The Aotearoa Digital Arts Reader
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A Minor Cinema: Moving Images on the Internet

Eu Jin Chua

Does the short digital movie streamed over the Internet constitute a form or genre? Do such streaming Internet movies have a particular sensibility? The film theorist Vivian Sobchack thinks so. In an essay titled *Nostalgia for a Digital Object*, she points out that streaming movies obey neither the logic of digital culture (broadly speaking) nor the logic of conventional cinema.[1] Instead, they constitute a unique form of their own. Whereas the aesthetic of the digital is all sleek logic and clarity and sterility (consider the fact that the governing metaphor of computer operating systems is that of the well-organised office with everything hierarchically slotted away into files and folders), streaming movies tend to be, on the contrary, ragged and fragmented, dishevelled, disorderly. This is partly for technical reasons—because of the simple and pragmatic fact that the artists and amateurs who make such streaming movies are aware of the technical constraints and so make their works accordingly. In the tiny size of the image, in the jerkiness resulting from bandwidth bottlenecks, and in the fuzziness arising from the necessary lossy compression, streaming movies refuse any sense of totalising sleekness or predictable structure. Unlike the expansive, outward-looking mode of address of "big-screen, live action movies," streaming internet movies "draw us down and into their own discrete, enclosed and nested poetic worlds: worlds re-collected and re-membered; worlds more miniature, intensive, layered, and vertically deep than those constructed through the extensive, horizontal scope and horizontal vision of cinema."[2] The ethos here is that of psychological interiority rather than public address, contingency rather than determinacy, associational reverie rather than hierarchical logic, distilled intensity rather than expansiveness.

For obvious reasons, the form of streaming Internet movies resembles that of short rather than feature-length films. But Sobchack also compares streaming movies to precious artefacts of material culture that similarly call for responses having to do with pensive contemplation or nostalgic longing: miniatures, reliquaries, cabinets of curiosities, Joseph Cornell boxes. Sobchack uses an Internet artwork by Lev Manovich, *Little Movies* (1994 – 1997), as a prime example, but I also think of another series of works by the artist Shirin Kouladjie as paradigmatic, even if these latter works are not in fact streaming movies at all. Rather, Kouladjie's movies are animated GIFs, short found-footage clips that appear in small pop-up windows, often overlaid with scrolling text and radio buttons and set to music.[3] Mickey Mouse dances to a jaunty Eastern European pop song. The silent movie star Louise Brooks arches her neck and laughs. A swimming baby does a stately underwater waltz. And so on. In their salvaging of ignoble and neglected fragments: forgotten films, home movies, old music, family photographs; in their predilection for the twee and the kitsch; in their associational collagism and sense of collector's mania; and in their dusty archival impulses hinting at what Sobchack calls "a sea of memories shifting below the surface, […] an effluvial database," Kouladjie's animations echo with the "bits and traces of an individual yet collective past: personal memories, narratives, histories that were, from the first, commodified and mass-mediated." The experience of passing time appears as the act of selecting fragments, flotsam and jetsam, out of the turbulent 'database' of personal and collective history. Memories emerge from the effluvial murk of the past in the form of a Proustian or Bachelardian reverie—or as cute little pop-up windows.[4]

Sobchack's article was written in 1999. I mention this because, by the fast-paced standards of contemporary technological time, that is a long age ago. Now that we are firmly in the era of YouTube and video podcasts and Web 2.0, her argument seems somewhat quaint and outdated (not least because she uses the proprietary brand name 'Quicktime' to denote the streaming Internet movie, as if this was the only format available for setting images into motion over the web). But she is in fact quite conscious of impending obsolescence. For the article takes the form of a kind of lament or elegy for a soon-to-be archaic form, whose defining characteristics are too often perceived as mere technical shortcomings to be swept away in the rush of progress. Forget puny screen sizes, twitchy playback, and indecipherable images—let's have high resolution and widescreen! The Quicktime movie is an endangered species; it will "eventually and seamlessly 'stream' into 'live-action.'" Hence Sobchack's regrets about the "quickening of Quicktime."[5] Indeed, that we can now watch world events unfold on tiny YouTube screens or download high-definition movie trailers and feature-length video podcasts suggests that this has already happened, that the Quicktime movie as memory box was already passing into history when Sobchack wrote her paean to it.

