



DWORKIN, Craig

# Hard Core / Soft Focus / Middle Ground

***model** n<sup>1</sup>. A structural design. [...] Something which resembles something else. [...] Euphem.: a person employed to pose nude.*

*o tijolo chegando [...] é o projeto da casa, é o corpo na cama  
[a brick arriving; it's the plan of a house; it's a body in bed]  
—Antonio Carlos Jobim*

*Hardcore: dedicated; determined; devoted; die-hard; faithful; fundamental; intractable, intransigent; loyal; obstinate; resolute; resolved; rigid; serious; single-minded; staunch; steadfast; stubborn; uncompromising; unmeasured; unwavering; unyielding.*

In its earliest uses, “hardcore” is linked to poverty. *The Oxford English Dictionary* disperses its archeology of “hardcore” between two volumes, depending on whether the phrase coalesced around one or the other of its constituent terms. The dictionary records the first two print occurrences of the phrase associated with the word “hard”:

1936 *Nature* 12 Sept. 441/2 Possibly 200,000 would be practically unemployable on any ordinary basis—the ‘hard core’ as it is called.

1940 *Economist* 3 Feb. 193/2 One of the more encouraging developments of the last few months is a substantial loosening of what has hitherto been regarded as the ‘hard core’ of unemployment.

The connection survives in contemporary dictionary definitions: “hardcore poverty” and “the hardcore unemployed,” as *Webster’s* illustrates the usage of the word.

A poverty of discrimination conflates the unemployed and the over-employed, those subject to hard labor, with too much ease. That idiomatic associations of “hard core” with both unemployment and unskilled labor may have originated in the use of the phrase to refer to material that circulated between those on the narrow threshold of employment and destitution. At the very least, the idiomatic use would have been strengthened by the phrase’s even earlier appearance in passages describing the mise-en-scène of the most abject labor. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records the first occurrences of the phrase as it appears associated with the word “core”:

1851 MAYHEW Lond. Labour (1861) II. 281 ‘Hard-dirt’, or ‘hard-core’, consisting of the refuse bricks, chimney-pots... broken bottles... oyster-shells, &c., which form part of the contents of the dustman’s cart.

1851 MAYHEW Lond. Labour II. 317 (Hoppe). The phrase ‘hard-core’ seems strictly to mean all such refuse matter as will admit of being used as the foundation of roads, buildings, etc.

1880 S. M. PALMER in *Macm. Mag.* XLI. 252 Rough bits of all kinds of material, which goes by the name of ‘Hard Core’.

“Hardcore,” it turns out, was originally an architectural term, a way of designating the material particulars of construction.

Noise into information, incidental detritus repurposed as the fundamental building blocks of construction, the cast-off or eccentric reimaged as foundational. The “hardcore,” in this sense, was understood to be both essential and foreign: heterogeneous and constitutive, extraneous and incorporated.

“Hardcore,” in fact, also carried a hint of incorporation in the sense of embodiment. As a conglomerate of partially absorbed material too tough to be entirely pulverized or completely assimilated, “hard core” emphasizes the toughness of the core. But there is some redundancy in that emphasis, because “core” already connoted hardness and resistance, “an irreducible nucleus or residium” as the *OED* puts it, a kernel of indigestible or impervious matter, an allergen paradoxically lodged at the defining heart of some thing’s essence. Among its metaphorical uses, that recalcitrance already associated with “core” refigured the corporeal body in terms of toleration. Later in the *OED* definition for the word “core” we find:

*fig.* Something that sticks in one’s throat, that one cannot swallow or get over; also, in allusion to ADAM’S APPLE (sense 2), said of part of the original corrupt nature still remaining. *Obs.*

c1460 *Play Sacram.* 757 Lord I haue offendyd the in many a sundry vyse That styckyth at my hart as hard as a core.

Despite the serious (hardcore) and faithful (hardcore) source, the punning play is explicit in the text of the medieval mystery drama: “heart,” *cor* [Latin].

