

Ideas in their Becoming: On Low Quality Video Edits - By Tam Lines (Audio Produced as Tam Lin)

I have been struggling to make this piece. My body escapes me, tapping and swiping with practiced dexterity to open up the distraction machines, often before I consciously register what I am doing. A gymnast of self-sabotage, when the webpage or newsfeed opens to me, lying in a bemused, agitated daze, I rarely feel excited by what I see. My relationship to the feed is subliminal, driven less by what I actively want than by a quick and passive aesthetic satisfaction.

One stock phrase I often come across at the top of a YouTube comment feed is, "I am a simple man, I see a video by [x author], and I click on it." While expressing support for the creator, it also hints at the non-verbal Pavlovian relationship between user and content. This comment rings truer to my relationship with my screens than if it said "I found that video very interesting, it reminds me of such and such..." The reality is that I am usually not that active.

The spectacle of social media appears more as a theatre of affect, in which videos and images run through us, triggering satisfaction, overstimulation, or apathy – in most cases, passive consumption. In 2014 Mark Fisher wrote that,

"Producing the new depends upon certain kinds of withdrawal [...] but the currently dominant form of socially networked cyberspace, with its endless opportunities for micro-contact and its deluge of YouTube links, has made withdrawal more difficult than ever before." [Mark Fisher - Ghosts of my Life]

It is hard to even write about online media, since these videos exist within the distraction machines of YouTube, TikTok, etc., all of which pull and flatten my attention, so I forget what I am even looking for. I am reminded of Doctor Who's The Silence, the monster which I forget as soon as it leaves my field of vision, but which continues to influence my behaviour, unbeknown to myself.

Certain pieces of media stick with me though, calling me back to bask in their specific audiovisual texture. Over the past months, I find myself drawn back to a YouTube video titled "[now that would have been interesting](#)", a low-quality edit of a scene from The Sopranos. In the scene, Tony and Carmela berate their apathetic son AJ for a serious car accident he's caused, meanwhile AJ's dissociative, existential responses ("Death just shows the ultimate absurdity of life.") further rile up his parents. The exposure of the shots has been turned up to a brightness that begins to obscure the details of the scene. The video is pixellated, the audio crunchy and compressed. Ambient chimes play throughout, slowly becoming louder and more distorted, occasionally threatening to swallow the dialogue. As certain words are said by the characters, a stock image representation of that word appears, a half-friendly, half-menacing, "illustration" of what is happening.

Another video, "[dj Khaled fibre optic cable core](#)", strikes a similar chord, applying lens glare and Aphex Twin's Selected Ambient Works vol. 2 to DJ Khaled's social media videos. Words from Khaled's awkward and out-of-context exclamations ("Tell them to bring out the lobster!") are isolated, pitched down, and echoed, accompanied again by stock images.

On Instagram, I come across a [reel of a child in Ireland](#), in which the boy explains he is weighing down his trampoline before storm Isha. Again, words like "rope" and "block" are repeated an octave lower, accompanied by fairy-like chimes and colourful stock images. Overdubbed voices give words of encouragement ("Good idea!", "You heard the lad!"), accompanied by smiling emojis.

These videos fit a small online trend, sometimes dubbed noun-core for its repetition of certain words, other times called "lobotomy-core" or "fibre-optic-cable-core". The way these videos are categorised is not particularly important, nor the specific rules and styles that they follow. Many of these videos don't even appeal to me, resorting to in-jokes or reference humour. But the ones I find appealing usually say something like this in the video description:

"uhhh i do not know who made this video or where its from, i just found it on twitter"

"I haven't uploaded in a while so I cranked this video out today. It doesn't really have any soul to it but I think its good enough for what it is."

"made this like a week ago but forgor to upload because i thought I would finish it"

These clips have a looseness and disregard for quality that makes their creators dismiss them out of hand. The authors themselves seem distracted, non-committal, but somewhere in their roughshod approach is an affect that tickles something in my subconscious. Maybe it's because it does not conform to what we think of as good or worthwhile, and maybe it's because I relate to their distraction.

Cute

These videos pull me backwards to my tween online experiences, watching camcorder vlogs in 144p, faces talking directly to me from the screen. Emerging from the digital murk, words are highlighted as if to teach them to me for the first time, like the alphabet chart on my Year 1 classroom wall.

At Somerset House's "Cute" exhibition, I encounter a room curated by musician Hannah Diamond, [designed to elevate the aesthetics of a "girl's sleepover"](#). Pink carpets, covered with pink bean bags, set the scene for a video playlist of plasticky hyper-pop. Here girlhood is presented as utopian and transgressive, rather than something to be grown out of, a new form of futurism mixed with a semi-ironic fetishisation of the most synthetic of commodities.

Cuteness is often defined by a power dynamic, in which an aesthetic object is diminutive, weak, and infantile, able to be physically manipulated, sometimes abused, by the subject who experiences it as cute. Similarly, the clips of *The Sopranos* I watch have their edges rounded off, the dialogue clipped into cute, satisfying earworms. In the process, the clips stop speaking to the complex interpersonal fiction of the show. The word "window" is accompanied by an image of a window, and the imagery leaves the diegesis of the scene. The result is simultaneously dissociative and cute: the collapse of context isolates the viewer, putting a barrier between them and the scene, meanwhile the words and images begin to address the viewer directly. Sianne Ngai notes that cuteness often "revolves around the fantasy of a commodity addressing its "guardian" in [a] one-on-one, intimate manner..."