At the same time, I think the characteristics that Sobchack discerns in the short streaming Internet movie remains as an underground tendency—a "minor cinema." One sign of this is the unpolished amateurism (I use the term in the least pejorative sense) that dominates YouTube as much as the more professional stuff grabbed off TV or a DVD. Amateur re-edits (or even the very act of selection of short fleeting moments to be posted online that would otherwise have been missed in the flow of a television broadcast or in the progress of a film) suggest that a new cinephilia is made possible by digital technologies.[6] They suggest indeed that the minor tendency survives in practices of reception if not production. By analogy, think of Cornell's *Rose Hobart* of 1936 as an early mash-up by a cinephilic fanboy—appropriately enough, this formerly hard-to-see film is now available for viewing on YouTube. In fact, with the advent of cellphones and digital still cameras that record movies onto memory cards with limited space, these minor characteristics are now apparent even from the point of production, secreted, as it were, within increasingly dominant and totalising forms of technology. The emergence of these 'convergent' recording devices is usually interpreted in totalising ways—as the potential recording of *everything all the time*—but isn't it also possible to think of these technological phenomena in less sweeping terms? It may be true that everything is now being recorded, but it is being recorded in fuzzy and fragmented form, which complicates the issue and suggests that an exclusive focus on the totalising aspects of this technology is itself totalising.

Previous pages: Stella Brennan, *Little Boy* and *Fat Man*, 2007, digital prints, 380 x 550mm.

1. Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of Quicktime," *Millennium Film Journal* 34 (1999). http://www.mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/VivianSobchack.html
2. Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object."
3. Shirin Kouladjie, http://www.photomontage.com
4. Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object." Sobchack alludes to Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*.
5. Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object."
6. On cinephilia, see Paul Willemen, "Through a Glass Darkly—Cinephilia Reconsidered," in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 223 – 57; Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or the Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); and Marijke de Valck and Malte Hagener, *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

Consider as well moving image-based Internet art, not least of all recent work from New Zealand. Fuyuko Akiyoshi's films come to mind as further evidence of the survival of this "memory box" tendency, as does Gabriel White's *Aucklantis*.[7] Though both these series of films were originally meant to be shown conventionally, on cinema or television screens, their relaying over the Internet seems like the perfect marriage of aesthetic disposition to transmission medium. In Akiyoshi's *IX Sketches* (2003) a woman writes "empty every night" on a postcard and mails it by sticking it into the shrubbery. A boy named Nick orders a meal in an Auckland food court and drinks slowly from a paper cup. The subtitles that appear on screen—"nothing really happens… only after it's happened"—are explicit articulations of the artist's interest in the recording of minor, transitory incidents, incidents with the potential to distil a life, a desire, an effluvial database of lingering memory, filmic traces of lost time which make good the always-missed encounter with the present. The in-between moments, the "foreplay of life," become visible as life itself.[8] Meanwhile, in *Aucklantis* (2006), a series of short films about life in the city of Auckland as it is imagined as a kind of alternate universe, White films himself, for example, brushing his teeth while providing running commentary through a mouthful of toothpaste (he brushes with Natural brand toothpaste to make himself speak more naturally). Or films himself reading an invisible book, the turning of whose pages he mimes. He crosses a pedestrian bridge while watching to see whether his shadow cast on the motorway below gets run over by the cars. He shows us garbage bags on the street and informs us that the so-labelled "green bags" and blue recycling bins are for sorting coloured items, so that the city council can build us an all-green world or an all-blue world. This may be comedy, but it is of a disorienting sort. The deadpan commentary, with its alternate-universe logic, is a complement to the way in which these scenes, when viewed on a tiny blurry screen, are shrunk and compressed, but also re-charged, concentrated, intensified, perhaps in the manner of surrealist *depaysement* or formalist estrangement. There is, as with Sobchack's analogy between Quicktime movies and baroque *Wunderkammern*, a sense of filmic fragments containing and unfurling a whole world, each short movie evoking a kind of interior, psychological continent—call it Aucklantis—which may have sunk beneath the waves but which occasionally re-surfaces in the form of these droll traces.

