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## MEDIA AESTHETIC ENVIRONMENT OF IMAGE FORMATION

**KEYWORDS:** media aesthetics, image, imagery, bodyness, “oddly satisfying”, ASMR, haptic culture

**ABSTRACT:** This paper is devoted to the “nature of image” in the new media environment. The author re-conceptualizes the image as a basis of textual, visual and audial culture. Two factors of this revision are explained: (1) the facilitation of the complex creation and consumption of communicative unities, or artifacts (complexes of video, audio, texts and other forms), (2) the ability to capture a massive interest for new forms of imagery in social networks and the internet (a research evidence of this interest). The theory of the image, presented in the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy, is applied to the actual facts of communicative exchange allowing to identify some new directions for the development of media aesthetic phenomena. The main empirical material of the article is the growing mass interest in video and audio clips, such as *#oddlysatisfying* and ASMR. The author uses this material to confirm Nancy’s idea on the concentration of image formation in an “invisible” zone (beyond the representation of the object itself: the image is interlined, it is between sounds, it is behind pictures).

### 1. Introduction

The media aesthetic component of modern communication represents (theoretically) the intersection of aesthetic perception (of the world) and technesis (Hansen 2000) of the media environment, which supplies the “food” for the aesthetic “hunger”. Following Carsten Strathausen, the concept of “media aesthetics” combines technical, aesthetic and physical (bodyness). Strathausen offers a review of research approaches to “new media” and re-thinking of the aesthetic dimensions of the relationship between art and reality (Strathausen 2009). In his opinion, Manovich and Zielinski represent two main directions in media archeology (“genealogical” and actually “archaeological”), defining the main tasks needed to theorize the “novelty” of modern communication. Zielinski goes into media history discovering ruptures in culture and building his explanation of the new media on the epistemology of these ruptures (Zielinski 2006). Manovich shows that all the “new” (digital) culture painstakingly accumulates the previous cultural heritage (by re-organizing it in new vibrant and fully unstable matter), this is why “new media” are “meta-media” (Manovich 2001; 2002).

Manovich suggested that the nature of an image changes dramatically when a spectator (or a listener, or a reader) becomes a user. The user does not just look at the image, the user consumes it actively going in-depth into the image itself. Thus, the most significant “novelty” of the new media is related to the shift from the “regard” to the aesthetic consumption of “image-interfaces” and “image-instruments” (Manovich 2001, 189, see also Strathausen 2009, 61). This is why “bodyness” of communication does matter (Strathausen emphasizes that the word “digital” originates from the Latin word “digitus” – a finger, and this reminds us about our first (evolutionally-speaking) digital tools, see Strathausen 2009, 61).

Mark Hansen, following Bourdieu’s “practical mimesis”, noticed that embodied practices (experienced through mimetic reproduction) cannot be “translated into language”. The social role of these “mimetic skills” will be increasing in the future due to the development of technologies (Hansen used the expression “mimetic faculty”) transforming the logocentric culture (how things were organized during the long historical period of writing) into a technocentric one, where the verbal discourse will be marginalized (Hansen 2000, 52).

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht hypothesized in his book “Production of Presence” (within the framework of the so-called “new materiality”) that physical aura is important in communication, and therefore all “mediums” strive for its (this aura’s) capture, preservation, emanation (Gumbrecht 2004). For Jean-Luc Nancy, the image is interesting not as a “phenomenon”, but as an “actor”, which interacts not only with the perceiving consciousness, but with the whole temporal and spatial environment (Nancy 2005). The image should be considered, according to Nancy, not discursively, but performatively. It always produces excessive meaning (excessiveness, for Nancy, is an important feature of communication and culture in general – see Nancy 1996; 2007). The performativity of the image, thus, should be considered as the “pleasure from the image”, and not via the framework of discursive practices and discourse analysis (i. e. verbalized interpretation of the image).

For Nancy, it is important that no participant in an aesthetic exchange is a “disembodied ocular” which simply “reads the image”, but is instead “corpus sensitivus” (Nancy 2008). The image, in his opinion, is a union of “form” and “power” that drives this form (he calls it the “Eros” of form and force, their “marriage”). This Eros of the image is not comprehended cognitively, but is perceived impulsively, by those parts of the body that respond to this effect (be it “goosebumps” on the skin, or sexual arousal, or excitement, which are exactly the waves that overwhelm the “corpus sensitivus”).

