

Digital Premonitions: Curatorial Notes on Post-Internet Aesthetics

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DIGITAL PREMONITIONS

CURATORIAL NOTES ON
POST-INTERNET AESTHETICS.

Miriam De Rosa

Post-Internet Aesthetics is a project gathering a selected number of recent works from international experimental filmmakers and artists. It combines a creative sensitivity and a theory-informed take on contemporary narratives featuring audio-visual art focused on the digital and beyond. The exhibition explores the influence of the Internet as a source for a new stream of images and points to the shift in interest towards the new media forms, formats and configurations, as well as towards the circulating devices and distribution platforms feeding a post-Internet aesthetics. In so doing, the films installed at MMC Luka offer a themed focus centered on the issues of the post-digital, interface and screen. At the same time, all being an extraordinary essay of the post-Internet aesthetics – either embracing or criticizing it – the selected films also compose a corpus of works that aims at situating the exhibition within the broader project *Cinemaniac 2017* designed for the 64th edition of the Pula Film Festival. More specifically, the concept of *Post-Internet* is meant to work as a digital focus explicitly counterbalancing that of *Anticipation*, approached in *Video Television Anticipation*, the selection of TV and video works also on display at MMC Luka. In this way, the exhibition addresses the sense of temporality brought and articulated by the media, and questions its linearity. Proposing to the visitor a trajectory that moves from the pioneering video works which anticipated many of our current and most utilized media format and practices to a catalog of touch, portable, DIY and desktop screen media, the show revolves around the basic idea that media history is shaped after cycles. In this perspective, media might be replaced in reason of the obsolescence characterizing the delivery devices apt to make them accessible but, in fact, are not obliterated. On the contrary, they do compose a sedimentary assemblage made up of shifting layers which move more or less fluidly, determining variations, relocations, and returns;¹ retro-aesthetics, vintage phenomena or remakes are a case in point. Highlighting a basic continuity in terms of innovative tension and creative empowerment which

connects the spheres of artists and public, albeit filtered by the lens of culture and technology, anticipation and the 'aesthetics of the post-' are irrevocably connected. Such binary and the intermingled nature of the two temporal dimensions it epitomizes, represent the conceptual backbone of the whole exhibition. The inspiration for this comes from a vast number of accounts populating the constellation of media philosophy and epistemology, and yet – more than anywhere else – its essence is to be found quite emblematically in one of the key-texts in the field of screen media theory, Félix Guattari's *Towards a Post-media Era* (1990 pub. 1996). Welcoming the spectator at the beginning of his visit, excerpts of this visionary text are transformed into an artwork as they are screened in the same fashion the videos and films that follow are proposed along the exhibition itinerary.

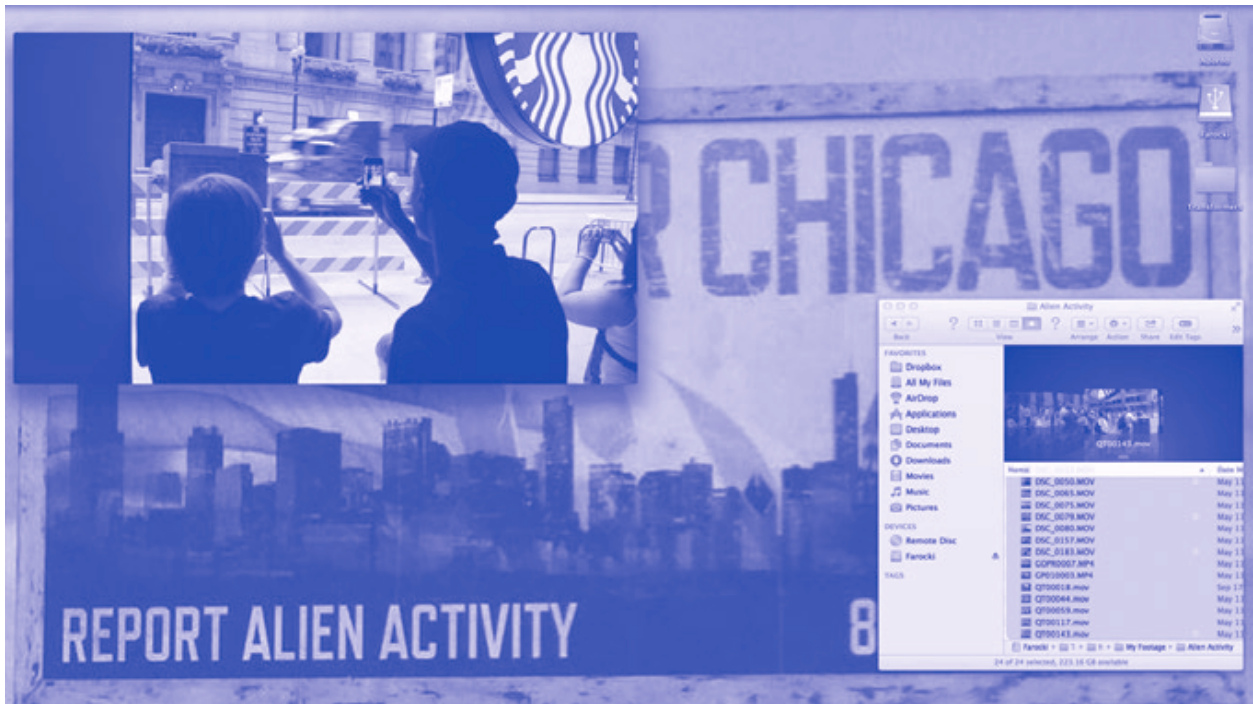
The digitisation of the television image will soon reach the point where the television screen is at the same time that of the computer and the telematic receiver. Practices that are separated today will find their articulation. And what are passive attitudes today may perhaps begin to evolve. [...] From that moment on, we can hope for a transformation of mass-media power that will overcome contemporary subjectivity, and for the beginning of a post-media era of collective-individual reappropriation and an interactive use of machines of information, communication, intelligence, art and culture.²

