THEORIZING DIGITAL CULTURES

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In the previous chapter, we reviewed definitions for aesthetics, explicitly framing aesthetic judgement as political. Likewise, we argued that aesthetics were linked with the affective, rather than with the neutral or dispassionate judgement of experience. This chapter defines specific aesthetic categories – be they historical ones, like beauty and the sublime, or recent categories that describe cultural transformations associated with digital media, such as cool, zany, cute, and interesting – and reviews specific forms often thought to characterize the aesthetics of digital culture, namely, participation, remix, bricolage, and glitch. This chapter is intended to review a basic vocabulary for describing the aesthetics of digital media, all while stressing the political aspects of these categories.

**TERMS:** affect; knowledge work; relational aesthetics; Web 2.0

**THEORISTS:** Theodor Adorno, Nicholas Bourriaud, Edmund Burke, Dick Hebdige, Patrick Jagoda, Immanuel Kant, Caroline Levine, Alan Liu, Sianne Ngai

**EXAMPLES:** Chris Rodley’s Algorithmic Horror; Double Rainbow; ‘Internet Ugly’; Journey; Miranda July’s Somebody; Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher’s Learning to Love You More; Pinterest; Takeshi Murata’s Monster Movie and Untitled (Pink Dot); YouTube personality Bunny Meyer
Our discussion of aesthetics is incomplete. Now, we need to turn from the general to the specific, from larger theories about aesthetics to particular forms and judgements. In this chapter, I’ll discuss some of the categories that have been influential throughout the history of aesthetic thought, beginning with the foundational concepts of the beautiful and the sublime, moving towards more recent categories said to characterize the present and, most significantly for us, the fact that our lives are heavily influenced by digital media. Following on from the previous chapter, I’m interested in demonstrating that aesthetic judgement is intrinsically linked to affect and emotion, even though aesthetics are often characterized as having a relation to dispassionate evaluation.

The cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has suggested that the aesthetic categories we use to describe and evaluate experience ‘call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to other subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose. In doing so, they are compelling reminders of the general fact of social difference and conflict underlying the entire system of aesthetic judgement or taste …’ (Ngai 2012: 11). This returns us to some of the concerns brought up in our earlier discussion of culture. First, like Raymond Williams, Ngai argues that the way we make sense of our world happens through artistic documentation which inscribes how it feels to live at a specific place and time, which Williams referred to as ‘the structure of feeling’. Second, we again see how the categories we use to describe the world and our experience of it are political. Our categories point to how our world has been differentiated and ordered, and thus direct us to inequalities of power and inequivalent social relationships – to the fact that culture is a field of conflict. Aesthetic categories are not universal concepts. Rather, a category like beauty performs political work in terms of ordering bodies, defining proper actions, and so on. At the same time, as we noted in the last chapter, this politics may not be the same thing as what we talk about when we think of governmental politics, or political intervention.

The goal of this chapter, then, is to go through a series of judgements that characterize aesthetic thought historically and in the present, moving to formal categories that commonly characterize both artistic works linked towards digital culture and the everyday experience of digital culture. We will begin with some important historical categories – the beautiful and the sublime – before moving towards categories thought to explicitly characterize digital culture. We will then delineate some specific forms that distinguish both art made with digital media and everyday
digital culture, even though these forms are not limited to digital media as well. This chapter is therefore intended to review a basic vocabulary for describing the aesthetics of digital media, all the while stressing the political aspects of these categories, following both Ngai and the discussion of aesthetics in the previous chapter.

**HISTORICIZING AESTHETIC CATEGORIES**

The Beautiful and the Sublime

Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1823), first published in 1757, is one of the foundational writings about aesthetics in Western culture. Burke, in his *Inquiry*, was attempting to examine why the arts affect us, not in a dispassionate, rational way, but as a source of emotion, as that which provokes the imagination. In moving the human body, the arts would act like any other experience. Like sweet, salty, or bitter food inspires a bodily reaction that can be evaluated through our taste for specific sensations, the arts inspire ‘Love, grief, fear, anger, joy … and they do not affect it in an arbitrary or causal manner, but upon certain, natural, and uniform principles’ (1823: 22). For Burke, the arts provoke the body into specific emotional experiences which are innate to the capacities of the human body. Evaluating what these experiences are, along with how they are best produced, provides a way for gauging taste and identifying a ‘good’ work of art.