My point, and perhaps Sobchack's, is not simply the essentialist-formalist one that streaming Internet movies have unique and exclusive properties of their own. Rather it is that the particular limitations and constraints of having to transmit over the Internet are conducive to a certain kind of already-extant disposition. This disposition is not even exclusively filmic or solely digital. In fact, one analogue here might be with Michael Benedikt's attempt to distinguish in architectural practice a minor "interiorist" sensibility from a dominant "exteriorist" one. The former is Benedikt's term for what we might elsewhere call immanentism—a sense of embedded continuity with the world, of mutual interrelation, the belief that life or existence can only be that which materially inheres within the present world rather than anything apart from it. Exteriorism, on the other hand, is the competing idealistic worldview that things are divided

7. Fuyuko Akiyoshi, *IX Sketches*, 2003. http://www.emptyeverynight.net/play.html
8. Fuyuko Akiyoshi, "Statement" [artist's statement], 2003. http://www.emptyeverynight.net/statement.html

and autonomous, with some elements always transcendentally standing outside others. The difference, Benedikt says, in a wonderfully quirky image of the exteriorist-interiorist distinction, is "how one feels about [an] onion":

> *What is an onion, formally? A tiny seed embedded in a series of cupping shells, or a series of near-spheres each covering the one inside? It makes no logical difference whether one starts from the inside and moves out, or starts from the outside and moves in, but it makes a great deal of difference to how one feels about the onion—or rather, how it would feel to make or be an onion. The exteriorist wants to paint each Russian doll on the outside; the interiorist wants to line each enclosing doll's inner, concave surface.*[9]

How one feels about the onion is not merely a trivial distinction, Benedikt goes on to point out, for these two orientations can take on political value. It becomes an issue of whether one wants to take up the exteriorist, transcendent 'view from everywhere and nowhere', which is also the view of imperialist mastery, coded masculine, in which one observes, from above and from the outside, a world consisting of mutually autonomous beings whom one can dominate (or be dominated by)—*or* whether one wants to take seriously the fact that one's view is always corporeal, materially coded, embedded in mutually-constituted relationships with other beings and objects (that is, immanent in concrete practices of life), and hence always partial and necessarily limited. Benedikt namechecks the architect Rem Koolhaas but also Plato, Newton, and Bohr as members of the dominant exteriorist 'party,' versus Aristotle, Leibniz, and Einstein as constituting the minor interiorist sensibility. I could also add Descartes versus Spinoza to this exteriorist versus interiorist axis—remembering, however, like good Spinozists, that no one is ever solely one thing or the other, never solely exteriorist or interiorist, except in their effects, practices and concrete powers.

I also see another analogue for this minor, interiorist disposition in Eve Sedgwick's account of what she calls "reparative practices"—ways of responding to the world's oppressions that don't involve paranoia or cynicism or knee-jerk suspiciousness, but that rather choose to defuse the world's hostility by taking its initially inimical, fragmented resources and refashioning these into new wholes.[10] Reparative practices are minor, local acts of art and thought that suggest that effective critique may be possible without a sense of paranoid and antagonistic—or if you like, exterioristic—negativity. Reparative practices are temporary and local rather than totalising or encompassing; they are enfolding and assimilative rather than merely antagonistic; they are responsive rather than reactionary (keeping in mind—and without exempting myself—that the left can be as reactionary as the right). The primary example here is the camp aesthetic, for, as Sedgwick points out, "campy" objects aren't simply subversive (which is the way that they are usually interpreted via the tools of negative critique)—they are also the products of an intensity of affect and feeling, even love, directed towards neglected or hostile materials which are therein reconfigured and refurbished. In a sense, "camp" has become a misnomer given that the word has taken on connotations of ironic humour without sincerity, whereas these objects are anything but ironic or insincere or cynical. Sedgwick's concept of the "reparative impulse" has, I think, a great deal of explanatory force for the kind of

9. Michael Benedikt, "Environmental Stoicism and Place Machismo: A Polemic," *Harvard Design Magazine* (Winter/Spring 2002): 3.
10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2003), 150.

digital moving images in which I am interested here (it explains the almost-kitschy, almost-campy elements of my filmic examples above), and indeed her description of reparative practices might well serve as a kind of checklist of characteristics of a "minor cinema"—these practices, she says, involve:

> *…startling, juicy displays of excess erudition… passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; …'over'-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; … rich, highly interruptive affective variety; …irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; …disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture… surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment, unexplained upwellings of threat, contempt, and longing…*[11]

As with Benedikt's "interiorist" sensibility, Sedgwick's "reparative impulse" is immanent, embedded—this is a sensibility which, in its most concrete forms of practice, doesn't want to survey the world from a lofty or transcendent perch, but rather wants to enfold into itself the impure but nonetheless worthy resources of the everyday in order to create new lenses through which that same world may then be re-perceived, however locally and temporarily.