In its moment of summation, at the core of the drama, the non-cycle spectacle *The Coxton Play of the Sacrament*—the most crudely sensational, offensively antisemitic, and bluntly literal specimen of the genre to survive—momentarily falters, an error or illegibility sticking its throat. Early editions of the manuscript corrupt the opening line of an antiphon for the Office of Corpus Christi, reading: “Now folow me, all and summe,/ And all tho that bene here, both more and lesse,/ Thys holy song, O *Sacrum Dominum*,/ Lett us syng all with grett swetnesse.” The slip is both theologically more and liturgically less correct; rather than to the Lord [*Dominum*], the call should instead be to the meal: “*sacrum conuiuium* [holy feast].”

Lat. acc. *sacer* [sacred]: *sacrum, sacram, sacrum*.

The “sacrum,” in medical terms, is the heart of the pelvis, the solid core supporting and protecting the genitals. The origins of the word are a mystery. Some have conjectured an association with resurrection (either because it was believed that the bone had to be intact for the body to rise or because it was an attribute of Osiris); others have speculated that the bone was offered in animal sacrifices. More likely, the Latin name too literally mistranslates the Greek term for the same anatomical structure: *hieron osteon*. Although the phrase does indeed mean “holy” or “sacred bone” in Greek, it equally denotes a “strong bone.” In the ancient world, the *hieron* was thought to be the one part of the body that was indestructible, because it was so exceedingly hard.

“Corrupt,” “offendyd,” “vyse”—“hardcore” also connotes, of course, the most explicit and graphic pornography, a kind of sexual literalism, the opposite of both mystery and play.

Pornography, however hard, is a category of aesthetics. Not surprisingly, “hardcore,” in that sense—as a rhetoric, or style—also bears traces of the asymmetrical social relations of labor and poverty. Class is clearly legible in the genre’s history, from its stock of narrative fantasies to the demographics of both its workers and viewers. More recently, the history of hardcore pornography has merged with the history of the internet and associated technologies for recording, distributing, and storing data—all of which may be blurring some of the class-based demarcations of its genres. The exact statistics for on-line pornography are hard to come by, and have been fiercely contested, but one effect of the internet has been to redistribute the architecture of hardcore, dispersing it from the easily identifiable and containable brick and cinderblock (hardcore) buildings relegated to economically marked social spaces: town peripheries, not yet gentrified transitional zones, and impoverished urban neighborhoods. The attempts to regulate internet pornography might be seen as an extension of zoning laws, as municipal planning pursued by other means.

The legal term for hardcore is obscenity. The word “obscene” is also of uncertain origin, with folk etymologies suggesting mysteries played out behind the curtained stage (*ob scena*) of an exhibitionist erotic drama. Less glamorously, the word most likely comes from the Latin *cænum*, meaning “mud,” “filth,” “detritus”—the very world of the Victorian dustmen, rag and bone shop keepers, and bricoleur construction workers documented by Mayhew among the “hungry and naked [...] poorest of the poor; after they have had one meal, they do not know how to get another.” “Very hungry,” their fare at best is often only a “meal composed of nothing else” but “bread and grease.”

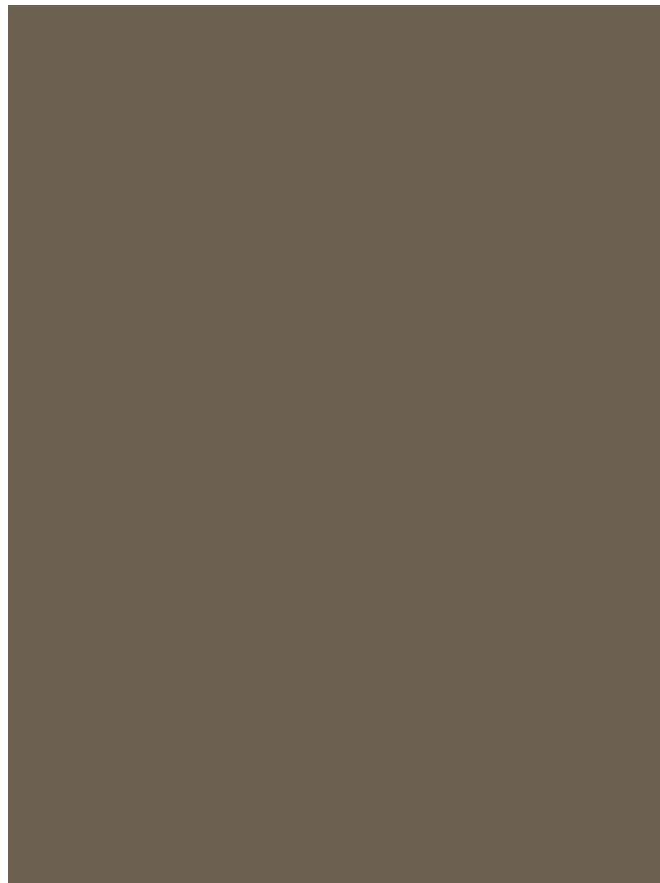
Latin *cæna*: common late empire corruption of *cena* [meal].

