

Objets Propagés: The Internet Video as an Audiovisual Format

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The boundaries of an audiovisual language are commonly defined by its material medium of inscription, as in *film* or *video*. The physical underpinnings prescribe certain operations of production that determinate elementary characteristics of any piece of work made within the conditions established by the medium. However, as different audiovisual media converge, the practices they foster are mingled. Even though some traditions of production still persist, works made for cinema, home video, television broadcast and even mobile phones can now be done in virtually the same way, using very similar technologies.

As we adopt digital technologies for media production, what really seems to set the boundaries of an audiovisual format is the dynamics of consumption, understood not only as a particular viewing regime, but as the whole structure of diffusion employed – intentionally or not – into bringing the work to its public. This could be the ultimate signal that, as media theorist Vilém Flusser states, it is the mode of distribution that transforms a work into *praxis*.¹ Otherwise, we may be engaging with a more systemic notion of materiality, as proposed by N. Katherine Hayles – “an emergent property created through dynamic interactions between physical characteristics and signifying strategies”.²

Nonetheless, in what concerns medium specificity and its definition, platforms of inscription are losing their importance to this particular interface – the system of diffusion and consumption. Any parameter defined by the platform of inscription can be inevitably reformed by the interface of consumption. The place where this process can better be grasped is the World Wide Web, where the most diverse audiovisual pieces are transformed into “Internet videos” as they become subjected to the dynamics of social digital networks – a dynamics whose horizon, we could say, is the *phenomenon*: “the propagation of a digital

¹ Flusser V, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Reaktion Books, USA, 2000, p. 53.

² Hayles N, *My Mother was a Computer*, University of Chicago Press, USA, 2005, p. 3

file or hyperlink from one person to others [...] organically, voluntarily, and peer to peer, rather than by compulsion, predetermined path, or completely automated means".³

To further investigate the matter, this essay attempts to characterize the broad concept of *Internet videos* as a format in itself, typified not by a specific language or subject, but by its particular logic of distribution. Such logic would operate as a succession of *détournements*, which take an audiovisual form out of its original context and push it ever forward, re-signifying it progressively. This progression transforms excerpts of feature films, home videos and **similar pieces** into autonomous works, allowing for a peered mode of authorization. Likewise, as they foster this other regime of creation, Internet videos would call upon a different regime of visuality.

The Low Resolution Film Festival: a Research Methodology

Since not all forms of audiovisual to be found on the Web obey the same paradigm, one could wonder to what extent it is possible to specify a format based on the characteristics of this medium. This was one of the first concerns involved in the conception of the *Low Resolution Film Festival*, a competitive exhibition for Internet videos organized by the Brazilian group Cine Falcatrua, in December 2005. In the next paragraphs, we will explain briefly the strategies used by the Festival for doing so, as they constituted the original *method* of this research.

Cine Falcatrua (Portuguese for *Cine Hoax*) started as a film society in the end of 2003. The group was formed by undergraduate students of the Federal University of Espírito Santo, who organized free weekly screenings of different kinds of audiovisual works – but mostly, feature films downloaded from the Internet, months before they were released in Brazil. This activity led to a cease-and-desist notice issued by Brazilian film distributors in June 2004, along with a lawsuit against the University for copyright infringement. From this point on,

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_Phenomenon>

even though it did not suspended its “pirate” screenings, Cine Falcatrua began to organize events and workshops that explored other aspects of the dispute between traditional cinema and new media ecologies. The Low Resolution Film Festival was one of the first of these.

Celebrating the “almost-anonymity” of the Internet and proposing to “map all its original content and blame the guilty ones”, the Festival might seem an unusual tool for the exploration of Internet video. By that time, some video competitions – such as Fluxus⁴ and Anima Mundi Web,⁵ both existing since the year 2000 – already focused exclusively on online content. However, contrary to those “events”, which constituted web-based exhibitions, the Low Resolution Film Festival proposed to screen Internet videos in the offline structure of a conventional movie theatre. Within this architecture, the Internet video would be isolated and framed in the same way of the fictional short, the video art or any other standard format, so that it could be defined in relation to them.