Against a dominant cinema of transcendentalising values, then, a minor cinema has a "sense of *immanence*, immersion [in the phenomenal world], and embeddedness in a form of life," with a sense of "corporeal intimacy" and affective imbrication.[12] Against Andre Bazin's "myth of total cinema" (the idealistic desire for an all-encompassing cinematic image that reproduces reality completely—think IMAX), there is to be discerned another potential tradition of the moving image in which the fragmentary and the diminutive are acceptable because they gesture outwards—rather than solipsistically inwards in the manner of the autonomous art object—at the material practices and scenes of everyday life beyond which, they imply, there is nothing.[13] The frequent found-footage impulses of such moving images also suggest that the 'major' and 'minor' tendencies need not be mutually exclusive, but that moments of immanence may be discovered within even the most boisterous Hollywood film, via reparative techniques of fragmentation, collage, decontextualisation, re-projection and re-scoring (as with *Rose Hobart*), or, as in the case of the streaming web movie, digitisation and re-transmission over the Internet. In this latter case, digital technology, rather than being coldly abstractive or reifying (as we usually think of it), is an effective agent of dehierarchisation and destratification. The technology may, in one sense, cripple the moving image by making it jerky and small and snowy and truncated, but it thereby produces *another* kind of cinema, a cinema that accrues "phenomenological and aesthetic value as an effect of these necessities and constraints."[14] Here, digitisation enables by partially disabling.

Could New Zealand become a fertile ground for creative or aesthetic production in this minor or "interiorist" vein? Perhaps it already is. For Aotearoa is separated from the art-world centres by a wide geographical (and psycho-geographical) gulf, across which any totalising or metropolitan tendencies have to seek passage. Think about how New Zealand has always received the metropolitan canon across vast distances, the result of which may indeed be the overvalorisation of 'masterworks,' but also their creative misinterpretation and

11. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 150.
12. Malcolm Turvey, "Jean Epstein's Cinema of Immanence: The Rehabilitation of the Corporeal Eye," *October* 83 (1998): 35.
13. Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," in *What is Cinema? Vol 1.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Two objections might be made here. Firstly, that immaterial or intangible objects such as digital moving images consisting of nothing more than data streams can't be agents of an immanentist conception of the world. Can one 'embed in a form of life' something not physically real? But immaterial objects can serve quite easily as agents for a materialist or immanentist conception of the world, as long as one doesn't imagine that the virtuality of these objects is a ticket to transcendence. To do so would be to head down that much-trodden track of hyping digital technology as something that will save us all from our bodies and our messy lives as material creatures because once we download our brains onto our hard drives, we will never need to eat, sleep, have sex, or go to the bathroom ever again. Indeed, the idea that human existence or human being can be divided into an essence of digital or genetic code on the one hand, and throwaway corporeality on the other, precisely exemplifies the exteriorist, Cartesian sensibility in which some things are conceived of as divided from, and on a higher plane to, others. Yes, digital objects are virtual. But like any other artform, digital objects are the result of material practices and physical actions and they have concrete effects. In that sense they are not virtual but actual objects like any others, and it is a fiction to imagine otherwise. One might even speculate that the reason digital technology so often inspires idealistic thinking—exemplified, for instance, by the 'Californian Ideology' of futurists such as Jaron Lanier during the heady days of the 1990s—is that the technology's non-physicality or virtuality is too easily misconceived as occupying a higher plane. Virtuality ends up being conflated with classically transcendent categories such as mind or reason or spirit. The second potential objection to my argument is a more difficult one: in many streaming movies, especially Internet artworks, there is the threat of solipsistic aestheticism, as might be expected in films that emphasise psychological interiority, intimacy, and the domain of the private. Here, the line between a solipsism and immanence is very thin. I am well aware of this, and don't have a convincing reply except to say that, though solipsism and immanentism may be proximate, they are not identical.
14. Sobchack, "Nostalgia for a Digital Object."

productive misappropriation. That is, the 'masterworks,' by the time they are transmitted here, are perforce smaller, fuzzier, more fragmented, less anchored to structured contexts and hierarchies, dampened, re-ordered—thus allowing minor, alternate tendencies to surface and spin-off. Or perhaps the dominating tendencies of the canon become so over-determined that they shrink and diminish and intensify to the point where, between the covers of books or magazines or downloaded from the Internet—indirect rather than direct sources—they can be cut-out and collaged and put away into boxes, files, and folders (orderly to the point of disorderliness), where they accrue new, immanent life. I don't want to over-stress this point, for there is here the very real danger of turning marginalisation and peripheralisation into fetishised virtues, but perhaps there is something productive to be made out of the fact that Aotearoa has always had, may always have, bandwidth problems.