

**ROBERT CARTER
+ GEORGE HAJIAN**



**USED
PARTS**

Cover photo: Digitised VHS still from Falconhead II

During its inception, this collaboration went through many iterations, from moving images to projected animations and pixel-based collages, soundscapes and glitch based art. It broke down, came undone, then crystallised and distilled into “a gendered space” with analog interlaced animations and exclusive soundscapes.

We decided to hold on to some of the previous work and post it on a blog: **junkyardtouring.tumblr.com**, using this as a starting point and a documentation for the next installment.

Hint: The coin machine accepts \$2, \$1 and 50¢ coins.

Some Thoughts on The Poor Image

Robert Carter

The modern poor image is a poetic animal whose habitat is the digital world— the internet.

It might be worth making a few remarks about the DNA of this kind of image; the magical properties of the JPEG image format, and to a lesser extent its temperally-shifted cousin MPEG. JPEG stands for Joint Photographers Experts Group— it is the photographers that are responsible for the poor image of today!

Personally, it's hard for me to see a photograph in terms of a poor image, but the pervasive nature of the JPEG format has made inroads into almost every aspect of pictorial representation, printed or not.

What I find interesting is the specific ways in which this format affects what we see, and how a set of arbitrary decisions made by the group have governed all visual representations using this format.

A bit of history: Until the late 80s internet still images used non-lossy formats. These formats did not preclude poor images, or digital reproduction artefacts, but they did tend to minimise generational loss. They tended not to degrade visually when re-saved.

Around this time people were getting frustrated waiting for web pages to load. The *World Wide Wait*, as it was called, and a way was needed to get pictures of reasonable size and quality across a phone line and into a computer more quickly.

The Joint Photographers Experts Group approached the problem by asking the question: What are the most important visual aspects of

the image? Or in other words: What parts of the image does our eye notice most?

I'm over-simplifying but basically the answer was: "The edges". All JPEG images that are made poor by generational loss, resampling or other copy and paste actions by people or machines, retain to their bitter end: edge detail. They also give up easily, and you could even say offer as worthless, subtle changes in large areas of colour.

JPEG wants to throw away information when it is created. When it is displayed it wants to imagine that information back again. It is its own dynamical system of generative loss. The technology that displays a JPEG may generate an image based on a range of standard or arbitrary methods. This is the machine's visual imagination at work.

Its visual cortex is alive with crispy lines, unsharp masked to mars-ravine splendour, tapering symmetrically into lego-blocked, scale-defying, chessboard skies– a world away from the alchemical processes that educated the photographers in the now empty darkrooms.

I can't think of a more widely known example of people saying to machines: "You just make stuff up. You tell us what we are."

The format is all pervasive; digital telephony, video conferencing, audio playback, give you poor phone call, poor video chat and poor audio. In each case machines imagine how we look, sound and move, often with humorous and frustrating results.

Finally I present a challenge to the reader to correctly identify the three different format artefacts present in the image on the next page; spanning perhaps 30 years, a conglomerate of machine representations.



Three kinds of artefacts. Digital video still frame.

Coming Home From Tomorrow Part 1 of 3 (June 2010). URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhr8AB4lv8k> (visited on 03/21/2014).

Found and Faked

George Hajian

1.

An optical glitch¹ is a product of error, a visual manifestation arising as a product, disrupting an expectation. Resulting from mistranslations by some kind of breakdown or confusion in the digital transcription process, these faulty unexpected disturbances sometimes catch us by surprise as an arrangement of vividly coloured grids in bright greens, pinks, reds or yellows.

These mistakes, in the data conversion process, behind the seemingly smooth operations of digital technologies, colourfully manifest in dazzling colours revealing the error. The ‘upsettings’ in the translation process usually would have gone unnoticed in previous analog technologies: dust particles on a film roll or a record; tracking problems on VHS tapes or even background noise on cassettes were part of the analog culture. Nowadays, in processing of digital data, these glitches reveal themselves garishly as incongruous, complex, sharp and occasionally blurred shuffled frames or bands.²

The original glitch is of course a chance encounter– unexpected. Seducing, unlike noise from a VHS tape, it is “perceived as provocative, strange and beautiful.”³ This aporia in the breakdown of the flawless image is a violation. Much like Adorno’s “bourgeois functionalisation” it is a revelation and an insight to its mode of production. It suddenly activates the viewer, as it interrupts to reveal the inner-workings of the “frame” as a digital by-product.⁴

A real glitch is only found– discovered. Similar to an *objet trouvé*, a glitch becomes a *found frame* you stumble on, and this fleeting beautiful failure of the decompression process makes you think about the possibilities of the next one.

