Hito Steyerl: Circulation, Access and Value

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 3–4; discuss December 8. “In Defense of the Poor Image,” e-flux journal 10 (November 2009).

Before reading:

Steyerl writes about images moving through unequal systems of distribution. Her poor image is more than a pixelated appearance. The omitted middle sections discuss film archives, privatization and the promise of an imperfect cinema. The selection keeps opportunities for participation beside the commercial conditions that shape them. Juan García Espinosa’s imperfect cinema broadens participation rather than making technical polish its sole standard.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied PDF, page 1; section 4, page 6; section 5, pages 7–8; section 6, page 8. Omitted sections are marked. Footnote indicators are omitted; consult the full course copy for notes.

Source text: 547 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming.

[Passage omitted.]

In some way, the economy of poor images corresponds to the description of imperfect cinema, while the description of perfect cinema represents rather the concept of cinema as a flagship store. But the real and contemporary imperfect cinema is also much more ambivalent and affective than Espinosa had anticipated. On the one hand, the economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. But this does not mean that these opportunities are only used for progressive ends. Hate speech, spam, and other rubbish make their way through digital connections as well. Digital communication has also become one of the most contested markets – a zone that has long been subjected to an ongoing original accumulation and to massive (and, to a certain extent, successful) attempts at privatization.

[Passage omitted.]

But, simultaneously, a paradoxical reversal happens. The circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema – to create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams. In the age of file-sharing, even marginalized content circulates again and reconnects dispersed worldwide audiences.

The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy. It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools. By drifting away from the vaults of cinema, it is propelled onto new and ephemeral screens stitched together by the desires of dispersed spectators.

[Passage omitted.]

The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. In short: it is about reality.

Vocabulary:

- **Resolution:** The amount of visual detail represented.
- **Circulation:** The routes through which images move between people and systems.
- **Hierarchy:** An arrangement of unequal status or power.
- **Commodification:** Organizing something as a product or source of exchange value.
- **Exploitation:** Benefiting from another person's work or participation under unequal conditions.
- **Aura:** Here, a term Steyerl reworks around the copy's movement and temporary connections. Compare this with Benjamin's account of an original's presence and history.
- **Lumpen proletarian:** Steyerl uses this class term figuratively for an image with low status in a hierarchy.
- **Originary original:** The supposed first source from which copies descend.

Discuss:

- Where does the same route permit participation and commercial control? Explain a mechanism, rather than treating the two as separate good and bad effects.
- Use an image you can actually inspect. What can you establish about its circulation, and what remains unknown?
- How does your experience of Godard differ from a clip circulating on a phone? Distinguish a designed visual effect from evidence of a file's transmission history.

Connection:

Kissick asks whether deliberate limits on visibility can make a different kind of exchange possible.

Full source / further reading.

Printable handout:

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