Meal, n.<sup>2</sup> Forms: OE-eME *mæġ*, OE (Anglian)-ME *mel*, eME *mæle*, ME *mal*, *malle*.

What constitutes the obscene, in legal terms, is as uncertain and obscure as the word’s curtained etymology. After screening Louis Malle’s 1958 film *Les Amants*, in which the attentive viewer can catch a quick glimpse of one of Jeanne Moreau’s breasts, United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously averred:

*I have reached the conclusion, which I think is confirmed at least by negative implication in the Court’s decisions since Roth and Alberts, that under the First and Fourteenth Amendments criminal laws in this area are constitutionally limited to hard-core pornography. I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 US 184 [1964]).*

But what if, instead, we saw it only when we knew it?



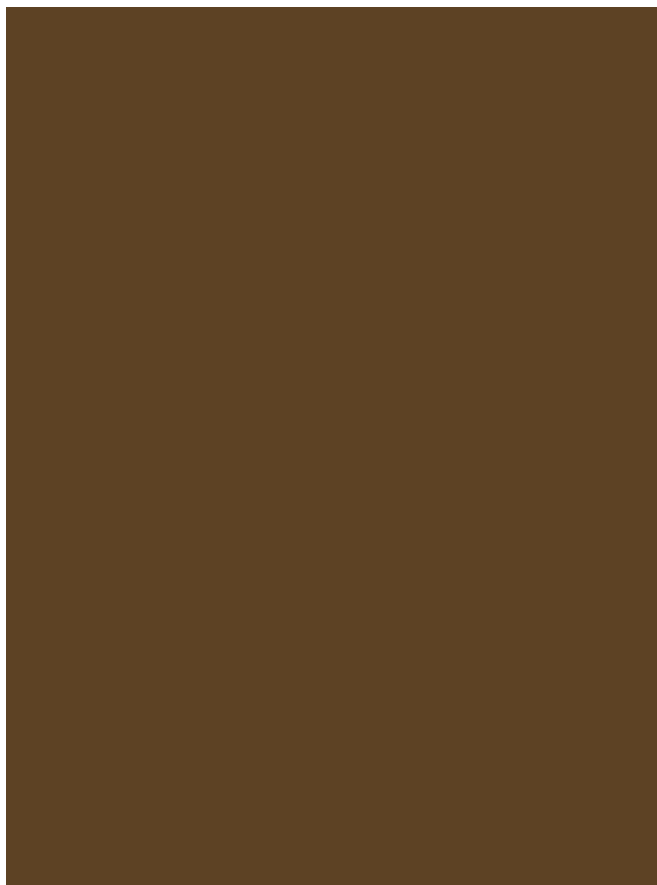
*Pieter Bruegel (the Elder): Jäeger im Schnee [Hunters in the Snow]. 1565. Oil on panel. 117 x 162cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien.*

Jordan52.jpg. Amateur Hunter. SHE NEVER TRIED DOUBLE OR TRIPLE ANAL ORAL PUSSY PENETRATIONS BUT... SHE WILL TRY IT AND YOU'LL SEE THE VIDEOS! CLICK HERE NOW!