It was precisely this difference that constituted the core strategy of the Low Resolution Film Festival. By putting the unauthorized Internet content in direct conflict with the hyper-regulated atmosphere of the cinematographic institution, the Festival emphasized the inherent characteristics of the Internet video format. The few parameters stated in the call for works concerned conditions of authorship and awarding, and the only explicit restriction was against “screeners or Hollywood blockbuster CAM recordings”. Besides that, any video was valid within the normal limitations of the medium: the material should be found on the Web, and send to pre-selection by e-mail.

Among the participating works, there was a clear predominance of video remixes (musical or not), homemade performances (re-enactments, lipdubs, stunts) and out-of-context excerpts of movies, TV shows and adverts – “works” whose production is favoured by the wide availability of digital equipments for video capture and editing. This material suddenly exists in the contemporary media ecology, and proliferates online almost as *genres*, since the network does

⁴ <<http://www.fluxusonline.com>>

⁵ <<http://www.animamundiweb.com.br>>

not pose the same formal, legal and economic resistance of the established channels.

In general, a large degree of unpretentiousness and amateurism could be inferred from the Festival's programme. Even though both characteristics prevailed on the video pieces found on the Internet by that time, they sure do not represent the limits of the medium. Certain works prepared with a lot of technical expertise, by professional creators, could not become public in any other media but the Internet. Good examples are *The Mashin of the Christ* (2004),⁶ by the musical group Negativland, and *O Destino de Miguel* (2005),⁷ by young employees of the Globo Network. The former is a musical video that uses takes from several Passion movies, while the later is a short film entirely made of scenes of the feature *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), re-edited and redubbed by Brazilian famous actors.

The expenses for distributing such pieces in a traditionally regulated channel would make them unfeasible. Besides, there would be a huge unevenness between the volume of real production involved and the juridical marathon to negotiate image licensing. In this regard, J.D. Lasica gives us the example of *Tarnation* (Jonathan Caouette, 2003), a documentary whose production cost no more than \$ 220 – rocketed to \$ 400,000 after paying for the rights of music and video clips, so that the film could be commercially released.⁸

These works, from the point on they use the Internet as their means of distribution, have to conform to the constraints of the medium – if not actively, at least as a collateral effect of their online propagation. Nowadays, when the medium restrictions are not so tight and we can find even HD videos being streamed, it is hard to notice such effects. Nevertheless, they were clear in 2005, when Brazilian normal connection bandwidth did not exceeded 256kbps. As a national production, *O Destino de Miguel* is very illustrative: the film version found on the Internet is compacted to a very low resolution (160x120 pixels), in order to allow its online dissemination. We could argue that it is a work

⁶ <<http://www.negativland.com/mashin>>

⁷ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tsa5id0Ywb8>>

⁸ Lasica J D, *Darknet*, John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey, 2005, p. 84.

completely different from its supposed DVD variant, which has normal NTSC resolution (720x480 pixels). In a movie theatre, the aesthetic deviations between both versions are accentuated. The two films, which look almost the same in an iPod viewfinder or in YouTube, are poles apart when shown in the silver screen. Each one cause a particular effect on the audience, and it is hard to deny that these effects are in large measure determined by the characteristics of their platforms of distribution.

These physical restrictions of online media were also acknowledged in the Low Resolution Film Festival competitive categories, as there were prizes for short, medium and long *kilobyte*. The size of the video files in KBs was defined as the criterion for classification because it is measure much more relevant to digital networks than the traditional *métrage*. The *métrage* (length of a film in meters) allows us to figure out the duration of the projected movie, being important to organize films in the theatre programme or in a broadcast schedule. Yet, this volume makes no difference on the Internet. A server is not limited by the number of hours of moving image it can store, but by the amount of data it can transmit. The time that matters on the Internet is precisely that of transmission, a direct function of bandwidth and file size, which will define the video mode of propagation.

