

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Special Issue – Arts, Ontology, and Politics

The Alienated Aesthetics of Purposefully-Poor Images: Satirising Image Degradation in Memes.

Author

LUCIE CHATEAU

Affiliation

TILBURG UNIVERSITY

Abstract: Hito Steyerl's theory of poor images describes images that travel through networks and lose resolution and information.¹ This article introduces the concept of purposefully-poor images, or images that are produced within the intention of looking degraded. These are low resolution, overly edited, unruly images who revel in their own mediocrity. Such images showcase the ability of certain meme producers to individually reproduce the *look* of circulation through specialised artistic practices. This intervention builds on contemporary theories of ugly digital aesthetics, but also situates purposefully-poor images in a longer tradition of aesthetics that emphasise amateur, DIY aesthetics. Such rebellious aesthetics utilises decay and ugliness as a strategy. However, I push further beyond this reading arguing that these images possess an alienated aesthetic. Purposefully-poor images draw attention to their own process of objectification by satirising their degradation. In showcasing the material markers of objectification, purposefully poor images narrativise the feeling of alienation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Online, images degrade by virtue of their own circulation. As they travel through networks, they lose resolution, information and quality and become deteriorated images. Hito Steyerl has analysed these deteriorated digital images as 'poor images'.² Purposefully-poor images are a recent trend in meme culture where image producers re-create the look of such deteriorated images. These are images that are deliberately blurred, pixelised, cropped or

similarly edited to mimic the look of an over-circulated image. Purposefully-poor images use their decay to attract attention, defiantly resisting aesthetic norms and expectations surrounding what an image *should* look like. Like poor images, purposefully-poor images disrupt aesthetic normativity. Unlike poor images, they wilfully take their place within digital cultural production when they intentionally foreground their decay. When purposefully-poor image makers create and distribute such images, they re-establish control over the process of circulation, and such images become re-valorised through the meme economy. As a reflection on circulation, purposefully-poor images are images that draw attention to their continuous process of re-making as they take on material markers of their own objectification. Then, in the second part of this paper, I offer one way of interpreting these images; through the lens of alienation. I argue here that purposefully-poor images are more than a display of agency and skill, but possess an alienated aesthetic.

Meme-ing is derivative reproduction, or the replication of an original object with new elements. In the meme economy, purposefully-poor images are poor in terms of quality but rich in terms of cultural capital. The role that meme-ing plays in the production and distribution of images on the internet cannot be understated. Scholarship on memes in its early days by meme scholars like Ryan Milner or Limor Shifman is often characterised by an admiration and enthusiasm for the productive potential of meme culture. Then, meme-ing as derivative reproduction (the replication of an original with new elements) was framed as an active process of mimicry and remixing made possible by the autonomous potential of the web. Nowadays, virality is no longer an ideal in the meme economy. Previously, memes that reached a wide audience had tremendous cultural capital, and could quickly take over the world, breaching the ecosystem of the internet and making to mainstream news in a matter of days. Now, though this structure is still in place, the conflation of irony and cultural capital has atomised meme production into specific subcultures where irony and popularity is formally determined. The place of purposefully-poor images within meme-ing communities reflects this new sensibility of memes. Purposefully-poor images and their celebration of ugliness is a demonstration of digital savviness and cultural capital. I open my article with analysing this dynamic and crystallise how a poor image becomes purposefully-poor.

The poor image is an affront to what an image should look like. In this way, it figures in the long and illustrious tradition of counter-hegemonic aesthetics. Symbolically, the rebellion of this aesthetics is motivated by its potential to divorce itself and obtain autonomy from the mainstream order. This is why such aesthetics is a form of political expression that is aesthetically rooted in its social disposition. By studying meme culture, we can obtain an oversight of a tradition of subversion. That is not to mean that nothing about digital underground aesthetics is new, nor that the aesthetic form of subversion is doomed to repeat itself. Rather, it is the opposite. Digital underground

aesthetics makes use of digital technologies and systemic logics such as digital circulation to show us that subversion and resistance is continuously remade. Formally and politically speaking, DIY aesthetics, sampling and remix culture are a necessary part of the history of the meme that have their roots in punk subcultures.³ In the online space, modes like the carnivalesque and Internet Ugly weave together histories of subversion and collectivity with digital know-how.⁴ The democratising power of the internet has given the tools to millions of web users to experiment with creative forms of textual remixing themselves. The result is always unexpected. The purposefully-poor image is also an affront to what digital technology can do. Purposefully-poor images are low-resolution, low-budget, glitchy, anti-establishment. They become neo-Luddite objects in their refusal of the standards of the aesthetic society. Therefore, there is a social and political history behind these memes that has to do with more than having fun online. I push further by introducing the notion that such images contain the material markets of objectification and can be made to aesthetically narrativise alienation.

The risk inherent in our encounters with Steyerl's poor images is that they are constantly in a state of flux, existing only as a transient copy. Nevertheless, they circulate, progressively materialising their own objective alienation. The signs of such images becoming objects are carried within their form. In this way, they show us that we are constantly removed from the product of our labour. As they do that, they act as a mirror to our feeling of subjective alienation. The poor image is a perfect vector for feelings of alienation because it carries alienation in its form. Therefore, the recent production of purposefully-poor images, images that mimic the deteriorated look that a poor image acquires through its process of circulation, is interpreted here as an aesthetic organising feelings around the experience of alienation. In the last part of my article, I turn to the alienated aesthetic and the aesthetics of objectification in purposefully-poor images which narrativise the feeling of subjective alienation. In this article, I seek to respond to scholar of resolution Rosa Menkman's call to action, 'do I, as a user, consumer, and producer of data and information, depend only on my conditioning and the resolutions that are imposed on me, or is it possible for me to create new resolutions?'⁵ The images I study would indicate that this is possible, and already happening.