The two categories Burke focused on were the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime is provoked by ‘Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger’ and is ‘productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling’ (1823: 45). The sublime is a response produced by the fear of isolation, vulnerability, and death, fears generated by an overwhelming sense of the vastness of the world and one’s ultimate insignificance. The sublime is not precisely a synonym for the experience of fear, however, as Burke is clear that the sublime is, in its own way, a pleasurable experience. The sublime reveals how fear is intertwined with wonder and is triggered not only by things that appear as dangerous, but by artworks that are large, or experiences that reveal some aspect of the vastness and infinitude of the world, which includes ‘the infinite divisibility of matter’ (1823: 98). Much of Burke’s discussion of the sublime is dedicated towards
formal elements, such as vastness, darkness, the uniformity of successive objects, overpowering loudness, and so on. Again, these are to provoke the experience of infinity, of a world that vastly exceeds one’s own knowledge and control. Watching an assembly line, for instance, would be a sublime experience for Burke, given how it would be a large, loud, endless succession of the same object ad infinitum. Early representations of technology, such as Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), depict industrialization as sublime, in which men’s bodies were literally incorporated into a vast machine over which they had no control, standardizing them and removing their individuality. I should note that these early representations were about the standardization of men’s bodies. They regularly positioned women as technologies to be feared, as linked to the sublimity of the machine (see Doane 2004; Huyssen 1986).

Beauty, on the other hand, is about ‘that quality, or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love …’ (Burke 1823: 127). Beauty is neither, for Burke, related to mathematical proportion (as for Alberti), nor to the ‘fitness’ achieved by perfectly matching an ideal form. Rather, ‘we must conclude that beauty is, for the greater part, some quality in bodies acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses’ (1823: 162). Unlike the sublime, beauty characterizes small objects, smoothness, softness, delicacy, and subtle variation.

Burke’s attempts to describe beauty lead him to creepy and explicitly sexist descriptions of women’s bodies, such as one where he describes in detail the path his eyes take as they move across the body of a woman. ‘Observe’, Burke tells us, ‘that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface, continual, and yet hardly perceptible at any point, which forms one of the great constituents of beauty?’ (1823: 166). The woman’s body becomes little more than the ‘beautiful’ object of Burke’s gaze, not an agent possessive of its own will and desire. The body is reduced to a surface consumed by the (male) eye of another. The legacy of beauty is bound up with heterosexual, male desire, a point that’s long been stressed by feminist critiques of visual culture, in which men act and women appear (Berger 1972; cf. Mulvey 2009). Burke’s understanding of aesthetic judgement is intimately tied towards his specific bodily response.
to something – the terms sublime and beautiful are names given to how Burke is moved at a base, bodily level. They do not refer to intellectual evaluations. The sublime is a mix of wonder and dread that comes from the fear of insignificance and death. Beauty is inspired by, it seems, what Burke personally finds sexually arousing.

The point here isn’t to define what beauty is, but to draw attention to how beauty is being defined. Beauty refers to Burke’s subjective experience, although it supposedly points beyond his experience. Immanuel Kant, in his major work on aesthetics, the *Critique of Judgement* (1987), originally published in 1790, also attempts to define the beautiful and the sublime, but he changes the grounds upon which these judgements are to be made. Rather than an emphasis on the affective dimension of experience and sensation, for Kant, taste should be evaluated without interest, as a kind of dispassionate activity that takes an object of contemplation for itself, rather than in the terms of an individual’s experience of it. Unlike Burke, this lack of interest would conceivably lead to universals that transcend the individual. It also transforms aesthetics from the experience of art to the communication of judgement to others. Rather than my own personal experience, judgement is about reason and the stripping away of my feelings, which are debated among members of a taste community (see Friedlander 2015). While the collective dimension of aesthetic judgement is apparent in Burke, it becomes explicit with Kant, although Kant, likewise, must eliminate the seemingly subjective, affective dimension of aesthetic judgement.

This dispassionate evaluation advocated by Kant is only one line in the history of aesthetic theory, although it is a significant one repeated by many others. Critical theorist Theodor Adorno, for instance, thought Kant was correct to argue that the aesthetic aspect of art should be divorced from sensual pleasure and bodily experience (an argument similar to Benjamin’s distinction between aesthetics and politics). Aesthetic judgement, for Adorno, ‘is free from immediate desire; [Kant] snatched art away from that avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it’ (Adorno 1997: 10). At the same time, Adorno did not feel that Kant went far enough. Adorno argued that the importance of art was in its critical function – that an artwork should be alienating, distancing itself (and the viewer) from assumptions about everyday experience. Like the glitch artists discussed in the last chapter, who saw Kanye West’s ‘Welcome to Heartbreak’ music video as corrupting their supposedly critical interventions into the ‘smooth’, unblemished surface of digital information, Adorno sees any affective engagement with a
work of art as a repetition of mass consumption and advertising. Artworks should resist this affective relation, making sure that the viewer (or consumer) cannot ‘lose himself, forget himself, extinguish himself in the artwork’ (1997: 17). Art should deliver perceptual shocks, jolting the viewer out of the ‘false consciousness’ of their everyday experience. Of course, these ‘shocks’ can still be affective, even if they’re framed in terms of dispassionate judgement.