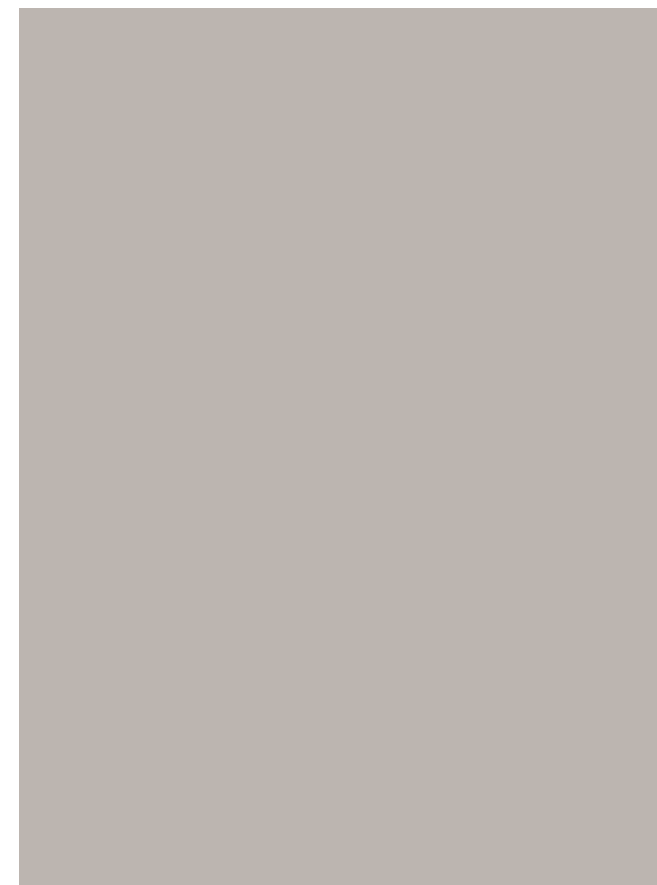
*El Lissitzky: Proun. 1924-5. Collage, gouache, ink, and graphite. 50 x 60cm. Private collection.*

cover.jpg. Category: Construction Men. El Paso Wrecking Corp. "After shooting up the Kansas City Trucking Co., Fred Halsted and Richard Locke move on to new jobs at the El Paso Wrecking Corp. - with plenty of torrid sex along the way. From bars to bathroom glory holes, no man ever goes unsatisfied. A pre-condom classic."



*Domenicos Theotokopoulos [El Greco]: El Espolio [The Spoliation]. 1577-79. Oil on canvas. 285 x 173cm. Sacristy, Toledo Cathedral.*

06.jpg. Got a PASSION for fine asses cuties? We have and only film the best. Rebecca's just one of many cuties we've film exclusively for ASSPARADE



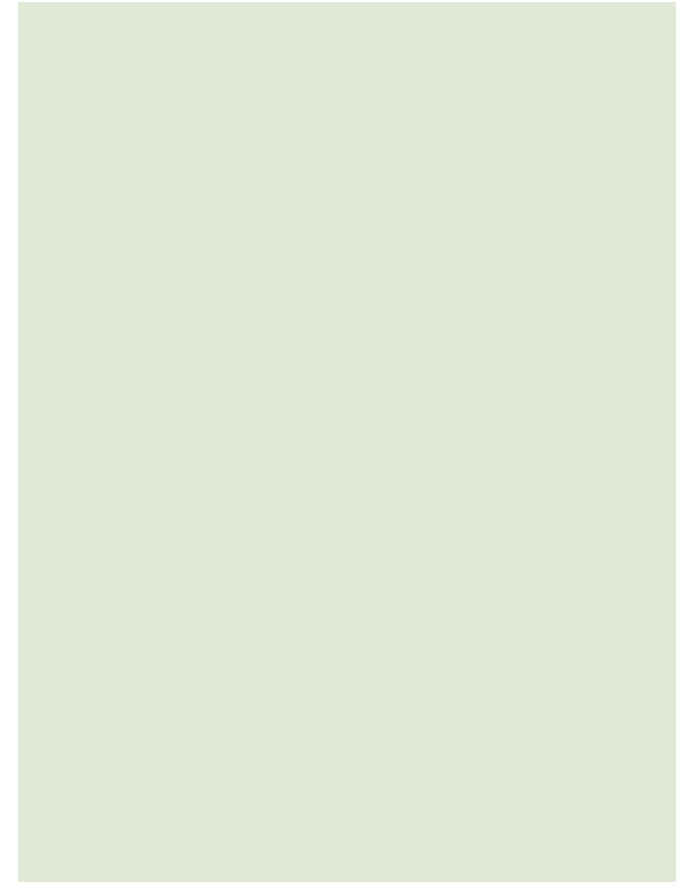
*Marcel Duchamp: [To Be Looked At (From The Other Side Of The Glass) With One Eye, Close To, For Almost An Hour]. 1918. Oil Paint, silver leaf, lead wire, and magnifying glasses on glass support (cracked), mounted between two glass panes in a metal frame on a pointed wood base. 55.8 x 41.2 x 3.7 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York*

