Naomi Even-Aberle

VCFA 3rd Semester - 1st Mailing

Reading: *In Defense of the Poor Image* by Hito Steyerl

Annotated Bibliography

In Defense of the Poor Image written by Hito Steyerl in 2009 for the online *E-flux* journal, analyzes the post-financial crisis contemporary world characterized by the networked digital culture of the Internet (Aikens 7). Steyerl traces the economy of poor images, how their usage has developed and is perpetuated, and how their status within a certain hierarchy of pictures is designated. While Steyerl evaluates the poor image from a cinematic and film perspective, a parallel can be drawn between the poor image and the larger contemporary semiotic digital economy.

Steyerl defines the poor image as "a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is...an errant idea, an itinerant image...compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution" (Steyerl 1). Poor images stray away from their original purpose, and their lineage, traveling from place to place, person to person, platform to platform, and as such become characterized by their travels. The poor image is situated within a digital hierarchy, ranked and valued based on resolution. As the image is shared, abstracted, and manipulated the image loses its resolution both physically and

metaphorically by becoming a user generated product of the digital culture. This modification of the image is enhanced and encouraged by technological culture, allowing each new user to re-assign value, meaning, or heritage before sharing and passing the image along.

The poor image occupies a hierarchically lower position in relation to other higher-resolution versions, with the cinematic image at the top of the scale. Characterized by very low resolution, poor images are not considered as important as those with guaranteed high rates of visuality, such as cinematic 35mm film, photographic large format, and high definition video (Steyerl 2). Take for example the contemporary meme. A meme is generally a humorous image, video, or piece of text that is copied, manipulated, and spread rapidly by users across the internet. A meme is more commonly seen, interacted with, and abstracted than any other image, and yet the resolution is by far below industry standards; but despite its low resolution the meme is highly reflective of its contemporary culture.

Resolution is not the only indicator of value, Steyerl also draws connections to the brand of an image, and how the presentation of an image can affect our perceptions. Filmmaker Harun Farocki, in a 2007 interview for *Senses of Cinema*, insists that the camera records and the maker assigns the value and meaning. "We humans are not machines...our look is subjective...the camera is the machine, but we are not" (Farocki 2). Farocki mimics Steyerl's insistence on the artist's ability to assign value and perspective to an image over

and over again. In the case of the poor image its value is re-energized, and re-assigned by the sheer number of global people, geographies, and cultures that continue to manipulate, edit, cut, paste, and share the images. Their actions speak to a larger global phenomenon of semiotic digital access and participation.

With acceleration, more and more consumers (both professional and non-professional) began adopting traditional cinematic industry standards as an assurance of top-notch visuality or image quality (Steyerl 3). As the dependence on high-resolution images became a fetish, cinematic industry standards started to seep into other industries, causing an inaccessibility to various mediums, such as TV broadcast channels, mainstream media, independent films, and state sponsored media. Independent films were heavily affected by this fetishized image standard, and experienced missing images or an invisibility altogether. As the value of producing and participating in culture as a commodity became more expensive, industries such as independent films were forced to create an "underground of alternative archives and collections" (Steyerl 4). This consumer driven economy created an unintentional counter-archive within the larger cinematic industry (Mark 69). A counter-archive which was a set of historical constructs, knowledge, and memories that were collected, stored, and recorded; knowledge that was undervalued and overlooked by the majority industries. This division of commercial vs. noncommercial and professional vs. non-professional media resulted in a new economy of poor images.

Poor images are poor because they were not important enough to be classified within the traditional cinematic standards, and therefore were disregarded as culturally valuable. These poor images are appropriations upon appropriations and it is through their displacement and possession that the lack of resolution becomes a signifier of the affective condition of the crowd (Steyerl 6). Poor images can circumvent certain codified and commodified industry traditions as well as provide a means for critique against existing traditions and structures of visual language. They subvert the elitist standard as well as help build foundations to understand visual mean-making with a digital culture.