Should we lose ourselves in art? Or should we remain ultimately dispassionate observers? Or, even further, should art force us into a state in which we become alienated from daily life, critically exposing the reality of that which exists around us? The specific questions asked of art have changed over time and inform larger questions about art’s social purpose. A number of recent works that examine the relation between aesthetics and digital media, however, take a different perspective. What, they ask, do the arts and the categories we use to describe experience tell us about how we make sense of our everyday lives? How do they reveal or transform our understanding of digital media, information, and infrastructures – things that are mostly invisible to everyday experience? We will briefly discuss two recent ways of theorizing the aesthetic categories we use to describe digital media. Alan Liu’s examination of ‘cool’ and Sianne Ngai’s discussion of the categories ‘zany’, ‘cute’, and ‘interesting’.

Cool

Throughout the 1990s, literary scholar Alan Liu, an expert on British Romantic literature and poetry, began to wonder about the fate of ‘knowledge’ in the face of digital media, along with the forms of ‘creative destruction’ associated with the first decades of the internet and the World Wide Web. Digital media carry with them their own specific forms, such as the database, the spreadsheet, and the hyperlink, which are different from past media. When faced with the reality of new technologies, Liu wondered, what will happen to art? And, in particular, what will happen if the dominant judgement of value is not beauty or the sublime, but ‘cool’? ‘Cool’, Liu explains, ‘is the techno-informatic vanishing point of contemporary aesthetics, psychology, morality, politics, spirituality, and everything. No more beauty, sublimity, tragedy, grace, or evil: only cool or not cool’ (Liu 2004: 3).

For Liu, these aesthetic changes are associated with the emergence of knowledge work, which characterizes a great deal of creative and
corporate labour since the late 1970s. Knowledge work is defined by the formation of temporary, flexible teams, in which information is the primary commodity generated, bought, and sold, often in the form of data and systems of organizing and interpreting data (also see Boltanski & Chiapello 2005; Moulier Boutang 2011). Identities, be they class, gender, sexuality, race, or something else, are subsumed into individual lifestyle choices and consumption patterns, which are understood as ‘immaterial’ signifying practices that have economic value. So, part of the culture of knowledge work is having and performing an identity – a personal identity rather than a collective identity (repeated with popular banalities such as ‘Be yourself’ and ‘Be an individual’, or in Apple’s one-time slogan ‘Think different’) – which is then analyzed and calculated through data gathered about you and your consumption habits. For Liu, these changes in labour are characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on coolness.

Coolness emerges from a long history of transformations in industrial manufacturing, leading towards contemporary knowledge work. On the assembly line, for instance, workers were expected to manage their emotions and be dispassionate or robotic in their actions and movements. As workers came to be replaced by machines, and as labour moved from the factory floor towards corporate offices filled with computers and managers, there was an overwhelming emphasis on coldness and alienation carried over from the assembly line (Liu 2004: 120). The emotions became intensely managed, be they emotions people ‘really felt’ or ones they were supposed to perform given their job. This emotional management has become one of the key skills one now has to master in order to get or maintain a job today, linked together with the tasks of networking, connecting, and maintaining relationships (see Lazzarato 1996).

So, coolness is a kind of affective neutrality that has emerged through the history of major changes in labour, from the factory to the office. But, additionally, it carries with it its own set of forms, which, Liu argues, ‘is the aporia of information … cool is information designed to resist information. … Cool is, and is not, an ethos, style, feeling, and politics of information’ (2004: 179). Paradoxically, for Liu, cool is about a limit point, in which the massive complexity of the internet and digital media meet up with the supposed non-feeling that comes from managed affective labour. It relies heavily on the principles of modernist design, ‘defined explicitly in informational terms as clean, efficient visual communication for an age drowning in media’ (2004: 199), in which visual style should
be minimal, clear, and unified. But, at the same time, it can also rely on a style that is cluttered and unreadable (the best examples here are 1990s tech and design magazines like *Mondo 2000* and the music magazine *Ray Gun*, although it can be seen in some examples of contemporary web design as well). It is a feeling that seems to rely on a lack of feeling and a kind of political ‘attitude’ that emphasizes ‘interiority and everydayness. Politics is not about a noisy, collective action on the street. It is instead an action so immured within the cubicle, within one’s individual workstation, and ultimately within the most interior of all cubicles, one’s own head’ (2004: 280). Cool, then, is about caring, but not caring too much. It is about communication, but in a styled way that is not just about the transmission of information. It is about the personal, and the expression of personal desires and interests, but to express one’s individuality rather than membership in a larger group.

‘Cool’ is less a coherent style or judgement than a wide-ranging set of responses to the proliferation of information and data associated with digital media and, especially, the forms of work and expertise that rely on digital media. It simultaneously reduces informational complexity and expands it to the point of meaninglessness, relies on a set of informal, networked connections and is ultimately about individuals. It is a feeling that is never too intense. Coolness, like beauty, is not a clear judgement with universal characteristics. Rather, it is a judgement that reveals specific social relationships that are about changes in technology and the kinds of work we perform.