Touching upon many of the processes that have been eventually theorized, such as convergence, intermediality and relocation, Guattari's text perfectly outlines the contemporary cultural climate of the post-media era in its

becoming and unfolding, picking up on the figure of that “emancipated spectator,”³ whose knowledge is not simply received but actively shaped in first person. Thanks to an increasingly independent media consumption, experimental, disruptive and subversive practices are allowed, thus enabling imaginative ways to create and utilize cultural, artistic and information contents.⁴ The works by Susanna Flock, John Smith and Kevin B. Lee featuring the show encapsulate and express this attitude in ironic, original, innovative ways. Susanna Flock’s *Starring Role* (2016) well exemplifies the re-gained visibility and the (alleged) empowerment of the audience. Two actresses in green body suits create a sort of choreography passing one another a cylindrical shape. Around them is a green screen which allows the director to intervene on the subjects removing their contours, thereby creating the effect of an abstract living shape floating throughout the space, but also alluding to the centrality vs removal of the voice of the public. The user’s agency is explored by the same artist in *Fetish Finger* (2016), too. Here, the tension between activity and passivity is analyzed in terms of materiality vs intangibility by combining stills, experimental video clips and 3D animations. The digital is approached in etymological terms (from lat. *digitus*, finger), that is, evoking the tactile dimension of screen media and shading light on the link bridging touch screens and haptic perception. As in a colorful attempt to contrast the dematerialization due to digitization, the action of the hand we see on screen crosses the diegesis and reaches the audience off screen: the hand gestures are turned into the common ground shared by both the director and the spectator, for the video is presented employing a scrolling aesthetics. Echoing the familiar action practiced to utilize any touch screen device, the viewer is presented an image oriented vertically, whose narrative literally develops from top to bottom, as if an imaginary finger would be favoring the motion on screen by moving it up again and again. Flock mainly uses Youtube in order to symbolize the contemporary

media environment. The sharing platform is presented as a sort of online hyper-visualized journal for the (post-)digital age, where snapshots of food seem to fetishistically replace the image of the individual, who is brought on screen only via his hands approaching his smartphone and full dishes: not the subject as it is proposed by the standard selfie mode, then, but the organic material feeding him – foodporn feeding curious eyes. If this creates a subtle metonymic effect, it is but in John Smith's *Steve Hates Fish* (2015) that the short circuit of digital visual culture reaches its climax.