Recently the Mail application on my personal computer started distorting all attached JPGs. For reasons exactly unknown to me, it has started ‘banding’ the photos sent by friends and family. Maybe there are too many emails stored in the application, or maybe the database has become corrupt for some esoteric reason, but everytime I receive an attached image in an email on my smartphone I look forward to checking it out from home.

Glitch [visual] art has started invading the web. There are now conferences, performances, installations and workshops based on digital ‘failure’.

Some artists reduce their interaction and interference with the glitching process waiting for the error to emerge, while others use programs (text editing, or cross-processing) to initiate it. Many induce it deliberately by tweaking the hardware (and the software) then watch the visual drama unfold. The community is divided between pure-glitches and glitch-alikes, the so-called pure/original and on the other hand, the copy/fake. A minority of artists consider “only the glitch readymade is true, dismissing almost all glitch art as fake.”⁵ But this glitch (intended or not) emerging from the internal (digital/electronic) fiasco plays the same role of failure, as long as it “allude[s] to a deviated engagement with the anticipated ‘norm’ – whether at the level of datastream, software or hardware (if not all three).”⁶

* * *

“What is now a glitch will become a hot fashion soon enough – reproducible, standardised, automated by softwares and plug-ins.”

ROSA MENKMAN

As the genre gets domesticated, this modernist approach to glitch art as subversive and political is slowly losing its progressive radical status, “It is no longer a break from the flow within a technology”⁷.

It's becoming a crafted, designed and predictable commodity. Pop musician Kanye West already has a datamoshed⁸ music video and Robyn released another one with Röyksopp in late 2014. The music industry has already consumed, produced and standardised the [sound] glitch in pop culture. But the trend is now attacking visual culture, propelled by social media and image sharing sites.

In her book *The Glitch Moment(um)* Rosa Menkman dedicated a long chapter listing some ways in which glitch art can be reproduced, but of course any list is incomplete, simply because new ways of databending are always being discovered. As tipping point approaches and modes of production are standardised and popularised, the movement of this genre might enter an obsolescence state and then reappear as nostalgic artifacts⁹. However, as long as the norm in pop culture relies on perfect digital social representation, the digital glitch will always be a sign for our times: A fetish for the pixel-perfect.

2.

“The act of discovering what’s cool is what causes cool to move on”

MALCOLM GLADWELL

Beards are losing their fashionable aesthetic. Last year, researchers at the University of New South Wales concluded that participants found bearded men attractive only when they were confronted with a succession of clean-shaven men. The process is correct in reverse too— a negative frequency-dependent preferences¹⁰. The more we see beards, the less attractive it becomes, and vice-versa.

As Whitehead points out— the embodiment of masculinity is achieved in many ways, but especially through the evoked symbols and signification in relation to the social world.¹¹ Deviation from mainstream signification is an essential part of fashion and commodification of goods. Fashion trends depend on being eccentric, a rebel, an outsider, a mistake; but the commodification of these so-called trends and fashioning up the masses

as anti-conformists defeats the idea. How can it be original if it's a copy to start with? A fake and a look-alike!

From jocks to nerds, athletes to cowboys, gangsters to businessman, hunter to worker looks, trends come and go. Marketing and advertising relies on these traits and commodifies them to sell gendered deviations to the masses. As beards (and “hipsterism”) get commercial, they become less attractive. “Irony doesn’t work when it’s mainstream,”¹² there’s less deviation, more normativity. However long these trends last– there will simply be another, in a long line of manly fashion.¹³ Masculinity is getting troubled and losing its ‘perceived’ power, resulting in a show of biological traits to reclaim this imaginary loss by personifying a projected spectacle, in an attempt to perpetuate the hegemony.¹⁴

Grab the clipper and some rubber bands, it’s time for the manbun.