Liu’s description of coolness seems to best characterize transformations in aesthetics associated with the internet in the 1990s and early 2000s. It doesn’t seem to characterize our present all that well, even though elements of what he describes persist residually in styles that refer back to internet culture of the 1990s, found in names like ‘vaporwave’ or James Bridle’s ‘New Aesthetic’.

**Zany, Cute, and Interesting**

A bit closer to our present are arguments advanced by Sianne Ngai. Like Liu, Ngai understands aesthetic categories and judgements as revealing to us something about larger transformations in capitalism and labour. She identifies three categories – the zany, the cute, and the interesting – that she sees as having a specific relationship to how capitalism has changed in relation to digital media and networked information. These categories tell us something about how we make sense of our world and, like ‘coolness’,
are ambivalent or weak, unlike beauty or the sublime. To demonstrate this point, Ngai asks of us:

Consider, for example, the media sensation caused by *Double Rainbow*, an amateur video made to capture the beauty of a natural wonder by hiker Paul Vasquez. That natural wonder ended up becoming immediately upstaged, however, even as it was being viewed and recorded, by the emotional extremity of Vasquez’s aesthetic response (which was simultaneously recorded). … Opening with laughs and exclamations followed by moans and sobs and finally the anguished question, ‘What does this mean?’ there was something about the sheer intensity and duration of Vasquez’s act of aesthetic appreciation that millions of people also seemed to affectionately appreciate but also want to immediately make fun of or belittle, as if such a powerful reaction to an aesthetic spectacle could not be taken seriously or simply left to stand on its own. (2012: 28)

Countless parodies of the *Double Rainbow* video appeared online, and many speculated that Vasquez’s response to a rainbow was, in fact, inspired by drugs. Vasquez was experiencing something akin to Burke on the sublime. The double rainbow he saw provoked a mix of wonder and amazement that relied on the incomprehensibility of nature and the world. But, today, this response is seemingly odd, and certainly not ‘cool’. The judgements we use, and the categories we apply to our world, implicitly carry with them ways of experiencing the world and acting within it that are ‘proper’ or ‘improper’. Not only is there a politics to what can be seen and said, but also to how it can be seen and experienced.

For Ngai, the categories of zany, cute, and interesting are far more applicable to today’s world than beautiful and sublime. Zany has its origins in the mostly improvisational sixteenth-century Italian theatre style *commedia dell’arte* and began as a specific character type (the zanni). Zany, for Ngai, is a judgement about that which fails to follow the cool, detached, managed affects that are assumed to characterize knowledge work. Someone who is zany, Ngai argues, works hard to look like they’re having fun, revealing how a kind of cool detachment is an impossibility for some. Zaniness can be seen in characters from film and television, such as Lucille Ball’s eponymous character in *I Love Lucy*, Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy*, or Richard Pryor in *The Toy*. Even though zaniness is
supposed to be ‘fun’, ‘the zany’s characters give the impression of needing to labor excessively hard to produce our laughter, straining themselves to the point of endangering not just themselves but also those around them’ (Ngai 2012: 10).

The popular YouTube personality Bunny Meyer, whose name on YouTube is ‘grav3yardgirl’, is a good example of online ‘zaniness’. Her videos are characterized by exaggerated facial expressions and a kind of overwhelming intensity even in low-key, ‘friendly’ situations. The zany, Ngai suggests, put themselves ‘into an exhausting and precarious situation’ (2012: 10), and, in spite of the fact that we may find their performances amusing, and we might admire ‘the affective and physical virtuosity of their performances’, they are ‘not persons we imagine befriending’ (2012: 9).

Zaniness, then, is a specific kind of performance that involves the explicit violation of coolness; it relates to knowledge work and its reliance on friendship, and knowledge work’s managed affectivity of friendliness, but also violates this assumed affective neutrality. While this performance can be leveraged into something of value (Bunny, for instance, relies explicitly on her zaniness for her success, as does Jim Carrey), it doesn’t follow normative ways of acting and relating in a world in which friendliness and coolness are assumed to be ideal categories through which behaviours are evaluated.

Cuteness, on the other hand, seems to be almost the opposite of zaniness, evoking the need for intimacy and care. Ngai associates the aesthetic of cuteness with the legacy of a specific aesthetic in Japan – kawaii – popularized after the Second World War to signify a kind of non-threatening helplessness or powerlessness, or a kind of pliability in which something cute can bend to the will of another. Something that is cute simultaneously evokes the desire to protect and destroy (think about the desire to squeeze a cute animal or a baby’s cheeks).