II. THE POOR IMAGE

An image in motion goes hand in hand with a process of deterioration. When we encounter an image on the internet, it is conjured in real time as image viewing software renders a visual image according to the information describing visual properties of an object. In order to travel and be conjured more readily, the informational quantity of the image is compressed through algorithms. In digital image transmission, reducing transmission size means the

information loss of raw image data. In this transitional process, the image loses resolution and context. The complicity between the poor image and the network aligns it with the logic of circulationism. Poor images circulate along the informational flows of global capital, accelerating as they continue to degrade. The advantage of the visual image is its ability to align itself within the flights of capital, to be endlessly consumable and reproducible. Its capacity for dissemination also lowers the barrier for entry into the image. As a political tool, the poor image represents participatory culture at its most cacophonous, polychronic and endlessly utterable. The way that the poor image circulates is what gives it its ability to generate intensity; this is precisely why it also ends up being perfectly integrated into an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans, on impression rather than immersion, on intensity rather than contemplation.⁶

For Steyerl, the poor image is a vector that generates intensity. As it circulates, it is stripped of value, channelling only affect and the cacophony of internet users' voices that have all had a say in its making. However, poor images generate their own exclusion through their circulation process; 'poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of the images- their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria'.⁷ Therefore, their erosion is what give them their outsider status. Poor images are thus discarded from what Steyerl calls the class society of the image.

As a result, poor images run abound on the internet, but are not valued because of their failure to meet aesthetic standards.⁸ The signs of their degradation are explicit, but not engineered. In her writings on the contemporary state of aesthetics and art, Hito Steyerl identifies the place of the poor image in the class society of the image.⁹ The segregation of rich images and poor images is crucial to constructing the class society of the image. At the very top are high-resolution images, such as blockbuster films, marketing campaigns shown during primetime sporting events, sponsored Instagram posts by social media influencers. These are beautiful images, meant to entertain us, and mostly entice us to consume (products, but also more of the same images). Similarly, in her book *Beyond Resolution*, Rosa Menkman argues that the standardisation of high resolution promotes efficiency, fidelity, control and power.¹⁰ The command to obey resolution standards turns into an institutionalised demand and brings creative production to a standstill. In this article, the class society of the image functions as an allegory of the ownership of the means of production of the image. The value of an image is defined by our means of access to it. The images we lust after are different from the ones that we are in contact with. The class society of the image thus places at the very top images it owns the means of production of. This control manifests as the fetish of resolution. Without being the owners of the means of production of the image, we can only ever access poor images, images not designed for consumption but for circulation. Poor images act

against this fetish for resolution. They degrade in their circulation because the way that they are produced and shared does not privilege high resolution, but accelerated consumption.

The deterioration of the poor image affects its status as an image under the aesthetic normativity of the class society of the image. This is because they no longer conform to our expectations of what an image should look like:

Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. Only digital technology could produce such a dilapidated image in the first place.¹¹

Poor images are not valorised because they do not display any sign that would allow us to interpret them as an image, therefore not entering into our interpretative horizon. The purposefully-poor image, however, due to its role in the digital cultural economy, does present as an active object within our horizon of interpretation. The crucial difference between the purposefully-poor images and Steyerl's poor image is that the purposefully-poor image finds itself valorised within the digital cultural economy through ironic memetic processes, whilst the poor image stands on its side-lines.

The only 'authentic' poor image is by definition a bad one – one created not to be valorised in the cultural economy. However, the purposefully-poor image is an image that is circulated *because* it is degraded. The purposefully poor image is capital-rich but resolution-poor. This allows the crucial distinctions between meme, poor image, and purposefully-poor image to be made. The relationship between the poor image and the meme is determined by the cultural politics of irony. Therefore, meme-ing allows for the valorisation of poor images within the digital cultural economy due to its collective logics of derivative reproduction. Circulation and its associated process of degradation therefore becomes an autonomous process that generates value in the form of cultural capital from within the digital cultural economy. The crucial difference between Steyerl's poor image and the purposefully-poor image is that the poor image is excluded from the class society because its means of production (degradation through circulation) cannot be *controlled* by any individual. The purposefully-poor image however is entitled to its rightful place within the class society of the image because it has been valorised by the cultural capital-rich users that make up the digital cultural economy. Next, I turn to how a meme creator on Instagram demonstrates the delicate dynamics of impoverishment.