Thus, a number of researchers are discussing the embodiment of communication (in the direct meaning of this word – as “flesh of communication”) in different aspects. This “bodyness” raises question not only over the development of such forms of communication exchanges (they are not “institutionalized” yet

in the history of culture), but also over their consolidation in non-written and non-textual cultural patterns.

It is important to understand the nature of the image in present-day communications. In the past, it was associated with imagination and textual, visual, musical (generally – artistic) information analysis. Nowadays, the image is formed within our “mimetic faculty”, as Hansen defines this ability. The influence of physicality (associated with facial expressions, gestures, states, movements, different physical reactions, technical operations) is included in explanations of image’s nature. At the same time, it is significant that proponents of this “new imagery” would like it to be institutionalized as a new “domain” (“a house”) of culture.)

The article proposes to illustrate the intuitions of theoreticians in the field of the philosophy of the image referring to audio and video, representations of a-narrative haptic and sonorous effects. These artifacts are combined in “oddly satisfying” and ASMR videos on Instagram and YouTube.

## **2. #oddlysatisfying: a media hybrid of psyche, corpus and techne**

The hashtag #oddlysatisfying first appeared in the Reddit.com forums in the early 2010’s and became quickly quite popular (Faramarzi 2018). This tag (usually) marks short videos representing innumerable ordinary actions that produce, nevertheless, a “sticking” effect to the viewer (e.g. when it’s impossible to stop watching these the “hypnotizing videos”). There are two main groups of “oddly satisfying” videos: (1) those with a tactile content and with muscular sensations, (2) those with sounds (noises) such as produced when glass is scratched with a coin, or when noisily chewing crispy food, etc.

Approximately at the same time as #oddlysatisfying the so-called ASMR community appeared (see the history of this community and the main sources on the topic: <https://asmruniversity.com/>, Dr. Craig Richard). ASMR stands for “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response”. The ability to create so-called “ASMR-triggers” (which aim to cause a pleasant tingling sensation in the viewer/listener’s head, to provide goosebumps, etc. – this feeling was called “oddly satisfying” or even “ASMR”) was quickly recognized as a specific art, and bloggers who dedicated their work to ASMR were entitled “ASMR-artists”.

The principal topics of ASMR and #oddlysatisfying are: whispering, gentle and quiet voices, slow soft speech (the voice timbre is quite important), special types of muffled whispers; crunching plastic or paper packaging, manipulating cellophane, bursting cellophane film-balls, tapping with nails or objects on different surfaces, lightly scratching plastic, wood and other surfaces with nails or with other objects, chewing, smacking, tongue clicking, breathing, blowing into a microphone (there is a whole series of videos dedicated to choosing the “right” 3D microphone for

ASMR), etc. All these actions can be combined in any order and can interface with a “personal attention” for the user technique (the ASMR artist uses his camera as if it were the viewer himself/herself, unwittingly involved in the action). The number of such videos can reach several millions views (for example, the popular blogger ‘Gentle Whispering’ had 21 million views for her 15-minutes video recorded in 2013, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVpfHgC3ye0>).

ASMR and #oddlysatisfying communications have been studied from a standpoint of biology, medicine, and social behavior. However, it seems significant to consider this phenomenon with respect to imagery. The user (a viewer, listener, observer) is chained to an obscure video plot that does not have the usual narrative structure. But she / he is fully involved and takes pleasure, the user’s state can be characterized by Kant’s expression of “disinterested delight”. These artifacts can be considered as “media aesthetic images” which are perceived by the “corpus sensitivus” (rather than by “disembodied oculars”).

### **3. How user’s corporeality can be converted into an image**

All art forms are addressed to human perception, and therefore to the body. But in the case of #oddlysatisfying, this physicality is included in the process of creating an image. The user’s body, his/her sensations, the signals, vibrations, “goosebumps” she/he feels – are not accessory or just “random accompaniments” of perception, they are the desired purpose of viewing, listening, or – in general terms – perceiving these types of artifacts.

For example, many of the popular #oddlysatisfying videos are manipulations of slimes (“silly-putty” – like shapeless masses). Why are millions of users ready to watch rather long (more than 10 minutes) videos, where on the screen, sometimes without any accompaniment of music or voice, blogger’s hands squash and “knead” slime, stretch it, twist, squeeze, poke it with their fingers producing a “clicking” noise? How does the user’s body get involved in the process of this contemplation, and how does it become part of the image created during the perception of such a video?