Glitch-readymade

Photo (original version): William Dart | Databent by Mac OSX Mail

Endnotes

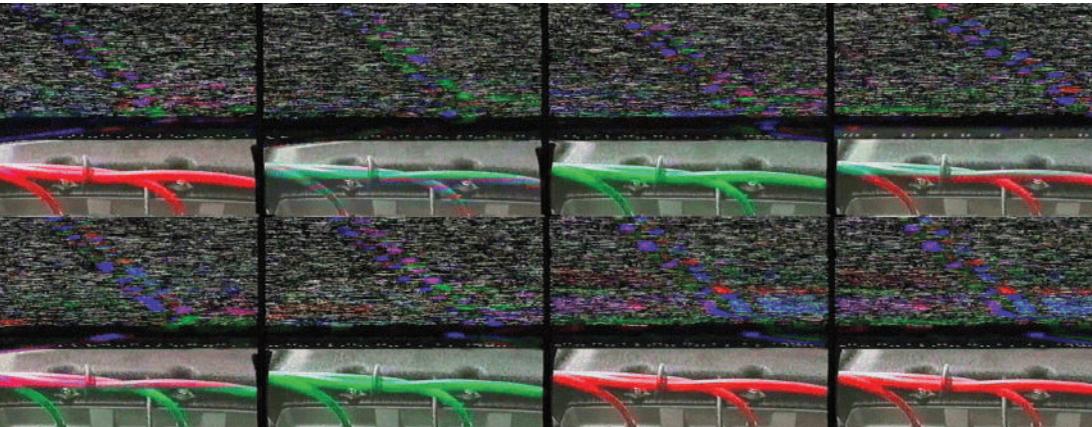
- 1 The word “glitch” was first recorded in English by the astronaut John Glenn for the American space program as he was describing the unexpected changes in voltage in an electrical current. (source: Wikipedia)
- 2 Iman Moradi et al., *Glitch: Designing Imperfection* (New York, NY: Mark Batty Publisher, 2009).
- 3 Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin, “Notes on Glitch,” *World Picture, Wrong*, no. 6 (2011), http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/TOC.html. (sec. 8)
- 4 Michael Betancourt, “Critical Glitches and Glitch Art,” *Hz*, no. 19, accessed February 27, 2015, <http://www.hz-journal.org/n19/betancourt.html>.
- 5 Iman Moradi et al., *Glitch: Designing Imperfection*. p.10
- 6 Michael Betancourt, “Critical Glitches and Glitch Art,” (sec. 3)
- 7 Rosa Menkman, *The Glitch Moment(um)*, vol. 4 (Network Notebooks, 2011), <http://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/no-04-the-glitch-momentum-rosa-menkman/>. p.55
- 8 Datamoshing is another term for intentionally glitching a video file for artistic purposes, where two videos are interleaved to interpolate frames.
- 9 An example of this phenomenon are low-fi filters used on Instagram, Hisptamatic, Facebook and other smartphone apps where additional noise and artifacts are added to create a nostalgic, analog aesthetic.
- 10 Zinnia Janif, Robert Brooks, and Barnaby Dixson, “Negative Frequency-Dependent Preferences and Variation in Male Facial Hair,” *The Royal Society Publishing / Biology Letters*, April 16, 2014, <http://rsbl.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/10/4/20130958>.
- 11 Katarzyna Kosmala author, *Imagining Masculinities : Spatial and Temporal Representation and Visual Culture*, Routledge Advances in Feminist Studies and Intersectionality ; 11 (New York: Routledge 2013, 2013).
- 12 Harry Mount, “It’s Time to Shave That Beard: The Decade of the Hipster Is over”, *The Spectator*, October 25, 2014, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9348122/its-time-to-shave-that-beard-the-decade-of-the-hipster-is-over/>.
- 13 Alun Withey, “The Real Reason Why Beards Go in and out of Fashion ,” *The Telegraph*, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/fashion-and-style/11189638/The-real-reason-why-beards-go-in-and-out-of-fashion.html>.
- 14 Katarzyna Kosmala author, *Imagining Masculinities : Spatial and Temporal Representation and Visual Culture*, p.65

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In the backside of beyond, a man sits working. The foam and vinyl motorcycle seat which he is mending is slowly becoming whole; each stitch gradually healing the wound. We are junkyard touring.



junkyardtouring.tumblr.com