The Lifecycle of a Circulated Image

Figures 1: 1 to 5 (p. 179) show us the lifecycle of a circulated image.¹² These images have all been taken from the Instagram account @brattycrush. Going counter clockwise from the top left image, we see the progressive degradation of the image as it undergoes various editing techniques indexed by processes

such as loss of colour and pixelisation. The initial image bears little importance and does not offer much content or communication, but it is its gradual evolution and departure from its original form that highlights its becoming an object of alienation. The first image (figure 1.1) already builds on an image that has been edited before; ‘Anybody wanna fall in love in October?’ has already been crossed out and replaced with ‘November’, then ‘December’. It already acknowledges loss; love was not found in October, nor November. Due to the loss felt, the perceived mental state of this poster deteriorates. Of course, in keeping with the ironic culture of meme, this is a rhetorical device used for comedic effect. It is also the construction and projection of a particular mental state; in this way, the maker of the meme *satirises* a fictional author going through a deteriorated mental state. This is materially mediated by the increasingly messy image and the intensification of its urgent undertone in Figures 1.2 and 1.3. Exclamation and question marks are added, definitive statements are made ('I give up' in figure 1.2). Subjective deterioration is symbolically alluded to in the objective deterioration of the image.

In figure 1.2, clear signs of degradation are present. The image has lost in quality, the image gradient has changed hue due to repeated excessive filtering, and the format itself has changed to a rectangular aspect ratio over a square one. This indicates the progressive ageing of the image. The content of the image would indicate that it has already been in circulation for at least three months, although there is no reference to the year. Indeed, this is an image that has been circulating for some time, and can be applied to any calendar year. Resignation is apparent in figure 1.2, but in figure 1.3, (bottom left), the initial format is re-established, and ‘January’ and ‘February’ have been added, whereas ‘I give up’ has been removed. However, the image seems to still be under the control of the producer as it is still taking on the affective tonalities of the original image, as well as positioning itself as its author by using the first person. This does not mean that the same person that produced the initial image is still the one editing, but that the individuals that are editing and speaking through this image are still relating to its original demand and able to reproduce its tone. The image is impoverished, but the communication is not. The image is still circulating. Poor images are constantly in a state of transience as their production is transferred from one internet user to another.

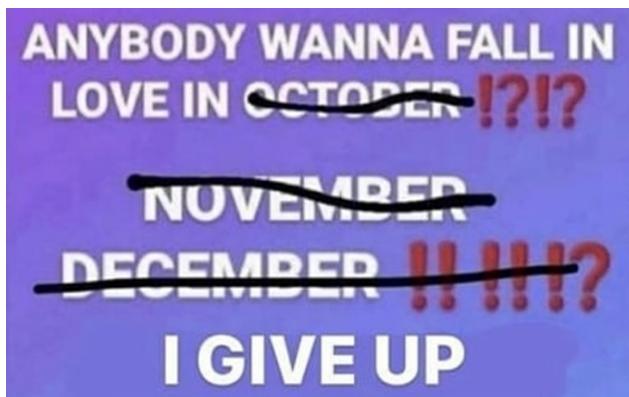
In Figures 1.4 and 1.5, we see the transformation of the poor image into a purposefully-poor image. These images turn their back on the previous images’ desperation and become images that parody loss. Figures 1.4 and 1.5 hijack the image’s running joke and interject their own statements on top of it, changing the tone of the image entirely, introducing a new, sarcastic voice. The image now becomes one that speaks back to the producers of the initial image and addresses them directly: ‘Have you guys tried loving yourselves instead’. Here we see how the image is purposefully impoverished. We can see



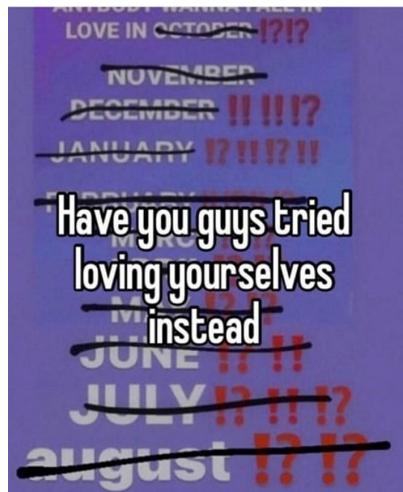
a. 1



b. 5



c. 2



d. 4



e. 3

Figure 1: The lifecycle of a circulated image (counter-clockwise).

the signs of editing through the different aspect ratios and tones of previous images that have been layered over each other in Figure 1.5. Degradation is deliberately over-engineered, parodying the fact that such poor, dilapidated images were circulating in the first place. The background of image degradation is necessary for these images to exist and for their commentary on loss to exist. They are objects that embody, as Menkmen writes, ‘loss induced by over-resolution’ (IV). In this way, they circulate as a meta-discourse about the existence of images such as seen in Figures 1.1 to 1.3. Purposefully-poor images, such as those in figures 1.1 to 1.5, lose their gloss and quality as they gain their audience. This is the creation of the purposefully-poor image.

III. ARE ALL MEMES POOR IMAGES?

The above set of images displays the gradual construction of a purposefully-poor image, from an initial image, to a poor image, to an image that ironises communication and comments on its own poverty. Irony is the lingua franca of the meme culture and a prerequisite skill when it comes to meme production. Understanding irony is the same thing as having meme literacy, and meme literacy is one of the edgiest forms of cultural capital to have on the internet these days. Notions of intentionality are lost in the flows of the meme economy, and irony is often a matter of revisiting aged content. Therefore, irony is made not in its initial authorial phase, but, if or when remixed, at the moment of posting of the meme. In terms of irony, cultural capital originates from how subcultural or niche a meme is so that one can post at the moment where cultural capital is at its highest. Pioneering or avant-garde meme-ing happens in niche subcultures where irony is still able to gather cultural capital before being introduced to the mainstream. In these subcultures, the aim is always being to be able to enjoy the discovery of a newly untapped source of humour before it attains a critical point of mainstream saturation, effectively robbing it of its cultural capital and devaluing the meme. It is not an organic process of degradation that we bear witness to in figures 1 to 5, but an active and involved social practice that deliberately uses the ugliness of the image in order to mock and subvert itself.