Pleasant tactile and muscular sensations considered as aesthetic experiences have never been in the zone of attention of researchers. David Parisi devoted his recent book on how haptics can be conveyed by media (he describes the history of a media invention that could do precisely that; see Parisi 2018). In the case of “slime-mania”, a simple and “ordinary” media is used (just video), it is not a special complex machine producing tactile sensations. In ASMR videos, the artist works with the camera as if it were the user, she/he brings her/his face very close to the object she/he is filming, and runs her / his fingers across the screen – but it is also just video, produced in a “personally attentive” manner. Tactile sensations are recreated in the

imagination of the viewer, and they become the image itself (the nature of the image is non-figurative sensations). In order for this image to arise, the user's physical involvement is necessary. This image of tactile sensation is not anthropomorphic nor is it subject-like. It is a physical experience. The image is exactly a physical reaction and a "cultivated pleasure". Interestingly, the creation of such an image is perceived precisely as an art form, as a talent by the viewers (according to users' comments on popular video slimers or ASMR-artists).

#### **4. Relax as art**

Calmness and peace can be valued as daily needs. However, as noted by Boris Groys, art becomes art the moment it is excluded from everyday life and "exposed" that is to say publicly displayed for viewing (listening, perception – see Groys 2008). In this sense, the significant public interest in ASMR and #oddlysatisfying videos shows that relaxation becomes a desirable state that requires from the user certain skills (a specific workout). To be "hypnotized" in front of a screen on which unfolds a strange plot, seemingly boring due to thousands of repetitions (the action is without beginning nor end, with whispering, or slime manipulation) can be considered as a condition for the public emergence of this new type of image – a "dance of sight" (Nancy). Of course, here, some will talk of depression and insomnia as the true "plagues of the 21st century". But, without going deep into mass psychology of the urbanized world, one should reflect upon the fact that the relaxation methods are moving into the field of art, skill, talent and attempts to find new methods with the help of media aesthetics. There is a new open research field: the "ergonomics" of viewing such videos, their involvement in people's everyday life (whether they watch the videos "at any time", or "at night", etc.). This article is not about digital ethnography, it seeks to understand how the feeling of relaxation and tranquility is converted into an image (and whether it is "the image of something" or the new specific features of the image nature).

#### **5. "Techne": world without words and music**

According to Bruno Latour, non-humans and humans equally participate in everyday life, and "sociality" has no intrinsic meaning (because "sociality" is not a specific domain of the world, it is world itself, where all subjects must be considered as an "ensemble"). This is why everything is "social", everything is included in a complex of connections). Latour insists on the need to "un-discourse" philosophy, offering to go from an "everything is language" position to an understanding of equality of language among a number of other forms of culture. The philosophical discussion

around technesis (see: Heidegger 1977; Simondon 1958; Kittler 1999; Latour 2005; Hansen 2000 and many others) focuses on the symbolic place of technical objects in the construction of the world and their relationship with the “non-technical” (natural, human) world. However, #oddlysatisfying allows us to consider technesis in the form of creative and object-free interactions: the technical objects and the actions achieved with them become, for the user, part of an ensemble creating a “new image”, devoid of specific features, placed in an area of “self-sufficient state”. If meditation and relaxation used to be associated with music, now music is excluded and the “ready-to-use imagery” associated with it (which expresses sadness, longing, joy, bravura, calmness, etc.) is replaced by noises (whispers, including unintelligible murmuring, smacking, crunching, rustling, etc.). The interpretation of these noises is woven into the “new figurativeness”, creating a space of co-creativity between the user and the artist.

“Vital impulse” (Bergson 1998 [1911]) applied by Gilbert Simondon to the process of creating technical objects (namely, the embodiment, the acquisition of “technical flesh” and “soul”; Simondon 1958), is also applied to explain such a complex technical form as the creation of ASMR artifacts or #oddlysatisfying videos. The pragmatism and functionalism of the “technical realm” are no more and no less than the pragmatism and functionalism of “the organic, vital, spiritualized” world (Kurtov 2014). At the same time, all technical objects included in the #oddlysatisfying ensembles lose their “technical task” and turn into tools from which the artist can extract new harmony. The “dance of sight” (“music of sight”), according to Jean-Luc Nancy, is formed here (when viewing images) without the participation of music or words.

