait of the image, but by the sum of several traits. These traits are reflected by the six criteria--*deixis*, *size*, *naturalism*, *space*, *content* and *density*--that I have presented. Although at the beginning of this section, these criteria were defined as questions that could be answered with yes or no, it would seem that they are best determined not as binary properties, but rather as properties that can be measured on a scale. In this way, I spoke of "partially fulfilled" criteria, or criteria that are fulfilled to a "high degree". The degree to which the criteria were fulfilled was implicitly assessed on an ad hoc scale that ranges between the highest and the lowest degree of fulfilment

imaginable. For instance, the *size* of the figures on a cover can generally vary between so large that a figure occupies the whole cover (King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King*, painted by Barry Godber, probably being the most famous example) and not being visible at all (any non-figurative cover, e.g. The Beatles' *White Album*). The maximal size enhances presence, the minimal size reduces it. However, with all six Blondie covers, the size of the figures lies between those two extremes. It would therefore now be possible to determine a medium size (say, half of the cover surface), and to define that all covers in which the figure size surpasses this medium value fulfil the criterion and the others do not. In the case of Blondie, this would mean that only one cover that of *Autoamerican*, would not meet the criterion of size. Thus the vast differences between the size of the figures in covers like *Blondie* and *Eat to the Beat* on the one hand, and *Plastic Letters*, *Parallel Lines* and *The Hunter* on the other, would be negated, which would lead to an undesirable blurring of the findings. Instead, a three-part scale--*high fulfilment*, *partial fulfilment* and *no fulfilment* of a criterion--would be both more accurate and still feasible to employ. For example, the criterion of *size* could be defined as being met to a high degree when more than two thirds of the image are occupied, and not being met when less than half of the surface is taken up. Consequently, it would be a partial fulfilment if an area between half and two-thirds of the picture surface is occupied by the figures. On this scale, two Blondie album covers (*Blondie* and *Eat to the Beat*) fulfil the criterion of size to a high degree, three (*Plastic Letters*, *Parallel Lines* and *The Hunter*) only partially, and one (*Autoamerican*) not at all.

Similar three-part scales can be devised for the other five criteria of presence. This leads to assessments such as: the cover of the debut album *Blondie* meets the criteria of deixis, size, naturalism and density to a high degree, the criterion of conflation of *space* is partially met, and the criterion of plausibility of *content* is not met. What does this assessment say about the degree of presence of the cover as a whole? Assuming that all criteria contribute equally towards the effect of presence (which, as I have said before, is unlikely, but I will assume it nevertheless for simplicity's sake), one could say that the degree of presence of the *Blondie* cover is *high*. (More exactly, if we assume that the difference between a highly and a partially met criterion is the same as between a partially met and one that is not met at all, the statistical characteristics of median and mode suggest that the overall value in the case of *Blondie* is high, but the arithmetic mean sits right in between high and medium. From now on, the arithmetic mean will be used to

determine the overall degree of presence, rounded up if between two values.) This method, applied to the other five Blondie covers, would result in the following:

1. *Plastic Letters* fulfils 2 criteria highly (naturalism, density), 3 partially (deixis, size, content), and 1 not at all (space). Therefore, we could say its degree of presence is *medium*.
2. *Parallel Lines*: 3 times high (deixis, naturalism, density), 1 time partial (size), 2 times no fulfilment of the criteria (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
3. *Eat to the Beat*: 4 times high (deixis, size, naturalism, density), 1 time partial (space), 1 time no fulfilment (content), resulting in a *high* overall presence.
4. *Autoamerican*: 5 times partial (deixis, naturalism, space, content, density), 1 time no fulfilment (size), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
5. *The Hunter*: 3 times high (deixis, naturalism, density), 1 time partial (size), 2 times no fulfilment (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.

In this way, only two out of the six covers have a high presence, whereas the others have a medium presence. Does this falsify the initial hypothesis that in Blondie covers, presence is specifically employed as a part of their visual strategy? I argue it does not. In order to test this hypothesis, it is necessary to assess the degree of presence of the Blondie covers not on an absolute scale (between two imaginary extremes), but instead by comparing them to other album covers.

### **Comparison 1: New Wave album covers**

Firstly, the hypothesis needs to be refined. If we want to know whether presence plays an important role in the album covers of Blondie, we could also ask whether presence plays a more important role in Blondie covers than in other comparable record covers. What does comparable mean here? It means the covers used for the comparison should share as many characteristics with the Blondie covers as possible. They need to be of the same format (12", not e.g. 7"), contain a similar product (an album, not a single or EP), be made at the same time (late 1970s to early 80s) and feature a similar musical style (New Wave). Therefore, ideally, our six

Blondie covers should be compared with all of the New Wave album covers ever made. This is, of course, not feasible. Instead, we need to randomly select a sample from the total number of New Wave album covers. How do we know of all New Wave albums that have ever been released? We can not, as there have been too many releases, and too many of them were released with a limited distribution that prevented them from becoming known outside of their regional subculture. However, the next best thing is to use a list that contains most of them.