Not all poor images are memes but most memes *are* poor images by virtue of their aesthetic composition. However, most poor images can be made memefied through the process of ironic distancing. Purposefully-poor images are always memes because they produce already memefied poor images, which is to say, they ironically use the aesthetic form of the poor image. Furthermore, memes occupy a central place in the digital cultural economy that Steyerl argues poor images do not. Purposefully-poor images contrast with Steyerl’s poor images in the intentionality of their deterioration. Purposefully bad images are recognisable because they aim to reconstruct a lack of meaning by exaggerating the material dimensions of the image. Ironically, reconstruction shows intention that reflects agency in the production process.

It shows the construction of a *fictionally* poor image rather than recording the material process of the degradation of an image into a *poor* one. The only ‘authentic’ poor image is by definition a bad one; one created to not be valorised in the cultural economy. Poor images are images which has been removed forcefully from the class society of the image *because* of their poor value, but are still in circulation. All memes eventually do *become* poor images because it is impossible to remove something from circulation once it is put online. Circulation thus democratises degradation.

That is not to say that all poor images are valued in the same way. Not all poor images are put to work to generate value in the form of cultural capital, some poor images are left out of the meme economy and its complicity with irony. It is therefore possible to get a poor image that is in circulation as ironic for some, but earnest for others. An example of this are ‘boomer memes’. Boomer memes are images without the digital savviness or grasp on irony that other, often digitally native, meme producers are able to infuse into their texts. Boomer memes will lack self-reflexivity, social skill and culture capital it takes to be distributed. Instead, they circulate in the meme economy due to the ironic disposition that is taken towards their naïve approach to humour. Making fun of Boomer Images is often done by mocking their lack of digital assemblage skills, thereby ridiculing their claims. As we have seen, the exaggeration of all these traits is quite the opposite. As Douglas and Galip point out, it is a display of digital savviness to create a perfectly ugly image.¹³ Purposefully-poor image should therefore measure up to an aesthetic standard, but remain subcultural. The purposefully-poor meme must then be *purposefully perfectly poor*. The idea of purposefully-poor images is to stay rooted in transgression by aiming to be so *ugly* that an observer external to the culture could never hope to reproduce it. Now, as subcultural meme genres are being adopted as branding strategy in social media campaigns by corporate actors, the foreboding sense of the aesthetics of ugliness being able to be recuperated and reintegrated into the aesthetic order looms.¹⁴ Meme genres that are illegible to the wider public are in high demand for meme communities wishing to stay subcultural.¹⁵ The place of purposefully-poor images within meme-ing communities reflects that their celebration of ugliness is a political one. What this points us to then, is that there is a social and political history behind degradation and ugliness beyond performative irony for the sake of demonstrating digital literacy.

IV. FROM THE GROTESQUE TO INTERNET UGLY: COUNTER HEGEMONIC AESTHETICS IN POPULAR CULTURE

Purposefully-poor images take their place in a long lineage of cultural practices that have deliberately subverted aesthetic standards. The study of the less-than beautiful has always been of importance to the field, from the historical form of the grotesque and carnivalesque to kitsch, defined by Greenberg in his seminal essay on the matter as the mass produced vulgarities of consumers.¹⁶ For Bakhtin, the subversive nature of the grotesque can be found in the function of the carnivalesque as the release of a social and libidinal energy.¹⁷ However, going from the ugly, uncomfortable, sometimes disgusting form of the grotesque to the cute factor of the commodity aesthetics might make it seem like transgressive consumer aesthetics have lost their salience. Sianne Ngai's *Aesthetic Categories* are here crucial to historicise how economic processes in late 20th century capitalism have influenced contemporary aesthetic judgement.¹⁸ Ngai advocates for the analysis of trivial aesthetics (the cute, the interesting and the zany) in a provocative argument that draws attention to the economic processes these forms parallel (consumption, circulation and production). These categories help us think about the relationship between aesthetic judgement and economic form. In the following readings of memetic aesthetics, this ideal of ugliness produces the trolling intrinsic to meme culture. Following Ngai, I provoke these arguments further, taking them from a reflection of degradation as a political symbol to degradation as a marker of objectification.

The counter-hegemonic discursivity of ugliness can be understood as a historical form such as the carnivalesque, a subversive form that has lived on in today's online meme culture.¹⁹ Allowing genres, cultures, bodies and social strata to come together, De Zeeuw argues that masked cultures in online platforms manifest the potential of profanation 'as a radical promise inscribed in mass culture to eliminate the distances and separations between people and things maintained by previous social formations'.²⁰ It is a tenet of meme culture to satirise and subvert established cultural and structural conventions. Deep fried memes can be considered the inauguration of the purposefully bad images genre. Revelling in the absurdity of circulating a less than perfect image, deep fried memes gave rise to a fetishisation of the *purposefully* poor image. By popularising image warping, the addition of noise, cropping, layering and others, gradually the look of dilapidated images became a recognisable grammar amongst other meme genres, but also on their own.