Found Forms, Propagated Information

Certainly, in a movie theatre, the Internet video is in laboratorial condition, stabilized out of its particular dynamics of consumption – a dynamics that also defines a good deal of the work's significance and value, as it overlaps with its mode of production. *Après Duchamps*, it could be said that Internet videos are *objets trouvés* in the mediatic ocean, re-found each and every time they are watched. However, what highlights them from the information landscape is not the combination of an artist's gesture with the legitimizing power of the gallery environment, but the fortuitous amazement that occurs in each spectator, which re-transmit the video to others, transforming it in the substance of a continuous flux – an undersea current ignoring tidal forces.

By and large, Internet videos share a certain *readymade* condition. What defines their autonomy is a procedure of clipping and remediation, which has a lot to do with the potential for convergence of digital information networks. Most of them are nothing more than audiovisual fragments pulled out from other channels and thrown on the Internet. In their natural environment, they go unnoticed: *Maldita Cachaça*⁹ is just another bizarre news report; *Vaca Matrix*,¹⁰ one among others scenes of the feature *Kung Pow! Enter the Fist* (Steve Oedekerk, 2002); *Nintendo 64 Kid*,¹¹ the domestic record of a Christmas celebration.

However, as they are taken out of their original media and propagated through the unauthorized pathways of the Internet, these fragments acquire another nature. Just like the new framing reshapes their meaning, it also affects the very disposition of the audience towards them. The public starts to regard the fragments as individual forms, distinct from their usual context. Likewise, the role of the spectators is changed, since they become – at least involuntary – responsible for the dissemination of the images.

Upon finding a video on the Internet, the spectator has the immediate possibility of distributing it further – attaching it in an email, embedding it in a website or creating any other form of link.¹² In a medium that lacks sanctioned channels, and where every user fulfils the role of a potential editor, this is not a frivolous decision. To propagate a Internet video is substantially different from recommending (or not) a blockbuster to your acquaintances. Within the traditional cinematographic circuit, the activity of the individual spectator does not have much effective power, no matter how influent she is. Personal-campaigns cannot normally face the industry's million-dollar marketing, unless clad in their own form of institutionality (such as journalism). In brief, to

⁹ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk8cdaarjNs>>

¹⁰ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39dn9meNqHA>>

¹¹ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFlcqWQVVuU>>

¹² It is interesting to notice how the practice of forwarding as a form of curating/collecting is also becoming standardized in the increasingly popular platforms for *social bookmarking* (*del.icio.us*) and *tumblelogging* (*StumbleUpon*, *Tumblr*).

pretend that a movie does not exist to your restricted social circle will not make it unavailable for the masses in Shopping mall multiplex everywhere.

On the Internet, on the other hand, the users are actually carrying out the distribution of a video as they forward it, creating a particular circuit within the larger network. As it can be better perceived in p2p architectures such as BitTorrent, the public is not just the final receiver of information, but constitutes its very carrier. Moreover, it wields an active function in this transport structure – just like in a game of Chinese whispers. By not retransmitting the information received, any user partially neutralizes the existence of a video through the enfeeblement of its circuit of distribution. This kind of attitude is largely disapproved by file-sharing communities' code of conduct, where it receives the not very appraising epithet of *leeching*. However, in general, that is exactly what happens – and not because the public is opposed to the transmission, but because it is not committed to it. The users simply do not care, and adopt the stance of normal spectators.

Therefore, the agency through which the works go each time they are forwarded is a positive one: the kind of filtering whose divergence is not to *retain*, but to *let flow*. In this sense, Internet videos are distinguished from Duchamps' readymades – everyday objects isolated in a pedestal (and in the History of Art) by a definitive gesture. While the readymade's figure stands out because of the change of background, an Internet video results from the constant reconfiguration of figure and background by small, recurrent gesture of the users. Such image appears less as *form* than as *information*, and its function is eminently *phatic*, producing its channel and public at the same time.