For such a list, I will use the *International New Wave Discography*, edited by B. George and Martha DeFoe (1982). It claims to be "[t]he most extensive international compilation of Punk|New Wave|Futurist|Hard Core| discographies ever assembled", containing all record (and cassette) releases of "[o]ver 7500 bands". The latest entries are from May 1982. This means that this book covers the time span in which the Blondie albums before their split in 1982 were released, with the exception of *The Hunter* which was released later that year. The entries were gathered, as the foreword informs us, by a number of contributors around the world, especially journalists and record labels. Other sources were distributor catalogues and fanzines. According to the preface, most contributors were from the United States, the second largest group was from the United Kingdom and the rest were from several European countries, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Canada. This list of contributors reveals two unfortunate biases: if record labels were involved in the making of this discography, we must assume that their releases entered the discography completely, whereas the releases of labels that did not actively contribute to the book are more likely to be incomplete. In addition, the geographic bias suggests that music from anglophone countries is more completely covered than music from other areas. Still, it is the most useful discography available. Another New Wave discography, *The Trouser Press Guide to New Wave Records* (ROBBINS, 1983), is even more geographically biased ("We have intentionally focused on English and American bands, although a selection of European, Australian, Japanese, and Canadian outfits are included for international flavor.") and less extensive ("962 bands"), which is why I primarily use the *International New Wave Discography* here.

The following sampling method was applied: although the entries for each release in the *International New Wave Discography* are not numbered, they are approximately of the same length and thus fairly evenly distributed over the pages, which are numbered. I therefore generated random numbers to select a page, then counted the entries for record albums

(excluding singles, EPs and cassettes) on that page and then generated another random number to select an entry on that page. To prevent the attribution of a release to the New Wave genre being arbitrary and possibly erroneous, I checked each randomly selected album against the aforementioned *Trouser Press Guide to New Wave Records*. If the album was not included in both discographies, it was discarded. Finally, I checked if an image of the cover of the selected album was available on the internet. This means, I did not use original copies of the records here, as it would not have been feasible to obtain them and the scarcity of some records would have introduced another bias. If a digital image could not be found (or unambiguously attributed to the corresponding release), the album was discarded. At the end of this sampling process, I came up with the arbitrary number of ten randomly selected New Wave album covers (not pictured here). To these ten covers I then applied the same method of assessing the six criteria of presence and ultimately the overall degree of presence which I had already applied to the six Blondie covers, with the following result:

- Artist: The Act. Album title: *Too Late at 20*. Label: Hannibal. Number: HNBL 1306. 1 time high (naturalism), 3 times partial (deixis, size, density), 2 times no fulfilment of the criteria for presence (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Elton Motello, *Pop Art*, Passport PB 9846: 1 time high (naturalism), 3 times partial (deixis, space, density), 2 times no fulfilment (size, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Humans, *Happy Hour*, IRS SP 70025: 1 time partial (size), 5 times no fulfilment (deixis, naturalism, space, content, density), resulting in a *low* overall presence.
- Invaders, *Test Card*, Polydor 2383589: 1 time high (deixis), 2 times partial (naturalism, density), 3 times no fulfilment (size, space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Jane Aire and the Belvederes, *Jane Aire and the Belvederes*, Virgin V 2134: 3 times high (deixis, naturalism, density), 1 time partial (size), 2 times no fulfilment (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Modern English, *Mesh & Lace*, 4AD CAD 105: 3 times partial (naturalism, content, density), 3 times no fulfilment (deixis, size, space), resulting in a *medium* overall

presence.

- MX-80 Sound, *Hard Attack*, Island ILPS 9520: 2 times high (deixis, naturalism), 4 times partial fulfilment (size, space, content, density), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- The Romantics, *The Romantics*, Nemperor WJZ 36273: 4 times high (deixis, size, naturalism, density), 2 times no fulfilment (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Telex, *Neurovision*, Sire SRK 6090: 3 times partial (space, content, density), 3 times no fulfilment (deixis, size, naturalism), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Urban Verbs, *Early Damage*, Warner BSK 3533: 4 times partial (deixis, naturalism, content, density), 2 times no fulfilment (size, space), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.

In total, 9 of these album covers are classified as having a *medium* degree of presence and 1 a *low* degree. Therefore, in comparison to the Blondie covers (4 *medium*, 2 *high*), the comparison sample of album covers seem to have considerably less presence on average. On the one hand, this supports the hypothesis that Blondie covers have a higher degree of presence than those of other artists. On the other hand, it seems to contradict my earlier assumption that the employment of presence is common among New Wave artists. If presence was a typical feature of New Wave imagery, would the results for both the Blondie covers and the comparison covers not be more similar? This can only be answered by analysing another sample.

