

The use of artifacts as critical media aesthetics

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In 1961 Foucault wrote in the *First Preface to Histoire de la folie*, that the modern man and the madman no longer communicate; there is no longer a common language connecting the two; there is only silence. According to Foucault, the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason *on* madness, was able to establish itself only on the basis of such a silence:

[...] the constitution of madness as mental illness, at the end of the eighteenth century, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue, posits the separation as already acquired, and thrusts into oblivion all those imperfect words, without a fixed syntax, and a little stammered, through which the exchange of madness and reason took place.¹

Foucault stated that reason is the cultural standard against which everything is measured up. Everything that falls outside of this standard falls inside what he describes as a *void*. Yet this void constitutes culture as much as everything that culture itself is made up from. Foucault concluded that therefore, there can be no reason without madness. He set out to write an archaeology of the silence that exists between the man of reason and the man of madness, because interrogating what is outside a culture is to question a divide that constitutes a meaning in itself.²

An encounter with a madman is not the same as an encounter with a man that speaks another language; there is not *just* another syntax or semantics. Instead the madman's actions are perceived as invalid; they consist of *unaccepted* sounds, *not legitimate* information or what is *not* a message. A definition almost analogous to noise, which is often scrutinised as an undesirable, unwanted and unordered disturbance or addition to a signal of useful data. This negative definition of noise has, like madness, also a positive consequence. It helps us to define its opposite, the

¹ Foucault, M. "First Preface to *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*" (1961). trans. A. Toscano, *Pli*, no. 13, (2002): 1-10, 2

² Foucault, 2002: 3

world of meaning, the norm, regulation, goodness, beauty and so on.³

There is no unequivocal definition of noise, because in the end, what is noise and what is not noise, is a social matter. Even so, I would like to start by making a formal categorisation of noise, following Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's communication model. The reason for choosing this model is to establish a difference between the transfer of meaning and information, which is necessary to overcome the many paradoxes inherent to noise. Certainly this model has been criticized for not considering the non-linear and social aspects of human communication, but it fits with the idea of digital communication as 'non-discriminatory' in regards to the content.⁴ This provisional categorisation can help to understand art that makes use of *critical media aesthetics*.

The myth of perfect communication

Shannon and Weaver's model for communication consists of five basic steps; the transmission of information starts at the *information source*, which produces the message. A *transmitter* that encodes the messages in signals suitable for transmission, sends the signals through a *channel*; the medium used to transmit the signal from the sender to the receiver. The receiver *decodes* or reconstructs the message from the signal. The final element of the model is the *destination*, the person or machine for whom the message is intended or where the message arrives. The model 'information source-> transmitter-> channel-> receiver-> destination' that Shannon constructed also includes an arrow inserting noise, which is a sixth, dysfunctional factor.⁵ Shannon and Weaver describe noise as any interference with the original message travelling through the linear channel; it is a measure of entropy (the disorder of a system at a given time).

In Shannon's communication model, information is not only obfuscated by noise, it is also dependent upon it for understanding. Without noise, either encoded within the original message (semantic) or present from sources outside the channel (physical), there could not be a functioning channel. Noise corrupts the transparency of the medium, and serves to contextualize information; Shannon and Weaver conclude

³ Hegarty, Paul. *Noise/Music: A History*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007: 5

⁴ Lessig, Lawrence. *Code and other laws of cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

⁵ Shannon, Claude Elwood, and Warren Weaver. "The mathematical theory of communication." *Bell System Technical Journal*, vol. 27 (1948): 379-423, 623-656.

that information needs noise to be transmitted.⁶

An art of artefacts

While the communication process as described by Shannon is reasonably deterministic, this static notion is undermined by the overall addition of noise, particularly during the encoding / decoding steps (often in the form of compression), feedback and when the messages is 'corrupted' whilst in transmission (for instance due to glitches). These three interruptions involve their own technical specificities and appearances; they are the fingerprints of the medium. These medium-specific aesthetics are also often described as artifacts that obscure the original information. Accordingly, we can say that every medium has a particular set of artifacts.