For example, ‘Gentle Whispering’ uses an oil diffuser – a device for flavoring air with heated oil – in one of her plots. The artist works with a technical object which just performs its ordinary function (which is to diffuse the heated oil’s scent: the viewer cannot smell it, she/he can only see the vapor), however, in the context of the video, this technical object becomes part of the “hypnotic action”: it “flies” in front of the viewer’s eyes, wrapped-up in steam, participating in the creation of the illusion of tactile sensations (touches of warm soft air on the viewer’s skin). Working with such diffuser is like playing a musical instrument, and the result is a “disinterested delight”, obtained both mentally and physically. At the same time, the blogger offers her viewers a hike into a 38-minute video: “...we’re going to enjoy some relaxing hand movements 0-08:30, wooden brush sounds 08:31, hair brushing 12:10, smell some essential oils 18:34, humming steamy oil diffuser 26:00” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8jUVci17vE>). This diffuser produces a low hum, and for nearly 10 minutes spectators can listen to this “technical noise” (rather than music or words). Nancy, theorizing the “art of listening”, writes about the “music of mutual image” (“listen to what you see”). In the creation process of #oddlysatisfying artifacts, the topic of silence and specific noises is essential

to the design of a tactile-sonic image. “The technical” at the same time turns out to be a source of a significant noise on a par with a person. It confirms Latour’s thesis on the indistinguishability of humans and non-humans in actor-network ensembles.

## 6. Conclusion

Nancy believes that, even before its reflective understanding, the image creates a sensation of meeting with something pleasant, beautiful (Nancy 2005). However, perception is an area of training and development (one can talk about a “well-read” reader, an “experienced” spectator, a “good” listener – they are all advanced art consumers who have a solid cultural base that helps them learn more from reading books, listening to music or watching movies than “non-advanced” readers, viewers or listeners can). In the field of #oddlysatisfying, an a hierarchy of “advancement” has also formed. Users explore their own capabilities to obtain physical sensations from media artifacts, and they also constantly expand their search for #oddlysatisfying: what other everyday ordinary actions can cause desired sensations. Thus, one can see the “altruism” of experiences with “bodyness” (corporeality), that are related to the “a-sexuality” of these practices. In contrast to sexual culture that is firmly rooted in the depths of centuries, there is no task here to initiate or cause a sexual pleasure with its culmination. The absence of a climax such as an orgasm brings #oddlysatisfying closer to “disinterested delight” and to the perception of works of art that excite, cause various psychosomatic reactions, but are not fundamentally connected with Eros (see: Nancy 2013).

The haptic experience, demonstrated in the videos, is characterized by its infinity, by the absence of a “plot”. Therefore, one can talk about the “anti-narrative turn” in these video forms. However, in this case, the problematization of the image in the temporal (non-static – as in a movie, for example) arts becomes more complicated: this is a timeless repetition, without beginning nor end, of actions that are intended to create an image in consciousness (and closely intertwined with the physical body of the perceiver, that is, the state of the latter). How to separate the “physical state” from the aesthetic experience, which aspect of the physical sensation of pleasure is aestheticized – these are the questions. Following Lev Manovich, one can confidently speak about the very fact of such aestheticization (see also Böhme 2016).

Roland Barthes in his work “S / Z” (1970, see Barthes 1990) proposes an analysis of the narrative (the action story of Honoré de Balzac) in an a-narrative manner – these are “text walks” which aim at making the reader slowly and deeply enjoy Balzac’s story. At the end of Barthes’s “walks” there are no conclusions nor general output.

This approach (comparable to that of Russian literary critics at the beginning of the twentieth century – see Gershenzon 1908) provides a key to the “new figurativeness” in modern communication: the “slow approach” of everyday life



is a way toward “disinterested delight” (which is not aimed at achieving a “completed” objective, at reaching a “final” meaning or discovering an “absolute” truth, etc.). In the cultural practices of present-day communications, one can find many examples of the “slowness turn” (for example, “slow food”, “slow reading”, “slow running” and so on). All these practices can be viewed as a response to the challenge of increasing speed of life, which has become a universal value. Consequently, a historically significant philosophical theme such as “stopping time” (Goethe, *Faust*: “Beautiful moment, do not pass away!”) is gaining in importance. In #oddlysatisfying or ASMR “hypnotizing” videos, the conditions for “everyday routine disruption” are present.

Undoubtedly, meditation can also be considered as a widespread psychosomatic technique of aiming at the same effect. But, unlike the “religions of experience” (such as Buddhism and others), which widely practice meditation, ASMR and #oddlysatisfying videos do not turn viewers into trances, sacral states of introspection, enlightenment, purification, but to their own sensations and physicality, almost erasing the line between the “psyche” and the “corpus”. They offer users to raise their physical sensations to the level of an aesthetic experience (“disinterested delight”), which implies that they include their physical state in the “new imagery”.

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