### **Comparison 2: Heavy Metal covers**

Since we would like to know if New Wave covers are more likely to evoke presence than other covers, we need to determine the degree of presence of the average record cover. To do so, we would ideally pick a random sample from the totality of all record covers ever made. However, there is no list of records that is even remotely complete from which we could extract such a sample. Therefore, I simply adopt a sample that has been used previously by another scholar. Recently, Manuel Trummer (2011), in an article entitled "Powermythologie" in the art

history journal *kritische berichte*, analysed 11 record covers (including singles, EPs and CDs) from the Heavy Metal genre. This selection is by no means a random sample from the totality of all records. Instead, Trummer chooses examples for a specific iconography. However, for my purposes, this selection can be considered sufficiently random, even though it introduces some biases (for instance, a tendency towards figurative covers and towards drawn rather than photographed ones). Furthermore, Trummer's covers have the advantage of being well-documented in his article (and pictured, so the images are not reproduced here.) I apply the same method to these covers in order to determine their degree of presence as before:

- AC/DC, *Iron Man 2*, Columbia/Sony Music 88697 69168: 1 time high (density), 4 times partial (deixis, size, naturalism, content), 1 time no fulfilment (space), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Anthrax, *I Am the Law*, RCA/Ariola 608 879: 1 time high (density), 3 times partial (deixis, size, naturalism), 2 times no fulfilment (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Anthrax, *Music of Mass Destruction*, Nuclear Blast NB 1297-2: 1 time high (density), 2 times partial (deixis, naturalism), 3 times no fulfilment (size, space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Bible Of The Devil, *Galactic Violator*, Threat Records: 2 times high (deixis, density), 2 times partial (size, naturalism), 2 times no fulfilment (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Edguy, *Superheroes*, Nuclear Blast NB 1504-2: 1 time high (deixis), 3 times partial (size, space, density), 2 times no fulfilment (naturalism, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Grailknight, *Return to Castle Grailskull*, STF Records: 2 times high (deixis, density), 2 times partial (size, space), 2 times no fulfilment (naturalism, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Helloween, *Future World*, Noise International 08-4440: 2 times high (deixis, density), 1 time partial (size), 3 times no fulfilment (naturalism, space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.

- Iced Earth, *The Dark Saga*, Century Media 77136-2: 4 times partial (size, naturalism, space, density), 2 times no fulfilment (deixis, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Purulent Spermcanal, *Sperman*, Leviathan Records CD-016: 1 time high (space), 3 times partial (deixis, size, density), 2 times no fulfilment (naturalism, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Risk, *Ratman*, Steamhammer 60-7607: 1 time high (density), 3 times partial (deixis, size, naturalism), 2 times no fulfilment (space, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.
- Joe Satriani, *Surfing with the Alien*, Relativity Records CD GRUB 8: 1 time high (density), 3 times partial (deixis, size, space), 2 times no fulfilment (naturalism, content), resulting in a *medium* overall presence.

All 11 covers can be said to employ presence to a medium degree. This means, their average degree of presence is in between that of the Blondie covers and that of the other New Wave album covers. Following this assumption, it can be concluded that Blondie album covers do contain an above-average degree of presence, whereas New Wave album covers do not.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, the term "presence", within the context of reception aesthetics, is defined as to denote a trait in a work of art that causes the beholder of the work to vaguely or subconsciously experience a figure (or figures) in the artwork as a living being that is actually there. From an extensive review of relevant literature, most notably the works of Michael Fried, six characteristics of works of art are derived that constitute the trait of presence: the *deictic* orientation of the figures towards the viewer, the *size* of the figures, the *naturalism* and vividness of the picture, the extension of the pictorial *space* into the beholder's space, the plausibility of the narrative *content* of the image, and the *density* of information (i.e. number and recognisability of depicted objects) in the image. The more (or rather, in the case of density of information, the



less) these characteristics are contained in a work of art, the stronger the feeling of presence evoked by that work.

When assessed in a work of art--in this article exemplified by the record covers of the first six Blondie albums--these characteristics combined lead to an estimate of the overall degree of presence contained in that work. While the meaningfulness of such estimates on their own is debatable, valid statements can be made when objects of comparison are considered. To put this to the test, a two-fold hypothesis is discussed here; a) the album covers of Blondie feature a particularly high level of presence, b) which is due to their charismatic lead singer on the one hand and the visual strategy of New Wave bands in general, who needed to visually define their style between pop and punk, on the other. When the degree of presence of the Blondie album covers is compared to that of a carefully selected test group of other New Wave album covers, it can be concluded that the Blondie covers exhibit a significantly higher level of presence. When covers from outside of the New Wave genre--in this case, from Heavy Metal--are added to the comparison, their degree of presence is found to be lower than that of the Blondie covers, but about the same as the New Wave covers. This verifies the first hypothesis: Blondie covers have an above-average degree of presence. The second hypothesis, however, is partially falsified. As New Wave artists do not necessarily employ presence more than other artists, the musical style does not explain Blondie's high presence, which is more likely connected to Deborah Harry's considerable charisma.

This article presents an operationalisation of the concept of presence that lends itself to being applied to other works of art, too. However, this article does not address the questions of how this method must be adapted for genres such as sculpture or video, or how other New Wave artists defined their visual strategy, or if there are common traits in New Wave cover art. Such questions have been left open for future research.

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