A Regime of Dissolved Authorities

From this perspective, it seems remarkable that some works, in an almost accidental way, are able to overcome successive layers of spectatorial inertia and become *massive phenomena*. In as much as it employs the distinctive strategies for redundancy of digital networks, this dynamics do not comply with the

disperse topography of the Web. Quite the opposite: it contests such topography, creating a spatial norm where apparently there are only *plateaus*, islands in the mist, deteriorated terrains. In other words, the Internet video describes the striation of the network structure.

Such way of occupying the medium is characteristic of computer viruses, which spreads from one network to another, infecting terminal after terminal. This similarity in behaviour has led to the characterization of popular Internet videos as "viral". However, there is a very important difference: the mechanism for propagation of the virus is embedded in its code, being part of its nature. Received by email, a worm will forward itself automatically to all the contacts of the contaminated individual, in spite of its decision. A video would not. Received by email, its propagation depends on the conscious action of the original recipient – depends on the will of this recipient to become a transmitter herself.

Whatever it is that motivates this action, it seems too volatile to be systematized in this short essay. Nonetheless, it should be clear that this motivation is not inherent to the work or to the channel, but to the user. The transmission of an Internet video does not occur by osmosis. It depends on the conjoined (albeit disarticulated) action of a series of agents. The public is directly involved in this process of information, and its experience of the video is thus determined.

At this point, we do acknowledge a second, more generalized procedure that characterizes the Internet video as a format. It is not a discursive practice, but an assertive one, worth of a curator, which endorse and revalidates the work. Even so, we could say that it is no less *authorial* than the original *détournement* that created the work in the first place, which it mimics in each stage. As she propagates a video, the user reframes it, accentuating its importance and increasing its presence. It is these successive reframings that will produce the medium's procedural *gestalt*.

In this manner, the authorship of an Internet video is diluted throughout its distribution, creating precedents for remixes, mashups and alternative versions.

The more it spreads, the more the video becomes a collective work, an almost folkloric manifestation. Someone can make an animation, send it to personal friends, and find it a few days later in a public discussion forum, completely out of control. In this operation, the authorship was so mischaracterised that the original creator suddenly occupies the position of just another spectator.

The role of transmitters is so important within this structure that they assume the vague position of authority over the works. Once again, this is easier to be perceived if we refer to the time of the Low Resolution Film Festival, when "Internet videomaker" was a so dubious title that I am obliged to put it between quotation marks. The (sometimes inadvertent) creator of a given video is almost never acknowledged, and the only reference normally imposed over the works is the channel by which they become public – often, popular directories such as *BoingBoing*,¹³ *Fark*¹⁴ or the Brazilian *Kibeloco*¹⁵. In this context, the mediatic legitimacy of audiovisual material as a piece of work depends on the density of its *casting*, which is not *broad*, but *peered*. This kind of popularity is a very peculiar logic of authentication within digital networks. Even the Google algorithm, this very important online North, is driven by it: a website gains search relevance the more it is linked by others.

It is curious how this mechanism collides with those of established channels, and end up taking "Internet celebrities" to the pages of important New York newspapers. A now classical case is that of William Hung, rejected contestant of the *American Idol* TV show. In 2004, the video of his failed audition appeared online, had millions of viewers, and gave him a bigger fame than he would have had he won the show.¹⁶ Afterwards, Hung returned triumphantly to the traditional media, had a recording deal and released three albums. Ironically, his success was provoked by the same images that, in *American Idol*, were employed to dishonour him. Extracted from its original context, the video became a mechanism for the celebrization of the failed singer. There is no doubt that, somehow, that sequence of images had become *a different thing*.

¹³ <<http://www.boingboing.net>>

¹⁴ <<http://www.fark.com>>

¹⁵ <<http://kibeloco.com.br>>

¹⁶ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zcc8dTqflh8>>

The Low Resolution Film Festival also tried to apply this dynamics of authentication to the cinematographic *milieu*. According to its regulation, it was not necessary to be the author of a video to send it to the competition: it sufficed to *take responsibility for it*, in the very uncertain manner this term might suggest. For the sake of competition, if more than one person sent the same video, it instantly became a collective work. What was being judged were not individual creations, but different *explorations* of the Internet.