Nick Douglas's article on 'Internet Ugly' (2014) is seminal in defining how the creation of new, deliberately ugly memes is a fundamental aspect of meme culture predicated on the democratisation of participation.²¹ Douglas characterises the aims of ugliness in its various manifestations in subcultural

communities as a way to critically satirise, innocently parody and celebrate authenticity. As a true meme genre, Internet Ugly values ‘irony and self-deprecation’.²² In a more recent work, Idil Galip picks up Douglas’s ideas on ugliness and irony in memes, highlighting the deliberative ‘aesthetic choice’ of ugliness: ‘Users often have the digital skills to make their memes ‘look better’.. but they choose not to, simply because memes are funnier when they are ‘ugly’.²³ In these readings, ugly is a cultural feeling. It is a feeling of social belonging that necessarily rebels against the aesthetic standard or desire for legibility imposed from an elite ruling class onto a marginalised caste. The aim of ugliness is never to sublime or make beautiful, but rather to valorise what the trivial, or even the detritus, have to say about aesthetic standards in society.

In memetic subcultures, degradation becomes a formalist technique, but extracted from the cultural capital-motivated, irony-laden meritocratic structure of meme culture, its decontextualised elements hold an affective power that have been used to narrativise feelings of anxiety, depression and nihilism. What I turn to next is a reading of purposefully-poor images as possessing an alienated aesthetic. Thus, I define the alienated aesthetic as the process of using image editing techniques that corrupt an image in order to remove it significantly from its original state and convey feelings of alienation. Before, however, I make a detour through the work of Marx and Berardi to define alienation and estrangement.

V. ALIENATION

Alienation’s definition in the works of Marx and Hegel speaks to the individual’s relationship to self and social forms of life. When an individual experiences alienation, they feel the self becoming other. For Marx, this is done due to the economic organisation of society under capitalism. Separation from human essence occurs when there is loss of ownership over the product of labour. Man is not connected to his labour because the product of his labour exists independently from him in the context of capitalist relations. Marx elaborates his conception of alienation in the 1844 manuscripts in terms of the objectification of labour. The *object* of labour is actually the embodiment of labour: ‘Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore, the greater this product, the less is he himself’.²⁴ Repeated encounters with the product of his labour as an object alien to themself estrange the worker from themself: ‘the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes’.²⁵ This repeated meeting with the embodied product of man’s labour gives an externality to labour that exerts an external, hostile power to the worker: ‘the object which labour produces... confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer’.²⁶

It is clear that for Marx, alienation can only be overcome by overcoming the economic realm. It is only by changing the economic structure that objectifies labour that a worker can be made to return to his human essence. Autonomist Marxism, however, situates itself firmly in the contemporary manifestations of capital in order to find a way to encounter alienation from within an objective structure of alienation. I draw here on Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s work to distinguish between subjective and objective alienation, and how an encounter between the two is necessary to achieve positive estrangement. Contrary to Marx, Berardi sees potential in positive estrangement to overcome alienation. What I argue then in the context of the purposefully-poor image is that the alienated aesthetic is the meeting place for narrativising feelings of subjective alienation through the representation of alienation. The representation of alienation here is mediated by the aesthetic elements of objective alienation.

Berardi draws on the 1844 manuscripts of the young Marx to distinguish between alienation and estrangement. For Berardi, alienation can be understood as ‘a sense of loss felt by consciousness when faced with an object in the context of capitalist domination’.²⁷ Positive estrangement, on the other hand, is the active confrontation between consciousness and the external conditions of alienation. In other words, the subjective feeling of loss of ownership, and the objective realisation that this loss is a result of the structure of society itself. Objective alienation refers to not only the feeling of being alienated, but the integral structural division of the self that capitalism demands from the worker when it appropriates the objects of her labour. Subjective alienation is felt because of objective alienation, but not all who experience alienation will encounter it as such. This description of alienation mediates subjective alienation through objective alienation. The alienated aesthetic is an example of this. Poor images embody the material form of labour congealed within the object in aesthetic form. To go one step further then, purposefully-poor image producers wilfully degrade their images to make a commentary on their own act of objectification. They take on an alienated aesthetic in order to offer an aesthetic encounter with the *representation* of alienation.

VI. THE ALIENATED AESTHETIC

Following are all types of image editing that have come to be used as aesthetic styles in memetic subcultures (otherwise known as deep frying) to degrade an image:

- Cropping
- Layering
- Image size alteration
- Adding noise
- Image mirroring
- Distortion
- Image sharpening



a. 6



b. 7



c. 8

Figure 2: Purposefully-poor images showing markers of circulation.

- Slicing
- Increasing contrast
- Image warping

Figures 2.6, 2.7 and 2.8 all exhibit evidence of these processes. They display deterioration through high level of pixelisation, poor cropping and explicitly written-over text. They blend both the loss of quality and information characteristic of poor images, but also draw our eye to the excessive and intentional re-editing and the addition of textual and aesthetic elements. This latter process is what defines these as purposefully-poor images. The deliberate addition of artistic devices that are normally acquired by an image when it succumbs to the process of circulation draws our eye to what circulation entails. In the case of image circulation, these purposefully-poor images satirise recontextualisation and loss as unavoidable features in the digital cultural economy.