Cuteness is obviously all around us on the internet, especially in memes of cute animals and the over-abundance of kittens and puppies online. Robots, likewise, are designed to be cute. While it is clear why one would want to design a robot to be cute – to demonstrate that it isn’t a threat in a world full of fears and anxieties about automation, alienation, and the absorption of jobs by technology – the proliferation of cute images isn’t quite as clear. Regardless, cuteness tends to reveal a weak desire for intimacy and love, although one in which the viewer never loses or sacrifices their control to another (cf. Dale et al. 2017; Turkle 2011). Today, we often feel as if we have little to no control over the world around us, with our lives determined by technological systems far beyond our power. Cuteness,
in performing subservience, exemplifies a relation in which one has control over another, in which the other is not particularly threatening and will bend to the will of the viewer.

Ngai’s final category, ‘interesting’, refers to an indeterminate judgement, somewhere between fascinating and boring (or both at the same time), that links feeling-based judgements to conceptual ones (so, a judgement that would be between Burke and Kant – neither completely affective nor stripped of emotion). Interesting refers to something that is different, unique – but not that different. Ngai links this explicitly to the dominance of information in contemporary life. As we receive a near constant overload of information, ‘interesting’ is that which is different enough to be acknowledged, to stand out, but not different enough to warrant any truly passionate or strong response. It is difference in seriality. Ngai associates this to the works of artists like Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, and John Baldessari, but we can link it to something like the social networking website Pinterest, which allows users to create ‘boards’ made up of images and links on the internet – called ‘pins’ – that they have found ‘interesting’ and, thus, worthy of note. These pin boards are usually grouped by theme, a grouping of different things that are worthy of interest but are not too surprising or notable. The name of Pinterest even demonstrates this link with the judgement of interesting. A pin signifies the judgement of interesting and directs us to look at something because it is worthy of interest. Yet a pin doesn’t inherently signify anything other than this minor judgement of minimal difference, a small judgement of something that may be worthy of note and attention, but not significant enough to be placed outside a serial stream of images that one scrolls through as they look at Pinterest.

Zany, cute, and interesting, like coolness, are minor judgements that generally refer to a range of phenomena, but they are still somewhat subjective – in that they’re based on individualized feelings and experiences – and collective – in that they refer to shared evaluations and terms. They refer to ‘the increasingly intertwined ways in which late capitalist subjects labor, communicate, and consume … our experiences of the zany, the interesting, and the cute are always implicit confrontations with the imaginary publics that these ways of working, communicating, and consuming assume or help bring forth’ (Ngai 2012: 328). They aren’t the only categories we can use to describe the present, but their very use as a form of judgement tells us something about what it feels like to live in today’s world, along with the ways that we make sense of our world and define the kinds of experiences we have of it, and ways of acting in it.
These four aesthetic categories discussed here are not the only ways we have of evaluating our experience, yet they do seem to describe a great deal of how we make sense, understand, and judge the world around us. They communicate shared investments and values, and tell us about proper ways of acting, existing, and relating, although, at the same time, part of their importance as categories is their flexibility. Coolness, in particular, is deeply contradictory, and would seem to be defined more clearly by its negative (zaniness is much more clearly defined than coolness, in part because it seems to be a failure to be cool). The point here is not to suggest that these categories remain unchanged over time. Instead, they point to how judgements serve to help us know and make sense of how our world appears to our experience.

**AESTHETIC FORMS OF DIGITAL MEDIA**

These judgements have to be about something specific, however. Many elements associated with digital media are designed to elicit specific judgements, or provoke specific associations, or to elicit one judgement from one group of people and a completely different judgement from another group of people. In memes, fonts like Impact Bold and Comic Sans are chosen because they appear amateurish or ugly. We see examples of ‘Internet Ugly’ throughout social media, which relies on ‘freehand mouse drawing, digital puppetry, scanned drawings, poor grammar and spelling, human-made glitches, and rough photo manipulation’; this ugliness is ‘an imposition of messy humanity upon an online world of smooth gradients, blemish-correcting Photoshop, and AutoCorrect. It exploits tools meant to smooth and beautify, using them to muss and distort’ (Douglas 2014: 314–315). Like the New Aesthetic, Internet Ugly is designed to disrupt the smoothness of digital media, although for different reasons, often using different means.

These techniques perform a political function, at least in Rancière’s sense: they challenge or expose assumed formal limits of digital media, sketching out an aesthetic space that allows something to be seen and said, something judged as ‘bad’ or ‘artless’ in a context more typically defined by coolness. But, at the same time, there is a ‘correct’ use of style, at least if one wants to be part of a specific group. Take, for instance, the relatively common distinction between ‘dank memes’ and ‘normie memes’, which is, oddly enough, itself a meme, with the distinction played out in images circulated online. This distinction relies on a
differentiation between a kind of meme that is supposedly cool or ‘enlightened’ (if sometimes in deeply problematic ways), often because of its inscrutability towards most people, and one that’s far too popular and played out, for ‘normal’ people.