Regimes of Active Visuality

In the years that followed the Low Resolution Film Festival, the general increase of bandwidth, the creation of lighter video codecs (such as Adobe Flash Video) and the growing popularization of services such as YouTube,¹⁷ Google Video¹⁸ and Vimeo¹⁹ have begun to crystallize online audiovisual practices in an almost regular circuit. As the Internet is turned into a proper medium for audiovisual works, it is open to debate if the definition of Internet video as a process of information that describes its own distribution still holds true.

More and more, the online work and its author seem to be fixed within standard channels. In a platform such as YouTube's, all videos are linked to the user who published them, who in turn is linked to other users (contacts/ subscribers), resulting in a certain stability of identities. Therefore, the main location of these works is in the user's page – which can be classified with a distinctive status such as *director*. The system creates logs of activity, and any dispute over originality can be resolved by referring to parameters such as the date of upload or the number of views.

A video is further localized as it accumulates metadata such as tags, comments and replies – in other words, as it becomes intertwined with the platform's own informational structure. This can be extended to diegetic references to the

¹⁷ <<http://www.youtube.com>>

¹⁸ <<http://video.google.com>>

¹⁹ <<http://www.vimeo.com>>

platform's interface (resulting in meta-linguistic works such *Dave dancing at my bday party*);²⁰ as well as to the creative employment of its video database (for example, in the mashup project *ThruYou*),²¹ user community (as in the *lonelygirl15* web series),²² or interactive possibilities (as in the infamous *Interactive Card Trick*).²³

In all of these cases, the video becomes inevitably attached to its original location, since any displacement would disrupt the work's particular significance and behaviour. The experience of *lonelygirl15*, for example, could never be conveyed without the illusion of intimacy created by the closeness to its user-character. In the same way, it would be pointless to download *Interactive Card Trick* and watch it in a conventional media player software – or, worse yet, in a Film Festival. The only effective way to propagate such videos is as a direct, online link to their URL. Therefore, it becomes rather impossible to take them out of their original context, as they bring this context along.

Nor even embedding the videos in another webpage would isolate them from YouTube – quite the contrary. The image would come overlaid by the site's watermark and advertisements, as well as links to other videos in its database. It is as if, through the embedded video, the whole YouTube infiltrated the webpage. Being this invasive, the platform reinforces its superlative authority over the works – an actual form of control better represented by its capacity to ban user accounts, take videos offline and block the access of certain countries.

Could it be that the characteristics of these platforms of distribution are being fixed as some sort of medium specificities, making them a kind of subgenres to Internet videos? Or have the platforms as a whole attained the status of concrete technical objects, from which the awareness and value of individual pieces of work can no longer be detached?²⁴ One could presume that either hypothesis

²⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVm_HJ_ax8o>

²¹ <<http://thru-you.com>>

²² <<http://www.lg15.com>>

²³ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbEei0I3kMQ>>

²⁴ Simondon G, trans. N Mellamphy, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, London: University of Western Ontario, 1980 [1958]. Available at <<http://accursedshare.blogspot.com/2007/11/gilbert-simondon-on-mode-of-existence.html>>.

indicates the evolution of online media away from a instable visuality into a new form of spectatorship – i.e. “prosumerism”. In as much as this could be true, such process should not be regarded as the consolidation of a proper form of mediatic experience, as if the early mode of engagement with Internet videos did not constitute one. To further explain this point, we will finish this essay by referring to another platform for online media distribution: the *4chan* image board.²⁵