Based on phone-footage, the video is centered on the lost in translation purposely created by the inappropriate use of the app *Word Lens*. This is instructed to interpret the signage and writings in a London street translating them from French into English so as to outsmart and disrupt its software, by leading to a prolonged, useless research in the app dictionary that ends in the random replacement of words. Challenging and mocking verbal language, the video proposes an extraordinary case of misunderstanding where coding/encoding/decoding become missed passages of a broken algorithm. The app interface superimposes incorrect terms onto the captured image making thicker, more opaque and evident its visually transparent filter which, in fact, casts its shadow in the construction of meaning, at an infrastructural level. As if in a sort of '*Zorns Lemma* for the digital age' where the pattern is lost, the assemblage resembles a live and simultaneous postproduction. This is a characteristic of post-Internet aesthetics on the whole: a composing principle based on "citation, recycling, and *detournement*"⁵ which is live, ongoing and constant, generating new streams of images out of pastiche and remix procedures. The explicit reference, inclusion and aestheticizing of the interface used to produce Smith's work, as well as *Flocks*', once again strongly echo what basically is the users' access to images, and thus their opportunity to intervene on, manipulate, rework them. This is also a characterizing aspects of the post-Internet aesthetics:



KEVIN B. LEE: *TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE*, VIDEO, 2014.

it does emerge in the systematic mix of form and process, as if the real time rhetoric of TV was now transformed into a compelling necessity of unveiling representations, depictions and meaning in the making – snapshots of a constant, fast-paced present. Such “operational images”⁶ feed a way of framing reality that is developed by way of continued re-contextualizations and re-semanticizations.

Kevin B. Lee’s *Transformers: the Premake* (2014) closes the exhibition offering these processes in a nutshell. An essay in operational images, Lee’s video is a desktop documentary. This is “an emerging form of filmmaking developed at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago by faculty artists such as Nick Briz, Jon Satrom and Jon Cates”⁷ alongside students. Inspired by the shooting of the new *Transformers* movie taking place in Chicago, the *Premake* builds upon the video

taken by both the author and by people who also happened to come across the blockbuster production in the city and decided to upload their footage on Youtube. The result is a fascinating reflection on cinema production, circulation and delivery, on the relationship between its economy and its potential pervasiveness in everyday life. Constituting a personal and yet collectively-fed version of the *Transformer* film, the *Premake* works as its anticipation in the age of post-Internet.

The idea of “premaking” a movie has now come into play because of the incredible access people now have to Hollywood’s pre-production and production activities. Through the internet they can find out all kinds of information on story leaks, production schedules and location details. And they can go to locations and film their own footage with cameras as small as their palms, and then upload almost instantly.⁸

As a desktop documentary, the video uses the computer screen as basic tool and workstation. This technique sees the desktop as the unique and synthetic site of those which once were the components of the filmic apparatus: it is the place of researching and gathering information; the place of recording, as it becomes the set; that of editing as well as of post-production and possibly distribution, screening and circulation. Intersecting the classic debate on the vocation of documentary as a genre, *Transformers: the Premake* seems to embody what Guattari predicted, as it questions also the relationship between screen and the world, and therefore, ultimately, between cinema and life. Whether or not the generalized cinematization brought by digitization is to be found in the anticipation of a *pre-* or in the appendixes of a *post-*, it seems our “virtual windows”⁹ do not cease to creatively engage, critically enthuse and, perhaps, simply attract and beguile us.

- 1 Wolfgang Ernst (2014). *Digital Memory and the Archive*,
Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- 2 Félix Guattari, *Towards a Post-media Era*, translated by Alya
Sebti and Clemens Apprich, now published OA in Clemens
Apprich et.al., eds. (2013). *Provocative Alloys: A Post-media
Anthology*, Berlin: Mute.
- 3 Jacques Rancière (2014). *The Emacipated Spectator*,
New York: Verso.
- 4 This is the same rhetoric where the concepts of *prosumer* and
produser are to be framed; as for the former, the first formulation
is notably offered in Alvin Toffler (1980). *The Third Wave*, New
York: Bantam; the concept has but found his fortune only
some twenty year later, mainly thanks to the contributions by
Henry Jenkins (*Convergent Culture: Where Old and Media Collide*,
New York and London: New York University Press), and David
J. Bolter & Richard Grusin (*Remediation: Understanding New
Media*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2000). As far as the notion of
produser, please refer to Axel Burns (2008). *Blogs, Wikipedia,
Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*,
New York: Peter Lang.
- 5 Nicolas Bourriaud (2002). *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay:
How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg.
- 6 Harun Farocki (2002). 'Transversal Influences' *Trafic*, 43: 19-24.
- 7 Video notes by Kevin B. Lee, available at
<https://www.alsolikelife.com/premake-1> (last accessed
June 20th 2017).
- 8 Idem
- 9 I am echoing the classic contribution by Anne Friedberg (2009).
The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft, Cambridge MA:
MIT Press.