The word artifact stems from the Latin words *ars* and *facere*, which put together means as much as 'artificially made', or 'made by human practice'. In traditional media theory, the term artifact refers mostly to an inaccurate, unwanted effects resulting from a (not perfectly working) technology. Attempts to use these artifacts as creative tools can be seen throughout art history and popular culture. In for instance *A COLOUR BOX* (1935), Len Lye explored the technology of film by painting and scratching the celluloid. He changed artifacts from unwanted, unaccepted and ignored noise, into tools that convey meaning. Put differently, by relaying agency and intentionality, these artifacts are no longer understood as noise originating in information theory, but are elevated to objects that find their meaning within humanities or social sciences. In the coming paragraphs I will describe two different artifacts; namely compression, and glitch to make this point clear.

Compression: infinitely pliable yet holding shape

In the attempts to make communication faster and more transparent, immediacy has become a keyword in the digital era. As a result, the transfer of information within the communication process has also been forced to change. With the help of code condensers (compressions) files are encoded into fewer bits, to arrive faster at their destination. These compressions reorganise the relations between sounds and images by scaling, reordering, decomposing.⁷ With the help of a taxonomy or

⁶ Ballard, Susan. "Information, Noise and et al." *M/C Journal*, vol. 10, no. 5 (2007).
<<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0710/02-ballard.php>> 1 May 2009.

⁷ Mackenzie, Adrien. "Codecs." In: Matthew Fuller, ed. *Software Studies*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008: 48-55,

language, compressions convert a piece of information back into a representation and in doing so, they re-visualise the obscured.

While from the start the development of new audio and video technologies were focussing on the improvement of sonic quality, by for instance the reduction of noise, recent developments have led to a reversal of this trend. Compression has become almost ubiquitous, whereas the original (RAW or WAV) recording is mostly absent and relatively obese, especially in the realms of digital music, photography and cinema. New data compression technologies, such as the mp3 data format have made it possible to distribute music easily, but in lower quality than the CD. While some artists believe that compression of their work harms it, by essentially chopping away pieces of information, other artists and theorists feel that compression is a necessary part of the character of the digital canvas. In the *Plugin Manifesto* (2004) Kronschnabl and Tomas Rawlings instruct the reader to use codecs and compression creatively; the user should investigate his tools and explore what he can do with these technologies in creative terms.⁸ While the camera and the celluloid defined the film in cinema, technologies like codecs and compression artifacts will define the material of the digital work.

An example of this exploitation can be found in the music released by the label 20kbps, which is dedicated to low compression music releases. The label advertises the extreme low of 20kbps instead of the common qualities of at least 128 kbps.⁹ Artists on this label give agency to the artifacts created by compression.

In video, compression artifacts are often recognizable as blocks or mosaic effects. The RyBN audiovisual-art collective from France makes use of such artifacts. Their *MONOCHROME* (2008) performance takes place in total darkness and consists of only black sequences extracted from various Divx movies. The saturation parameter (colour intensity) of the black video channel is linked to the sound master-volume. During the performance, the saturation becomes higher when the volume is turned up. This makes several blocks of pixels emerge from the previously black screen, acquiring its form and colour from the Divx compression codec.¹⁰

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⁸ Kronschnabl, Ana, and Thomas Rawlings. *Plug in Turn on: A Guide to Internet Filmmaking*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 2004.

⁹ The music label 20kbps can be found here: <<http://20kbps.sofapause.ch/>> 1 May 2009.

¹⁰ monochromatiq. "MONOCHROME." INCIDENT.NET | MONOCHROME | TUBE:MONOCHROME | RYBN.ORG. <<http://www.incident.net/hors/monochrome/tube-monochrome/>> 1 May 2009.

Glitch: the tipping point of failure

Whereas communication theorists are known to search for the possibility to create the ultimate, noise-free and hi-fi channel, in reality this Holy Grail is not as valuable as they hope. The excessive imposition of rules and protocols necessary for such a channel, can lead to a boring, monotonous and repetitive invention: a product with no variation, deviation or surprise. As Ernst Gombrich declared: 'however we analyse the difference between the regular and the irregular, we must ultimately be able to account for the most basic fact of aesthetic experience, the fact that delight lies somewhere between boredom and confusion.'¹¹

Defining what a glitch is, is if possible even harder than defining noise. The histories of the word glitch are many and differ per dictionary. According to The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, the term glitch stems from a writing of NASA astronaut John Glenn, dated from 1962, and since then evolved into wider usage: 'Literally, a glitch is a spike or change in voltage in an electrical current. [...] Since then *glitch* has passed beyond technical use and now covers a wide variety of malfunctions and mishaps.'¹² It seems that over the past few years the word glitch has been demoted into a figure of speech, a metaphor for all kinds of accidents involving anything erroneous.