This shift from state-sponsored media production to free-market media production and the subsequent privatization of media production was accelerated by neoliberal restructuring, advancements in digital technology, and postcolonial restructuring of nation states, their cultures and their archives. With the development and advancement of technology including Internet radio, television, and emerging computer technologies, a new information economy formed. Information was a commodity and now had a tangible financial worth within the larger economic sphere. The social and economic transformations of the commodification of data and the construction of a media public sphere created a means in which media and information could be exploited and commodified (Gillette 130). As nations developed tools and resources to exploit media, a global network of digital representations of national agendas emerged. Influencing the spread and dissemination of poor

images.

As Kodwo Eshun, writer, theorist, and filmmaker argued, poor images thrived within the void left between traditional cinematic standards, available resources, and the transition from state-sponsored media to free-global-market media. As media privatization and information commodification set in, smaller organizations and individuals were phased out of traditional cinematic resources, and increasingly relied upon piracy, copying, and lower-resolution images. This shift in the commodification of intellectual content gave rise to a new economy of the poor image (Kodwo 6).

As the circulation of poor images became widespread and popular, the lines between consumer and producer became blurred. When the genealogy, source of origin, and culture of an image are in constant flux, who is the author and who is the audience? In The Third Cinema manifesto, *For an Imperfect Cinema*, by Juan García Espinosa written in Cuba in the late 1960s, Espinosa combined a rejection of commercial and perfect cinema, with a call for an imperfect cinema. Espinosa presented the imperfect cinema as the means for undermining the cultured and elitist audience. "Imperfect cinema is no longer interested in quality or technique…it is an act of social justice-the possibility for everyone to make film" (Espinosa 24-26). That is, the division of labor within cinema is undercut. Espinosa also believed that the advances in digital technology would subvert the elitist and traditional cinematic standards and industry. Resulting in a cinematic practice that was influenced and directed by

the people (Steyerl 6). Imperfect Cinema, Espinosa continued, casts out any public displays of exclusivity, both individually and commercially (Espinosa 24-26). It brings together art, life, science, and contemporary culture in all its imperfections.

Imperfect cinema mirrors the economy of poor images by blurring the distinctions between artist and viewer, and integrates the everyday. As the economy of poor images continues to grow, its usage creates a network of visually compromised, pixelated, ripped, pirated, stolen, and blurred images. Unlike imperfect cinema the network in which poor images are created, manipulated, and shared encompasses a stage full of multicultural identities, commodification, and national agendas (Steyerl 6-7). As digital platforms such as Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram gain popularity they engage the users in both consumerism and production of content, blurring even further the lines between authors, editors, critics, translators, and cultural bearers. The content created within the network of poor images includes incredible amounts of experimental, artistic, and independent thought, but are also full of imperfections, political agendas, and advanced commodification techniques.

The study of the poor image can be seen as a way to study shifts in the global economic digital semiotic production. By studying the process in which we assign meaning and value to images, we can begin to understand the non-linguistic processes that images undergo. In addition, through the poor image we can study how diverse cultures interpret and translate semiotic

imagery and re-assign values independently (Alberro). As Steyerl argues "poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly. They lose matter and gain speed. But they also express a condition of dematerialization, shared not only with the legacy of conceptual art but above all with contemporary modes of semiotic production" (Steyerl 8). Poor images are complex semiotic and cultural manifestations that reflect the ever changing reality of the times they are produced. Poor images simultaneously break down conformist information circuits, work against the fetishized value of high resolution, and contribute to a cycle of counter-archiving of image and information capitalism.

Works Cited

Alberro, Alex, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

Aikens, N. and Fletcher, A. 'Introduction' in Too Much World – *The films of Hito Steyerl*, edited by N. Aikens. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014: 7-12.

De Genaro, Ednei, and Hermano Callou. "Keep the Horizon Open: An Interview with Harun Farocki." *Senses of Cinema*, no. 79, July 2016, pp. 1–16.

Gillette, Frank and Ira Schneider, 'Wipe Cycle,' *TV as a Creative Medium*, New York: Howard Wise Gallery, 1969.

Espinosa, Julio García, For an Imperfect Cinema, trans. Julianne Burton, *Jump Cut*, no. 20 (1979): 24–26.

Mark, Lisa Gabrielle., and Cornelia H. Butler. Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution. Los Angeles, Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007, pp.68-89.

Steyerl, Hito. "In De." *E-Flux*, vol. 10, Nov. 2009, pp. 1–9., www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/.