Figures 2.6 and 2.7 mock the classic image macro with top text and bottom text format of memes. This is one of the most recognisable meme formats since the early days of meme-ing, which circulates widely given its easily reproducible form and the popularity of meme generator websites on the internet. However, as an easy shortcut to recreating this format without needing to use one of these sites is to simply edit and write over the original image. This can be done by downloading the image and using any photo editing program already available on most phones and computers. This leaves traces of the original meme, but changes its message. Doing this over and over and over again, however, will inevitably make an image illegible. Here, figures 2.6 and 2.7 satirise exactly this. These images layer newer text over older, more faded, filtered or pixelised text. The overlapping text makes any of the previous iterations hard to parse, but we can glimpse fragments such as ‘Does anyone know how to’, ‘It is Wednesday or as I like to call it, Thursday’, or even the remnants of photo editing themselves such as the text box waiting for input: ‘Your text here’. Choosing to keep in the evidence of this image’s long degradation process, these memes mock the nonsensicality of layering and degrading images to the point of illegibility. Indeed, even the fresher, more readable text is devoid of sense. Not attempting to make themselves legible at all, these memes simply comment on the accumulation of labour and the inevitability of loss of control over the product of labour.

Similarly, figure 2.8 highlights specifically screenshotting as a form of image propagation. This image starts from an original picture (here, an underwhelming taco) framed by a black border. This is recognisable as the demotivational poster format, a meme popular around the same time as the image macro format. The humour in the demotivational poster format is dependent on an initial disappointment, shown by the image at its centre but made explicit by the text underneath it. Here, the initial joke ‘If socialism was a taco’ is framed by the poster format, which needlessly reiterates it. Then, various editors have added layers to the image mocking this pointless

repetition. The re-sharing, remediation and reiteration of the original image's title is exaggerated through different forms, such as the 'nobody:, x:' format or the addition of emojis. The semantic excessiveness gestures to the redundancy of participating in the image.

In these memes, semantic excessiveness is a comment on loss. Loss of the object and loss of control over production and circulation are both made explicit. In effect, they push loss to the extreme, reflecting a complete loss of agency. The more labour is added to the image, the more we lose the possibility of gaining control over it, and over anything as complex and multi-layered as image circulation online. The object has become its own external entity, but, at the same time, it has no autonomy of its own as it is a victim of accelerated rates of content consumption in the digital economy. The image itself wields no power, but instead makes visible the invisible force of the market. Therefore, it exists as a mirror to our place as individuals within the process of production.

Poor images invite us to reflect on them as an object whose production we have access to, but no control over. The purposefully-poor image exaggerates all the material markers of human intervention that an image could potentially acquire throughout its life as a circulated text. In this way, it differentiates itself from the genuine poor image as it exercises control over its degradation, and acts as a commentary on the loss of the object. The making explicit of the poverty of the image is crucial to poor images conveying a representation of alienation. As stylistic elements become a recurring feature of the genre, their association to objective alienation is reinforced. It is how the alienated aesthetic is formed. Next, I turn to how the aesthetic elements of the purposefully-poor image are used to convey the *mood* or feeling of alienation.

VII. SUBJECTIVE ALIENATION IN PURPOSEFULLY-POOR IMAGES

Figures 3.9 and 3.10 exemplify how the narrativisation of subjective alienation is conveyed through aesthetic elements unique to the purposefully-poor image. Both images display signs of being heavily edited and circulated, as made evident by their grainy aspect and poorly cropped format. The colours of the images are harsh and vivid but in an off-putting and unnatural way. The individuals depicted in the image bear little resemblance to actual individuals. Excessive filtering transforms them into faded copies of themselves through objectification. Elements are both added and taken away, such as the hastily drawn tears as represented by the blue lines emerging from the man's eye in figure 3.9, or the poor cropping of figure 3.10 that cuts off the bottom text. The text overlayed on both pictures is in the top text/bottom text format of image macros, but scribbled out in black and written over.



a. 10

b. 9

Figure 3: Purposefully-poor images referencing feelings of alienation.

Editing and re-writing is made explicit in these images, but instead of producing semantic abundance such as in figures 2.6, 2.7 and 2.8, there is still a coherent statement in each that builds on the original text, hijacking its grammar to turn each into a reflection on human existence. Figure 3.9 states ‘I ain’t never seen a promising escape from material suffering, It’s always all of em gotta be an endless pursuit of sensation yielding nothing of permanence’, and figure 3.10, ‘Does anyone know if we have to keep going tomorrow’. However, the way the text interjects into the original utterance is unnatural. It throws off the symmetry of the image and creates a jagged, abnormally paced sentence. While figure 3.10 does use the impact font of the original meme, figure 3.10 does not go that far to reproduce the original image, preferring its own font. Both images draw attention to their process of re-writing, showing agency at the level of interjection and hijacking over the image.

The presence of material markers of the process of production in the immaterial form of the digital image asserts an absolute difference between physical encounter and the object itself. Returning to Berardi’s definition of alienation as ‘a sense of loss felt by consciousness when faced with an object in the context of capitalist domination’, purposefully-poor images serve here as a site to confront an image within the context of digital capitalism, but also as a medium through which one can express feelings about this encounter.²⁸ As stated, subjective alienation is felt because of objective alienation, but not all who experience alienation will encounter it as such. In the above images, alienation is felt as a dissonance from reality. The images perform the feeling of having been removed from their original context of production. There is

a helplessness and despair to them, attempting to speak out but trapped in their deteriorated state. Even the more recent text is still trapped behind a filter. However, this is not an act of resignation, but one of mediation. It is through the aesthetics of alienation that the feeling of alienation can be conveyed.