The aesthetic space of digital media is not uniform; in fact, it could be said to be inhabited by a number of radically different, competing aesthetic forms and judgements, even though these forms are ostensibly intended to perform a similar function of criticizing or unveiling the limits of digital media, more often than not pushing against or challenging the logic of ‘cool’, or reframing the ‘cool’ away from a kind of smooth uniformity. There are far too many aesthetic elements associated with digital media to simply enumerate the many forms we experience daily. In this section, I’m going to briefly review four formal elements that are common for the aesthetics of digital media: networks, participation, remix, and glitch. This is just a partial list of forms that are mostly conjoined or overlap, but these are often thought to be central for much of the art-making and creative practices associated with digital culture.

Networks

‘Sprawling and spreading, networks might seem altogether formless, perhaps even the antithesis of form’, claims Caroline Levine (2015: 112). Networks are defined by connectivity, of links that connect various points. In the language of network science and graph theory, they are about the ‘edges’ that connect ‘nodes’. There are many different kinds of networks, and networks do not have an intrinsic link to digital media, but it’s clear that many structures associated with digital culture, be it the internet in general or a specific social media platform, are organized in the form of a network. The history of the word ‘network’ preceded the technological; it was a word for manufactured fabric, then used to describe anatomy (in nervous and circulatory networks), the railroad and telegraph, branch banking, and social relations, much earlier than the emergence of the ‘network society’ of digital media and information in the 1970s (Bollmer 2016). Often, networks have been considered to be politically emancipatory, refusing a sense of bounded limits, although the historical use of network, more often than not, referred to a structure that contained and trapped. Consequentially, the politics of a network is, at best, ambivalent. And, while many argue that networks are intrinsically partial, connecting outwards infinitely, the simple fact is that any actually existing network has clear limits, be it because of technological,
social, or geographic boundaries (so, networks of roads literally have to end because of bodies of water, the network that is the internet is limited by its literal infrastructure, and a social network is bounded by actual social relationships).

We imagine networks as boundless, ever-expanding entities because we, quite simply, cannot sense them in any clear way. The network model of connected nodes can seemingly be grafted onto almost anything we experience, giving us a sense that ‘everything is everywhere’ (Galloway & Thacker 2007: 4), or that everything is linked in an unending, ever-unfolding totality of connectedness. Anna Munster, a theorist of digital media and art, suggests that we too easily slide into ‘network anesthesia – a numbing of our perception that turns us away from [the] unevenness [of networks] and from the varying qualities of their relationality’ (2013: 3). Rather than enable us to feel and experience our connectedness, networks are imagined as totalizing forms of connectivity that cannot be experienced. The assumption, more often than not, is that we may not feel connected, but we inevitably are connected. Rather than an aesthetic sensibility, this is literally an-aesthetic, in which our perception and sensation become numbed to our world.

Literary theorist Patrick Jagoda (2016) argues that we do have a way of experiencing networked forms of connectivity, however. Examples he provides from literature (such as Don Delillo’s Underworld), film (Babel, Syriana), and television (The Wire) dramatize the various forms of networked connection that have emerged in the past few decades, with massively complex plots that demonstrate the connectedness of various different people, institutions, and histories. These fictional examples perform the intertwining of many different actors and elements in ways that seem to mirror the social interconnectedness that the internet and social media are thought to reveal, even if they are not intrinsically about network technologies.

Jagoda argues that specific videogames enable us to experience networked connectedness, not by visualizing networks themselves, but by emphasizing the relations between different individuals playing a game. For instance, Jagoda refers to Twitch Plays Pokémon, along with the game Journey, to demonstrate how these works perform the experience of connectivity. Twitch Plays Pokémon, as we’ve already discussed, does this by relying on a kind of networked actor comprised of many different people playing together. Journey does this by enabling players to cohabitate the world of the game with another who is playing elsewhere. While players cannot directly communicate with each other, at least through language,
Journey ‘puts players in touch with many of the ways in which Internet users … already construct the networked processes that constitute everyday life’ (Jagoda 2016: 166). As an aesthetic form, then, networks reveal to us our connectedness, be it through the massive complexity of social relations depicted in numerous examples of contemporary popular culture, or in games that require collaboration and relation across an actual digital network.

Participation

These examples of networked games tend to foster or demand participation from those who are connected. Participation has long been regarded as one of the most foundational formal elements of digital culture (Deuze 2006). Digital media permit us to participate and contribute online, embodied in the transition from Web 1.0, which refers to the early days of the World Wide Web, made up of mostly static pages connected through hyperlinks, to Web 2.0, a term popularized by internet luminary Tim O’Reilly to describe the emergence of websites based around user-generated content, collaboration, and sharing. Digital culture, here, is reliant on a form of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 2006), in which users are fundamentally in control of what gets produced and circulated on the internet.

