In defense of the poor image, deconstructed and re-translated

by Noor Dhanju

For this written response, I chose to translate Steyerl's text 'In Defense of the Poor Image' into a visual breakdown of her main arguments, relaying the style of Queneau's 'Exercises in style'.

In her text, Steyerl argues that images transform, mutate and circulate depending on the contexts and infrastructures around them. She discusses why a poor image, often one gathering new meaning as it's circulated, should be protected. In comparison, Queneau's book, with its 99 retellings of the same story each in a different style, parallels Steyerl's poor image, where new forms mutate existing meaning.

Where Steyerl critiques the idea of a single "authentic" or "high-quality" image, Queneau's variations show that there is no single authentic version of a narrative. Hence this felt like an interesting translation to undergo.

Defintion

low-res ghosts travel
carrying what can't afford
to stay high-quality
blurred, shared, passed along,
the world copies what it loves—
pixels as protest
poor image rising:
a small flicker on the screen
outshines its "original"

Mobility & Control

Steyerl argues that poor images[1] might be low quality, but they have the ability to circulate faster and further than high quality images, oftentimes the original. The distribution of high-quality images is controlled, lacking space for individual intervention. Poor images lack usage rules, circulate freely with space for manipulation, detached from original contexts and authors. Each level of circulation gathers a layer of intervention, whether a new crop, file type, or the resolution degrading a little each time. This loss of "aura" is not a flaw but an opportunity to escape institutional control.

The circulation of media is crucial, because what is the point of controlling the quality if no one consumes the high quality version anyways?

[1] Steyerl makes a compelling argument for what she calls the "poor image" in her text; what I found most interesting is the fact that there was a refusal to outright define what a poor image is. The reader is asked to string together comparisons and examples in order to determine the definition for themselves.

Desire

Poor images spread because people want them, such as rare films, political content, fan edits, bootlegs. Rather than protecting the high quality original, the elite institutions' curated versions of art, poor images embody collective desire, collective cultural memory, and create a cult-like following around the source material.[2]

Steyerl argues that what counts as "high quality" is shaped by institutions of power: museums, studios, corporations. Poor images challenge this hierarchy by prioritising access over polish, circulation over exclusivity.

[2]The nature of poor images can be anti-capitalistic; they go against the grain of the highly controlled markets (cinemas, galleries, official archives). When fan-edits circulate, the segments deemed most exciting by enjoyers of the original gain exposure with a new audience. The audience enjoys the modified original, albeit at the cost of the resolution.

ctivism

The poor image is a tool for resistance. Because they are easily shared and hard to police, poor images have long been important in activist media, underground art, and political movements. Their instability and ubiquity form a counter-archive against official, monopolized media channels.

Further, the poor image reveals global inequalities (limited bandwidth, piracy, lack of access to high-end technology). Circulators of poor images are, for lack of a better term, poor.[3]

[3]This is a contentious view, and initially I disagreed, but upon reflection I realised Steyerl argues that poor images make cultural works available to people excluded from official circuits. High-quality images are often made and circulated by cultural groups that have held institutional power for centuries. The term poor is being used with a more broad definition.

References

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