Dissonance and Subjectivity in the Purposefully-Poor Image

In figures 4.11 and 4.12, dissonant states are evoked through the use of grainy, blurred textures and glitch imagery. Figure 4.11 describes ‘I’m Gonna Fucking [tv static] Disease’. Underneath the title, a roughly drawn emoji-style face with darkly underlined eyes is smoking a cigarette. Over the drawing is superimposed a grey, randomly pixelated frame that evokes tv static. The same tv static is used as part of the ‘symptoms’ of the disease listed underneath the image. Here, the subjective feeling is entirely described in the rugged, discontinuous state evoked by the tv static, while words are completely ignored. As a result, the mood of this image is linguistically indescribable because there are no words present on the image to describe it. Instead, the impact of this image depends on social codification about the *feeling* of the image of tv static.

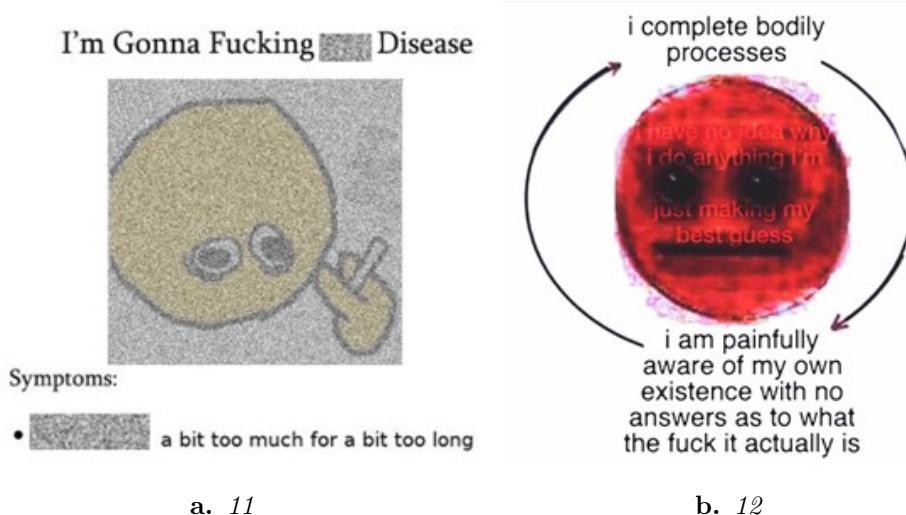


Figure 4: Dissonant states in memes.

Similarly, figure 4.12 contains a deteriorated face with a textual overlay. It has a white background and places the face at its centre with two shoddily drawn curved arrows on either side of it making up a circle, each pointing to a statement at the top and bottom of the image. The first text reads ‘i complete bodily processes’ and the second ‘i am painfully aware of my own existence with no answers as to what the fuck it actually is’. In the middle,

the face is radioactive red, with huge, circular black eyes and a straight line as a mouth. Not only is the face pixelated, but certain spots around it are too. The image radiates both profound disenchantment and a sense of urgency. The facial expression itself is passive, but the deterioration is so apparent that it becomes active. For sure, being aware of existence is not a restful or pleasing state for the subject of the image, but a deeply conflicting and inharmonious feeling.

Figures 4.11 and 4.12 show us how the aesthetics of alienated images have become a shorthand for subjective feelings of alienation through the popularisation of purposefully-poor images. It is only on the basis of a collective social alienation produced under digital capitalism that we are able to use the aesthetics of individual subjective alienation. The aesthetics of the purposefully-poor image may start at its conception, but the entire process of objectification that it satirises or comments on is one that is a product of constant, collective circulation. The products of this process of objectification, poor images, bounce around the internet until they become a recognisable genre. It is here that purposefully-poor images mobilise them for the purpose of narrativising subjective alienation. This active, autonomous process of astheticisation thus grasps at something that is collectively ungraspable. Purposefully-poor images foreground how collective alienation has taken on aesthetic form beyond just the formulation of individualised structures of feeling.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Online, the meme economy is part of a larger logic. The digital economy works relentlessly to incorporate the labour of prosumers into its circulatory logics. Indeed, the participatory ethic has replaced the protestant work ethic. Producers, creators and editors of images are the very backbone of the cultural production model currently underpinning digital capitalism. However engrained they might be in the circuitry of the machine, their capacity to speak through images is less than passive. Indeed, their ability to disguise agency within mutability is what gives the producers and circulators of poor images their power. Through their participation in the flows of capital, image producers stand firmly rooted within the production process in its stage of infinite objectification. It is here that they find agency. In this context, meme-ing gives rise to its own logics of circulation based on cultural capital and ironic literacy. Purposefully-poor are not poor images that Steyerl writes about in terms of being deteriorated from their own process of transmission, but rather ones that are made to look bad on purpose. They are no longer poor images. They have lost the aura of the poor image by trying to recreate them mechanically. Images that are poor by design, such as in the style of Internet Ugly, contain more cultural capital than images that are poor through

deterioration. In contrast, a poor image is one circulated by capital-poor actors and that has not acquired an ironic, reflexive façade that allows it to be valorised by the digital cultural economy.