Participation, then, is a general aspect of digital, networked media. Consequentially, participation is often a key element of art that relies on or is coordinated via the internet, whether in ‘flash mobs’ (which are now a dated fad), or through apps and projects that explicitly use digital media as a means for organizing the acts of different people. Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher’s Learning to Love You More (2002–2009), for instance, was a website that provided participants with 70 different ‘assignments’, such as ‘Make a child’s outfit in an adult size’, ‘Make a poster of shadows’, and ‘Make a paper replica of your bed’. The over 8,000 people who participated in July and Fletcher’s project would document their attempts at completing the assignment, which was then saved on the website, presented at an exhibition, or included as a performance at a museum. Another project of July’s, Somebody (2014), was a messaging app for iOS that used the location services of an iPhone to deliver a message not to the intended recipient, but to another person who was physically nearby, who would then be tasked with finding the intended recipient of the message and delivering it verbally, as a
stand-in for the sender. These works rely on the participation of numerous individuals in different spaces across the planet, who are networked through digital media.

The curator and art theorist Nicholas Bourriaud (2002) describes some of these forms of participation in art as embodying what he terms relational aesthetics, which stress the social relations formed in a specific place, at a specific time. While relational aesthetics do not inherently rely on digital media, ‘the emergence of new technologies, like the Internet and multimedia systems, points to a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality’ (Bourriaud 2002: 26). Bourriaud refers to artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, who, in his work pad thai (1990), literally cooked and served food to visitors of a gallery, and Carsten Höller, who has placed slides (that would seem more fitting for a playground) in galleries and museums across the world and, in his work The Double Club (2008–2009), opened a combined nightclub, bar, and restaurant in Islington, London. These artists, according to Bourriaud, are producing works that require the participation of the viewer. However, this is not because these works are reflective of an increase in participation elsewhere in daily life, but because of an absence of participation elsewhere, in which people do not feel like they have any genuine relationship to other people in daily life. For Bourriaud, while new technologies may give the appearance of being participatory, the general feeling that initiated these works was that there was little to no space for genuine participation elsewhere, and the gallery and museum end up serving as spaces for that which does not exist in daily life.

Remix

Another longstanding formal element of digital culture is the remix. A remix can be said to be a form of ‘bricolage’, a French word that refers to a kind of improvisational making, based on taking elements that are at hand, recombining and recontextualizing them, and creating something new. In Dick Hebdige’s classic work of cultural studies, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (1979), the fashion practices associated with punk, in which symbols and objects from elsewhere, whether safety pins, trash bags, or Nazi imagery, are assembled together to create a new style with a new meaning. The formal elements that comprise punk’s style are arranged as a kind of bricolage, which involves making something new with what’s available, appropriating it to generate something else. Remixing, then, is another name for a specific kind of bricolage, one that
takes various consumer products (usually songs, but also images, video clips, and other kinds of texts), recombines them, and invents something out of them.

While, like networks and participation, this isn’t intrinsic to digital culture, it characterizes a great deal of art made with digital media. Software packages like Adobe Photoshop and Ableton Live make it easy to take pre-existing images or sounds, combine them, manipulate them, and create new things. Various genres of music and images from the past several decades rely on these techniques, poaching and plundering as a form of invention. Fan fiction, a practice that involves readers writing new stories with characters from their favourite books or television shows, has existed for decades, but has exploded with the internet as a means to share and access these stories.

In recent years, however, the legal status of many of these works has been challenged in court, as they often violate copyright and other intellectual property laws (Vaidhyanathan 2001). While remixing and bricolage are certainly still a central element of the aesthetics of digital culture, they have been legally restricted in recent years. At the same time, this aspect of digital media – and the internet in particular – has been noted by art theorist Boris Groys as ‘Maybe the most interesting aspect of the Internet … precisely the possibility of decontextualization and recontextualization through the cut-and-paste operations that the Internet offers to its users’ (2016: 187).

One of the most bizarre reinventions of remixing has been with the creation of artificial intelligence algorithms, which use software-based neural networks to simulate human thought, such as Google’s DeepDream, which is designed to create images similar to that of a human mind dreaming while asleep. Those working on the DeepDream project would feed images into their software, and it would generate ‘dreams’ out of the elements of those images, creating surrealistic images of hybrid animals and landscapes. In 2015, a group of researchers from the University of Tübingen made a similar algorithm, one designed to detect a specific painting style from the images fed into it. The algorithm would then create a filter and copy the lines and brushstrokes from the original set of images onto another. The artist Chris Rodley, inspired by similar experiments with the Tübingen algorithm on Reddit, found that one could create filters out of repeated images, such as eyes, teeth, stock photography models, and cats, and develop disturbing and funny ‘remixes’ of works of art which he refers to as Algorithmic Horror (Figure 8.1). These images demonstrate how remixing is no longer just
about human creativity in cutting up and recontextualizing images, sounds, and texts from elsewhere. Software is now ‘remixing’ in a relatively independent way, which, Rodley (2017) argues, has its own specific aesthetic form, which he labels as algorithmish, as it is partially shaped by the formal dimensions encoded into the algorithms used to generate these images.