001.jpg. French Girl With Glasses Fucking On Sofa. free upskirt voyeur movies



*Julian Wasser: untitled photograph [performance documentation: Marcel Duchamp and Eve Babitz play chess at the Pasadena Museum of Art]. 1963. Private collection.*

*evesden.jpg. I want a new girlfriend*



*Kazimir Malevich: Suprematist Composition: White on White. 1918. Oil on canvas. 79.4 x 79.4cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

*. LUSTHAUS > Allgemeines Diskussionsforum > Wix Pix Gallery > Cum on my Face!!!!*

*Blur* is a project realized with John MacDowall as part of his “Traces and Translations” collaborative series of book works. The book presents a sequence of rectangular monochromes—chromatic bricks assembled in a series of muted and autumnal fields of ochres and rusts, unexceptional browns and greys.

As the afterword reveals, each swatch is in fact the average pixel color of a source image. Or, to be precise, of two different source images, both of which happen to blur to the same mathematical mean. For every set of matches, one of those paired images was drawn from a work of high art, the other from on-line pornography. In each monochrome, the building blocks of the image are indistinguishable within the image itself; each block of color is an extrapolation of its constituent pixels, a projection of its miniature parts. Similarly, in the single uniform color of each page the two very different source images of the monochrome are indistinguishable. With its origin thus undecidable, each brick is a perfectly ambivalent index, pointing with equal insistence to each of the abstracted sources. Looking at the reconstituted model of a rendered hue, the reader, in some sense, is always looking at both.

Moreover, beyond the chance match of their digital averages the final set of image pairs was arrived at by a further aleatory filter. An internet search engine was used to find the pornographic images, following the rule that the webpage containing the image must match at least two of the descriptive terms from the page that contained the art image. So, for example, a search for “El Lissitzky” and “constructivism” returned a page featuring the video *El Paso Wrecking Corp*, which was listed under the distributor’s category “Construction Men.” The image of the VHS box, as it happened, had precisely the same average pixel color as the Lissitzky painting that had initiated the search.

The chance of such a match is exceedingly low, since it requires that both images average to exactly corresponding values in all three of the separated color channels (red, green, and blue), each of which is set to a tonal value between 0 and 255. There are, accordingly, over 16 million possible combinations.

These chromatic bricks thus propose a set of formal equivalents, putting pressure on the prepositional terms in our grammatical models for visual experience. How do we understand the genitive preposition to function when we say we are looking at a picture of something? That it belongs to that thing, or that it is a logical consequence of its nature (a projection, or model)? When we look at one of the blurred images, can we still say that we are looking at a picture of a VHS box? (The question is only postponed, but not answered, by specifying that we are looking at a picture of a picture of a picture of construction workers printed on a VHS box). Were it partially blurred, in the intentional soft-focus of glamour photos and sentimental erotica or simply by the chance spherical aberrations of a defective lens, we would surely still say so. But when distortion achieves a total obfuscation? Do we see it only when we know it? Only when it is recognizable?

For that matter, what are we looking at when we view any work, distorted or not, and whether we think of it as art or pornography? Which facets do we privilege and which do we suppress? And when we compare or equate images, what is their relation? Can we see the connections and dissimilarities among ink and paper and chemical sizers, pigments and oils and tautened canvas, light polarized between layers of liquid crystal and plastic—or do we only see it when we know it?

*Blur* is not, of course, the only work to ask these questions in this way, and if each of its pages points to two sources, it also points to a number of procedurally equivalent works as well. In 1989 series, for instance, Sherrie Levine took a masterpiece of modern art, sectored the image into large blocks, and averaged the colors of each sector, reproducing the results in a series of prints. Her colophon description of the portfolio reads:

*The twelve-color woodblock prints in the portfolio Meltdown have been created by Sherrie Levine by entering images, after Duchamp, Monet, Kirchner, and Mondrian into a computer scanner that spatially quantizes and transforms these images into the minimum number of pixels, thus determining each of the colors in the four prints.*

As woodblocks, Levine’s prints gesture back to the craft pre-history of her modernist sources; at the same time, they push those sources proleptically forward to the post-war monochromes of Yves Klein, Olivier Mosset, and Brice Marden.