A glitch is the most enchanting and puzzling artifact of all that reveals itself as a perceived accident, chaos, or a laceration that gives us a glimpse of a normally obfuscated machine language. Rather than creating the illusion of a transparent interface to information, the machine reveals itself. The user witnesses rags of the process through which the message is transmitted and altered by the interface. Here, the machine reminds the user of its existence. But even though the glitch or unexplainable accident can never be understood, it can still roughly be encircled. Glitches rely on the assumption of a 'normal' mode of operation. They take place on the border of a system, but appear not to follow the rules, the language or syntax of that system. They reside on the border of sense and nonsense, break and 'natural' flow, convention and the collapse thereof.

¹¹ Gombrich, Ernst Hans Josef. *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1984: 9

¹² "glitch." The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/glitch>> 27 December 2008.

A glitch is often used as a synonym for bug, but there is an essential difference between the two. Whereas bugs can be described in detail, through bug or problem reports, a glitch is that which is unknown and cannot be explained. The term glitch is generally used to describe a short-lived fault in a system, or a break from a flow within a system, which was designed to work as a *coherent entity* and to follow its set of objectives. This means that when a certain occurrence is described as a glitch, there is also a claim about the expectations of this system, most importantly its purpose, or set of objectives.

Although the glitch can take place strictly within the computational system, the majority of artifacts that are referred to as 'glitch art', are not purely computational, but spawned by a synthesis of different actors. These actors include the protocols built into the machines' hard and software, the input that makes these protocols behave in a particular way, and finally the system of reception, governed by the beliefs and expectations of the user, who cannot make sense of the outcome. This is where we can diverge between glitch art that emphasizes the procedural and glitch art that finds a point of gravitation in outcome or design.

Isn't it nice when things just (don't) work?

Just like Foucault stated, that there can be no reason without madness, flow cannot be understood without its interruption, noise without order, transparency without artifacts or glitch without a presumed function. Interruptions of the flow of our daily life make us aware of its existence and the omnipresent constructedness; it forces us to change our routines for making meaning.

The void that is inherent to both madness and artifacts, is not only used as a lack of meaning, but also as a means to move away from the traditional discourse around code, and to open it up, to understand the politics of technology. Through a void of meaning, artists can voice a critique towards the genre, interface of a medium and the expectations of the user or viewer. The glitch generates a new state, a system I would call 'Noise-speak' (as opposed to George Orwell's Newspeak). However, once understood as a new language or alternative way of representation, the essence of its glitch-being is vanished. The glitch is no longer an art of rejection, but something that is recognized as a new form (of art). As an exoskeleton of progress, the art of artifacts does not just take place on a surface; it is the very form of a new mode. The choice to accept an artifact, to welcome it as an aesthetic form, means to accept

change and to welcome a new dialectic.

The glitch transforms and redefines the normal, static aesthetics of the conventional artwork into a form of unstable utterance of counter aesthetics, a theory of destructive generativity or a *critical media aesthetics*; critical not only because the medium is in a critical state (a ruined, unwanted, not recognized, accidental and sometimes even horrendous state), but also because it offers an opportunity to voice a critique on the conventions of the medium. Through critical media aesthetics, failure has obtained a place in the narrative of evolution.

Studying glitch (art) is a frustrating endeavour because when I describe and define it, the glitch might lose all its charm. For academic comprehension it is necessary, but glitch studies requires attention to that which is outside statistics and solid models, maybe even beyond the reasoning that permeates knowledge production at large. Therefore I want to conclude by underlining the importance of practical experiments in critical media aesthetics since it cannot (yet) be captured by rigid theory. We need to embrace madness.

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