Figure 8.1  Chris Rodley’s Algorithmic Horror (2017), crossing Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus with an image of two golden retrievers. Digital image, variable dimensions. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

The remix, traditionally, was something performed by a human combining different things, the creativity of the bricoleur expressed in the combinations and manipulations of materials found at hand. The ‘remixes’ of DeepDream and Rodley’s Algorithmic Horror, however, suggests a move towards a different sense of agency, one in which the ultimate visual appearance of a work is, at least to some extent, determined by how a specific technology is designed or programmed. The ‘form’ in this case is less about visual form – or at least cannot be limited to the visual – but is instead found in how software is designed to combine things.
Glitch

This technological agency is even more clearly seen in works associated with *glitch*, which relies on contingency in the transmission of information, embracing noise in communication or errors (Krapp 2011: 54). Images or sounds become distorted because of problems in transmission, which are then shaped into a coherent style of music or visual art, although one in which the agency of the artist is, at least ideally, displaced—what makes a work of glitch art ‘art’ is, in fact, the contingency of the computer, not the intention of a human artist. Glitch is similar to a number of other processes in contemporary art that rely on file formats and problems in transmission. Some works rely on various techniques of ‘lossy’ compression, in which a file format cuts out information to make a file smaller, and, as a result, degrades the image, blurring it (see Hoelzl & Marie 2015: 63–80; Kelsey 2010: 15–22). These ‘bad’ images, like works associated with the New Aesthetic, are thought to reveal something about the ‘reality’ of digital images, breaking through the surface of information to demonstrate the operation of computers and software that guide daily life.

Takeshi Murata’s works *Monster Movie* (2005) and *Untitled (Pink Dot)* (2007), for instance, rely on a technique called *datamoshing*, in which Murata manipulates digital files of films (a B-movie called *Cave-man* and *Rambo: First Blood*, respectively) to create distorted, psychedelic images that transform the original films into fluid bursts of colour. Datamoshing exploits the technical limitations of digital encodings of video. To explain what’s specifically happening in these videos requires a bit of knowledge about how digital video works. In a filmstrip, every frame includes an entire image. In a digital file, however, there are several types of frame, and, to reduce the size of the file, very few contain the entirety of an image. What’s called an ‘I-frame’ (which stands for Intra-coded frame) contains the entire image, like a frame from a film strip. But many of the other frames are compressed – data is removed from them, based on what’s in other frames. A ‘P-frame’ or a ‘B-frame’ (Predictive and Bi-predictive frames, respectively) only contain differences between the preceding or following frame of the video. Practically, this saves space in the file, as it greatly reduces the amount of data in the video. In addition, it rarely has a significant effect on our viewing, as we only really notice this encoding at work when something goes wrong and the image appears to glitch. Datamoshing forces a kind of glitch by removing, corrupting, or replacing the I-frames of the file. Thus, while...
the effect of watching a video like *Monster Movie* is aesthetically affecting in and of itself, it is implicitly making visible something specific about how digital video files work – something we overlook when we watch digital videos.

These four forms are certainly not the only ones associated with digital culture. They are simply some of the most notable forms, although most are not specific to digital media. Networks, participation, and remix do not inherently require digital media. However, there are different assumptions when it comes to glitch when compared to the other forms we’ve discussed, because glitches are believed to reveal something about digital media that are often obscured in daily life. In embracing points in which digital media literally do not function properly, some artists working with glitch, noise, and error believe that there is a critical function to their work: they are unveiling the ‘reality’ of digital media.

CONCLUSION

Continuing on from our previous discussion of aesthetics, this chapter addressed specific judgements and forms related to both the history of aesthetics and the categories and forms associated with digital media. Providing a final statement on our judgements and forms, however, is an impossible task. New forms are invented daily, forms that intersect with and relate to other forms, reliant as they are on the materiality of digital media, digital media’s relation to ways of organizing bodies and labour, and various practices performed with digital media – practices that are central to people’s daily lives online, but, most likely, have preceded our contemporary digital culture. But, again, understanding what’s new requires us to look at what’s old, differentiating the present from the recently past, thinking about what’s emergent and what’s residual today.

With the internet, there have been a number of theorists who claim that the totality of daily life can be thought of as a giant art project. Either the internet is a massive form of performance art (Heffernan 2016), or art today bleeds into the practices of documentation that characterize social media, in which the most significant work of digital art is our own identity (Groys 2016: 174–175). I’m not so sure I agree. Rather, I follow those like Caroline Levine and Eugenie Brinkema. We should pay attention to the specific forms we encounter today, and think about the way we describe
these forms, along with the way that they shape the body’s movements – the way they modulate affect. This demonstrates not that the whole world has been ‘aestheticized’, becoming a giant art project. Instead, it points us to the politics of aesthetics, of how the distribution of the sensible changes, which is also about how bodies and their acts are transformed and regulated.

In the next chapter, we’ll continue with our discussion of form with an overview of the infrastructure of digital media and its politics.