**LEMOS MORAIS — Data aesthetics**

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**Data Aesthetics, Old and New**

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Two years ago, a New Aesthetic was announced by Bruce Sterling in a widely circulated and debated text published on *Wired* magazine: ‘An Essay on the New Aesthetic’. This aesthetic is, for him, as significant as any of our past avant-gardes: ‘the New Aesthetic is one thing among a kind: it’s like early photography for French Impressionists, or like silent film for Russian Constructivists, or like abstract-dynamics for Italian Futurists’ (Sterling, 2012). New Aesthetics can also be understood as a ‘collaborative attempt to draw a circle around several species of aesthetic activity—including but not limited to drone photography, ubiquitous surveillance, glitch imagery, streetview photography, 8-bit net nostalgia’ (Battles, 2008). It is concerned with documenting a contemporary phenomenon of ‘eruption of the digital into the physical’ (Sterling, 2012). A new language and sensibility have been identified in the intersection of humans and their machines, one that is related directly to the visual coding and translation of machinic interferences, glitches, and noise to the augmented field of human perception, which is enabled by pervasive digital media.

As in the case of any avant-garde, the New Aesthetic was first identified and presented by a cluster of young artists, led by James Bridle, a British computer programmer and designer who coined the term and developed the concept by doing content curation in his Tumblr page, http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/. He refuses to identify the New Aesthetic with a movement, however, stating that it ‘may be considered a work, a conversation, a performance, an experiment, and a number of other things (although, please, not a movement)’ (Bridle, 2013). Despite all his efforts to refuse being labeled as the founder of an artistic current, his Tumblr page became a classic contemporary work of digital curation as an art form. It basically is a gathering point of images and information about instances in which the digital becomes physically embodied, trying to raise awareness of the physical reality of information networks, together with 3-D printed objects or sculptures reminiscent of pixelated works. The objects portrayed point toward the material embodiments of data networks, ranging from satellites and drones to cellphones.

The power of observation is here more important than the power of creation. The various technological affordances present in digital media are reshaping our relation to the material world, creating the conditions for the emergence of *immaterial physicality*: ‘a transfer instantiating the immaterial in a physical form, a “print-out” whose tangibility then becomes the operative dimension in asserting the presence of an immaterial, digital, “information space”’ (Betancourt, 2013). The informational structure and logic of computational code ‘leaks’ into visual/digital culture, which is then translated into sensuous matter, pregnant with immaterial physicalities.

Whenever the New Aesthetic is mentioned, particularly in reference to the work of James Bridle, we are faced with a direct engagement with the cultural and political outputs of digital networks: their noise, visual identity, clear and/or obscure applications, and agendas. What is artificial blends with what is natural in such an intimate way that the New Aesthetic becomes a perfect example of Donna Haraway’s *naturecultures*: collective expressions created and distributed by a network of post-cyborg agents living in a world of pervasive and invisible prosthetics, in which machinic species are equivalent to the material-semiotic assemblages of biological bodies. If ‘the machinic and the textual are internal to the organic and vice versa in irreversible ways’ (Haraway, 2003, 15), then so is their aesthetic. The work of James Bridle is iconic in regards to a New Aesthetic that represents the technological properties of the digital by accumulating virtual traces of material networks. By documenting and curating various examples of immaterial physicalities and bringing the ‘digital’ into the ‘physical’ in an automated and mechanic way, data aesthetics shape reality according to the fluid possibilities of the virtual, organically and meticulously. This article examines the inner workings and cultural implications of data aesthetics, and the ways in which digital curation and network dynamics become tools for a critical engagement with the world, connecting us to our physical landscapes in an unprecedented way, while redefining our perception and experience of time and space.

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