In every instance of editing and remixing that contributes to the degradation of the image, there is a cacophony of voices speaking out to us. The interruption, hijacking and deformation of images as it manifests in purposefully-poor images reflects this collective participation ethic. The political reality of digital image is that swarm circulation and its resulting cultural and semiotic mutations enable new forms of aestheticisation. This process constantly generates new aesthetic forms that can potentially mobilise the affective intensity that Steyerl describes such images as holding. The alienated aesthetic is one of these. Purposefully-poor images bear witness to the subjective dissociation alienation instigates. It is a dissociation that operates at such a corporeal level that we have forgotten how to mediate it, cognitively or linguistically. However, by using the detritus of the signs and symbols that circulate in the digital cultural economy, we can draw up a picture of this disconnection. What is then produced is an aesthetic representation of the encounter between subjective and objective alienation. The alienated aesthetic is a new mode of cultural production only made possible by the logics of digital capitalism. It may not last long, but it opens a window in time to make aesthetic encounters with the representation of alienation possible.

luciechateau@gmail.com

NOTES

- ¹Steyerl 2009.
²Steyerl 2012.
³Navas 2012.
⁴De Zeeuw 2019, Douglas 2014 and Galip 2021.
⁵Menkman 2020, 54.
⁶Steyerl 2012, 42.
⁷Steyerl 2012, 38.
⁸Steyerl 2009.
⁹Steyerl 2012, 40.
¹⁰Menkman 2020.
¹¹Steyerl 2009, 32.
¹²SeeUrls for the origin of the figures.
¹³Douglas 2014 and Galip 2021.

- ¹⁴Allebach 2019.
¹⁵Busta 2021.
¹⁶Ella Shohat 2002; Greenberg 1939.
¹⁷Bakhtin 2004.
¹⁸Ngai 2012.
¹⁹De Zeeuw 2019.
²⁰De Zeeuw 2019, 122.
²¹Douglas 2014.
²²Douglas 2014, 336.
²³Galip 2021.
²⁴Marx 1959, 28.
²⁵Marx 1959, 30.
²⁶Marx 1959, 29.
²⁷Berardi 2009, 23.
²⁸Berardi 2009, 23.

REFERENCES

- Allebach, Nathan. 2019. “How Brand Twitter Grew Up.” *Vulture* (see URLs).
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2004. “Rabelais and His World.” In *Literary theory, an anthology (1965)*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, second, 686–694. Blackwell.
- Berardi, Franco. 2009. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Busta, Caroline. 2021. “The internet didn’t kill counterculture – you just won’t find it on Instagram.” *Document Journal* (see URLs), vol. January.
- Douglas, Nick. 2014. “It’s Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic.” *Journal of Visual Culture* (see URLs) 13 (3): 314–333.
- Ella Shohat, Robert Stam. 2002. “Narrativising Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics.” Chapter 3 of *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, second, 37–59. London: Routledge.
- Galip, Idil. 2021. “Memes, Irony and Ugliness.” *Institute of Network Cultures* (see URLs).
- Greenberg, Clement. 1999 [1939]. “Avant Garde and Kitsch.” In *Allikas: Art and its Histories: A Reader*, edited by Steve Edwards, 211–216. Yale University Press.
- Marx, Karl. 1959. *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Menkman, Rosa. 2020. *Beyond Resolution*. Institutions of Resolution Disputes.
- Navas, Eduardo. 2012. *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling*. Ambra Verlag.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2012. *Our aesthetic categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. MA: Harvard University Press.
- Steyerl, Hito. 2009. “In Defense of the Poor Image.” *E-flux Journal* 10 (11): 1–9.
- . 2012. *The Wretched of the Screen*. New York, NY: Sternberg Press.
- Zeeuw, Daniel De. 2019. “The profane media logic of anonymous imageboard culture.” Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam (see URLs), Amsterdam.

URLS

Nathan Allebach, 'How Brand Twitter Grew Up', 2019:

<https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/brand-twitter-jokes-history>

Caroline Busta, 'The internet didn't kill counterculture ...', 2021:

<https://www.documentjournal.com/2021/01/the-internet-didnt-kill-counterculture-you-just-wont-find-it-on-instagram/>

Figures 2.6 and 2.7:

<https://elytrians.tumblr.com/post/651713515335434240/adhd-to-adhd-communication>

Figure 2.8:

https://reddit.com/r/ontheledgeandshit/comments/ln1w80/if_socialism_was_a_taco/

Figure 3.9:

<https://reusablewaterbottles.tumblr.com/post/663090000433446912>

Figure 3.10:

<https://instagram.com/p/CTfrmR6ob9D>

Figure 4.11:

<https://toastwiki.tumblr.com/post/654547579676295168>

Figure 4.12:

<https://instagram.com/thisisafleshprison>

Idil Galip, 'Memes, Irony and Ugliness', 2021:

<https://networkcultures.org/viralimageculture/2021/12/17/memes-irony-and-ugliness/>

Daniel De Zeeuw, 'The profane media logic ...', 2019:

<https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=c0c21e79-4842-40ef-9690-4d578cca414b>

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 Lucie Chateau

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.