4chan is based on the *Futaba Channel*,²⁶ a popular Japanese forum for image sharing. It was launched in October 2003, a couple months before the term *Web 2.0* was first published.²⁷ Nowadays, it receives at least 1.5 million unique visitors a month.²⁸ In spite of being older than YouTube, it still retains a very loose regime of authority and participation. A striking difference between both sites is that there is no need of registration to use 4chan, allowing users to post images straight away in any of its 44 boards. The images are published in the order of upload, creating a linear flow of threads that defies random navigation. Besides, the platform does not hold long-term archives: most of the boards are limited to eleven pages and, as soon as a thread reaches the bottom, it disappears completely.²⁹

These restrictions sum up to the site simplicity of use and very high refresh rate. Having no database or community structure (such as profile pages), 4chan exists as a lively arena of information. In about minutes, the content of a board might have changed completely. Still, some images persist – but to what extent should they be considered stable forms, if they are always about to disappear, and the only way to make them endure is by bumping their thread, reposting or recreating them? Not surprisingly, a great deal of Internet “memes” – such as *LOLcats*,³⁰ *Rickrolling*³¹ or the *Advice Dog*³² – originated in 4chan. However, in

²⁵ <<http://www.4chan.org>>

²⁶ <<http://www.2chan.net>>

²⁷ Knorr E, The Year of Web Services, *CIO*, Dec 15 2003. Available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=IQwAAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_summary_r&cad=0_0#PPA90,M1>

²⁸ <<http://www.niemanlab.org/2009/02/how-4chan-shows-the-challenge-of-monetizing-a-big-online-audience>>

²⁹ <<http://www.4chan.org/faq>>

³⁰ <<http://encyclopediadrastica.com/Lolcats>>

³¹ <<http://encyclopediadrastica.com/Rickrolling>>

³² <http://encyclopediadrastica.com/Advice_dog>

this natural environment, such folklore should not be considered auto-replicating, wide-spreading information. These images and their variations consist of nothing less than the very activity of the users in participating of the channel.

The lack of need for registration creates an additional big difference between 4chan and other platforms for online media distribution: in 4chan, complete anonymity is the rule, not the exception. For a casual user, it is as if all the others were the same – or none at all. Hence, there is no individual images or authors, there is just the channel: no community, just a public. Nevertheless, 4chan's authority is not imposed in the same way as YouTube's, since it is the very activity of the public that secures the channel's integrity. The anonymous masses produce 4chan as they inhabit it, by viewing, transforming and reposting images. Once again, we are confronted with an essentially phatic form of mediatic experience.

This regime of visuality becomes clearer in the nature of images such as the *FFFUUUUUUU* comics³³ or *Tenso* sequences,³⁴ which are not meant to be just viewed, but also altered and reposted. Their significance comes from this particular mode of propagation. An even better example would be *Punho dos Brothers*,³⁵ the drawing of a fist made of ASCII characters, posted in user scrapbooks of the Orkut social network. It comes accompanied by a statement explicitly ordering the receiver to “forward it to five brothers”, else he “would be no brother” – i.e., dynamic information, meant to be propagated. In this process, it indeed generated some variants, such as *Hadouken dos Brothers* and *Luís XVI dos Brothers*, all with the same purpose.

From these examples, we should conclude that the particular paradigm typified in the Low Resolution Film Festival is still significant, constituting an important horizon for the investigation not only of online platforms, but of media in general. In this respect, it is worth mentioning that 4chan's creator moot

³³ <<http://encyclopediadramatica.com/FU>>

³⁴ <<http://sites.levelupgames.com.br/FORUM/RAGNAROK/forums/t/337660.aspx>>

³⁵ <<http://virgula.uol.com.br/ver/noticia/tecnologia/2009/03/25/119623-punho-dos-brothers-conheca-os-mais-divertidos>>

(Christopher Poole) has been voted the most influential person of 2009 in Time magazine's traditional election, beating the likes of president Obama and Oprah Winfrey.³⁶ And it is even more meaningful that such result was provoked by a very sophisticated hack, perpetrated by 4chan Anonymous community, just for the sake of it.³⁷

³⁶ <<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1894028,00.html>>

³⁷ <<http://musicmachinery.com/2009/04/15/inside-the-precision-hack>>