Watching these videos, I wonder if I am the one being cutesified, protected and manipulated. Presented with obscured, confusing, sometimes violent worlds I am unable to intervene in, deep warm words emerge to reassure me. "Lobster", okay nice, at least I have that. I feel like I am being cooed back to sleep – "nonono, don't look at that. It's okay."

Is this eerie cuteness opening new worlds or coddling me? In the noise, bloom, and pixels I sense the blistering texture of where we are and may still go to. I imagine myself at year 0, idealisms waiting to be formed, without the "pervasive mood" of capitalist realism. The options feel open, waiting to be grasped. But I wonder if I can break out of the stupor and reach for them.

Poor Image

At the time Hito Steyerl coined the term ‘poor image’, Apple’s hyperclean and minimal aesthetics of white, chrome, and Helvetica reigned supreme. ‘Digital’ implied HD 2K, crystal clear legibility and intuitive user interfaces. The poor image presented a contrasting account of digital aesthetics, “mock[ing] the promises of digital technology. 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.”

The Poor Image is borne of the internet, despite the best efforts of the companies presiding over our screentime.

This degraded media potentially stands outside capitalist dream economies of luxury products and technological progress, but Steyerl warns that the poor image risks being subsumed by “an information capitalism thriving on compressed attention spans”. We see the poor image increasingly used in marketing, such as in the campaign for Charli XCX’s recent ‘brat’ album, which features cover art of intentionally pixellated plain text on a lime-green background. With a “brat generator”, users are encouraged to make their own poor-quality text images to be uploaded across social media, boosting the profile of Charli XCX’s album, showing that the rough aesthetics and decentralised communication paths of the Poor Image can easily be channelled for streaming revenues and personal clout.

I come across degraded content in the state of distraction, endless “micro-contact”. I dutifully file crunchy, chaotic smartphone footage overlaid with cartoon sound FX into a folder called “Good Ordinary Content”. The clips I return to are half-formed, their content and context disintegrating, leaving space for something new. Steyerl tells me, “the poor image tends towards abstraction: it is [an] idea in its... becoming”. These clips dissolve into a blur, hinting at aesthetics not quite grasped.

stuplimity

Ngai, writing on the exhaustive practices found in works by Modernist writers Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein, argues that through the extreme repetition of expressing one idea through dozens of syntactical variations, these authors instil their audience with a,

“‘temporary paralysis’ [that] is not merely a state of passivity; rather, [bearing] some resemblance to what Stein calls ‘open feeling,’ a condition of utter receptivity in which difference is perceived (and perhaps even ‘felt’) prior to its qualification or conceptualization.”

In other words, the boring, irritating and alienating in Modernist writing shifts how we perceive language and meaning, from clearly defined symbolic order, towards something different. Ngai dubs this process ‘stuplimity’, a portmanteau of sublimity and stupor, a fruitful numbing of certain interpretive tendencies by an excess of words, imagery, or objects. The quantitative excess of syntax in the ‘stuplime’ gives way to semiotic breakdown, demanding I take alternate routes to making meaning.

In the controlled and abstracted settings of modernist theatre, experimental poetry, and white cube galleries, ‘stuplimity’ may trigger profound alienations but in the commercialised, algorithmic cyberspaces we more commonly access, our stupor is driven by bad actors. The exhaustion I feel from doomscrolling does not leave me with an ‘open feeling’, rather, the space of meaning opened up by online stuplimity is quickly filled with feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and an urge to buy and produce.

The videos I keep returning to invert Ngai’s stuplimity. Instead of paragraphs in which the same idea is rephrased from dozens of angles, a whole scene is reduced into a single word, a strange texture to sit in.

Stupid content

If someone found me watching “now that would be interesting” I would quickly dismiss it as just a ‘dumb video’. My favourite videos, tweets, and podcasts speak fluently in ‘dumb-clever’, playfully adopting a voice of ignorance, revelling in the rhythms of digital colloquialisms.

It’s worth noting that the language around stupidity is rooted in a sense of superiority, enabling the rational subject to condescend to and discriminate against what they consider their intellectual inferior. It is also important to note that many of the terms we use to describe stupidity are rooted in eugenic experiments which were intolerant of mental and physical disability and neurodivergence. Meanwhile dumb’s usage as a synonym for ‘stupid’ stems from an association made between muteness, inferior intellect, and degeneracy.

In the videos I return to, comedy and unease emerge from the aesthetics of reduced faculties – words repeat, images become harder to make out, things don’t occur with a discernible logic. Simulating cognitive breakdown for uncomfortable and comedic effect sometimes earns these videos the label “lobotomy-core”, a tag they can only carry by maintaining ironic distance from the widespread abuse enacted by medical institutions in recent history.

Reclaiming discriminatory language could act to celebrate forms of art and communication that was controlled and stamped out in disciplinary institutions. At the same time, 'playing dumb' may only reassert tacit feelings of superiority over those we deem mentally inferior.

Moving outside of language and rationality as we know it, utopian dreamscapes may slowly shape. Irony can disintegrate here, leaving space for earnest searching. Sublimity in the texture of a laptop speaker, meaning crumbling away, a buzzing void to house something new.