More recently, the Belgian artist Pieter Vermeersch has also worked with the average colors of others’ paintings, entering into dialogue with particular collections (such as the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens in 2004) or intervening in the category of painting itself (as at the Prague Biennial in 2005). Like Levine’s series, his color fields

of averaged values gesture ironically and nostalgically to the long history of modernism: the grid; abstraction; monochrome; readymade appropriation. Working in a smaller rectangular format than Levine’s squares, however, he also plays with the porous border between art and decoration that so troubled modernism. Vermeersch’s 2004 installation *Average Colors III*, for example, is something like a domesticated version of Gerhard Richter’s mock-monumental *Achtzehn Farben* (1966/1992), an 8 by 15 foot arrangement of eighteen large monochrome plates painted according to industrial paint sample cards. Where Richter magnifies the paint sample, projecting it to the scale of the modern art museum wall, Vermeersch reduces museum holdings to a series of small uniform swatches looking nothing so much like paint samples from an interior decorating store.

The same impulse to statistically analyze and average can also be seen in recent video. Cory Arcangel’s 2005 edition of Dennis Hopper’s film *Colors*, for instance, plays single lines of resolution from the film one at a time, with each individual pixel extended vertically to fill the screen. The soundtrack continues to play, but the image now appears like a thin and agitated version of the old broadcast test pattern sent scrolling in a scanning curtain of pulsating colors. Distended at this level of resolve, the film’s new running time is over a month.

Like a rotated still from Arcangel’s *Colors*, Jason Salavon’s 2000 digital print *The Top Grossing Film of All Time 1x1* displays James Cameron’s film *Titanic*, frame by frame—with each frame blurred to its averaged pixel color. Salavon has restaged that work with different sources (parsing MTV’s *10 Greatest Music Videos Of All Time*, for example), but he has also accumulated rather than dilated found photographs, layering them in transparent tiers of statistical blur. Averaging and amalgamating images, these projects accrue and compile generic poses into ghostly demographic blurs: one-hundred family photos of *Special Moments* (2004), arranged by subject: newlyweds, graduates, kids with Santa, *et cetera*; *Every Playboy Centerfold* (2002), by decade; school pictures for *The Class of 1988* and *The Class of 1967* (1998) culled from Fort Worth yearbooks; and listings of *Homes for Sale* (2002), a spectral send up of the architectural unconscious in Conceptual Art (from Dan Graham’s 1967 *Homes for America* to Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* and the ongoing industrial taxonomies of Bernd and Hilla Becher).

One final example of chromogrammatic aggregation, not incidental to these real estate investigations: in 2001, Samuel Yates undertook the ambitious project of determining the average color of the city of Palo Alto, photographing each municipally partitioned lot and averaging the values. Furthermore, like Richter and Vermeersch, Yates summons the quotidian commercial material of paint in an art context; the result will be marketed as a shade of exterior latex house paint.

The interface of software such as Adobe Photoshop permitted (and no doubt suggested) all of these works, but they evince the more general logic of the digital world. The formal equivalents of digital media—in which all content is translated into binary code—opens the way to the logic of the blur: the chance equations of dissimilar works and the unexpected ‘pataphysical swerve between different semiotic systems that happen to share certain signifiers even if they organize them with entirely different semantic codes. One of the problems with thinking of visual works in structural terms was always that they seemed to lack discrete units of double articulation, something analogous to the alphabetic letters and words of written language. Digital imaging and analysis, however, provide the necessary unit of articulation: the pixel.

“Pixel” [etymologically from *picture element*]: “the smallest complete sample of an image; a unit of measure; a measure of resolution” (the hardcore, recall, is both unmeasured and resolved).

“Craze”: [aphetic from *acrase*, from French *écraser* (to break) or Old Norse *krasa* (to shiver, to crash)]: “to break (a thing) so that the parts still remain contiguous,” as in a pixelated screen or image.

“Pixilated” [etymologically from *pixie*]: “crazed,” in the sense of losing one’s mind, of being led irrationally astray.

Every tactic is another tactic’s strategy.