



Meditation on a blunt instrument

Description

Digital networks presumably influence people's encounters with social reality: "real life is life online." But there's also the argument that reality in general is mediated through the instruments we use, in our social life and in our understanding of the material universe. The physicist Neils Bohr noted that for observations and calculations about sub-atomic particles

no **sharp** distinction can be made between the behavior of the objects themselves and their interaction with the measuring instruments (139).

As if to amplify reality's instrumental dependency, CERN physicists have the 27 km long circular Hadron Collider to determine the existence (or not) of fundamental particles, eg the Higgs Boson. Long before the CERN experiments, physicist Werner Heisenberg asserted that

what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning (46).



This intensity of observation inevitably involves instruments. If equipment mediates (or defines) reality, then it does so through tools prone to bluntness. It seems that reality is sharper than our instruments,

which are subject to limits and tolerances. Instruments don't only occasionally break down but require relentless adjustment and calibration to achieve the precision necessary to penetrate the particular stratum of reality under examination. To put it bluntly, our instrumented grip on reality is somewhat delicate and finely tuned.

Leaving physics to one side, adjustment and [calibration](#) provide appropriate metaphors for our interaction with and in the world. Putting it even more bluntly, there's an argument to be made that adjustments and calibrations are endemic to the character of reality. More poetically, the world is constantly undergoing processes of [attunement](#), ie tuning, retuning and de-tuning its interactions: people, instruments, nature, each with the other, and within each.

Perhaps sharpening a pencil qualifies as a crude exemplar of such adjustment, though the fine tuning of musical instruments in an ensemble is nearer the mark.

Architecture has various tools for adjustment, not least those that are shaped like [wedges](#). Wedges hold window frames in place, split stone slabs in two, hold up arches, constitute tools for marking up sheet materials, sharpen pencils, and stop doors from slamming. (In music wedges divide strings into lengths to make notes.) The bluntest of all instruments is that end of a wedge farthest from the business end. Most of the action takes place where it's sharp. But the equally important blunt bit is the part you grip, hit with a hammer or kick with your foot to allow the sharp end to function.

But the most important instrument of all in physics, as in architecture, is language. Niels Bohr again:

It is wrong to think that the task of physics is to find out how nature is. Physics concerns what we can say about nature.

According to the philosopher of science Don Ihde, this instrumental position suggests that

Laboratory machinery is, in effect, a complex writing instrument (p.75).

If language is an instrument, then it presumably requires frequent adjustment. To suggest it has to be sharpened to get closer to the truth is perhaps a metaphor too far.

So now people are writing with blunt pencils, or those styluses that simulate finger tips, designed for writing on the screen of a tablet computer, and thereby drawing (and writing) new realities â€¦ putting it bluntly.



References

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