"*A Place Colled Lovely1)*": the HD Afterlife of Low-Res Feminist Video Art

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ABSTRACT

The digitisation and networked distribution of the PixelVision videos of Sadie Benning presents a challenge to aesthetico-protocological hegemonies that determine the value of digital videos. Subverting their status as 'poor images', the uploaded copies of Benning's works restage their queer, counter-hegemonic resistance via the controls of a new digital context. This paper calls for a re-examination of traditional attitudes towards the digitisation of 'analogue' moving image artworks and proposes that compression standards and their artifacts may be recuperated as part of a queer feminist-materialist artistic strategy.

KEYWORDS

MOVING IMAGE, DIGITISATION, VIDEO ART, HAPTIC CINEMA, SADIE BENNING

Introduction

Discussions of the digitisation of analogue moving image artworks often attend to the reconciliation of two conflicting beliefs about the digital. On one hand, it is argued that the process of digitisation degrades analogue artworks by stripping them of their materiality and medium specificity and redeploying them in a digital *dispositif* that lacks the prosthetic support of the black box or the white cube. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that digitisation promises the liberation of the artwork from elitist or exclusive institutional confines—that digitisation expands audience engagement via the broadening of conditions of access.[1] Erika Balsom (2017) has explored the tension between these two claims in terms of digitally bootlegging experimental film and the ethical questions of the unauthorised circulation of moving image artworks. So here, in looking at a particular upload of Sadie Benning's 1992 video *A Place Called Lovely*, I want to consider an alternative to these positions, one that appreciates the liberating potential of digitisation while at the same time grounding this digitality in the material and protocological conditions that are the very basis of this newfound liberty.

Protocol

The utopian promise of art's digitisation is both structured and undermined by its protocological determination. A computer protocol, understood here as defined by Alexander Galloway, is "a set of

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[1] In a discussion held at the Oberhausen Film Festival, 2013, the heads of LUX, Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), and the Canadian Filmmakers' Distribution Centre (CFMDC) agreed that access was the most important opportunity afforded to such organisations by digitisation (Cook et al., 2014).

recommendations and rules that outline specific technical standards" (2004, 6), "the principle of organization native to computers in distributed networks" (2004, 3). The moving image does not circulate 'freely' within networks as an immaterial presence but is at all times subject to protocological controls governing its encoding/decoding and communicability within the network. As digital video files, moving image artworks are transformed by compression algorithms that reduce their information content (and, as a result, file size and streamibility) with the aim of increasing their viability on platforms that depend upon the instantaneous availability of content. Adrian Mackenzie summarises that the function of codecs—the software that encodes and decodes a digital data stream—is to reorganise relations "within and between images and sounds, between things and experience" (2006, 2). The dematerialized artwork has its internal organisation reconfigured— re-standardised—so that it is no longer structured by the physical limitations of its storage media but by the techniques of compression that facilitate its digital existence and accessibility.

In nearly all cases, and certainly in the case of the video I want to discuss here, video codecs deploy 'lossy' compression algorithms that reduce the amount of information necessary to display a video with the least possible damage to its audio-visual fidelity. Mackenzie acknowledges that this process is transformative, but concludes that "the advent of realtime digital networked media afforded by codecs does not constitute a radical re-ordering of the content of video" (2006, 5), making the argument that there is a phenomenological or experiential congruency between digital video and its analogue counterparts, such that the images retain their identity despite the processes of encoding and decoding. Codecs prioritise that which is "most perceptually relevant to human eyes and ears" (Mackenzie 2006, 3) based on an idealised human standard, redistributing the colour, contrast, sharpness, and so on, according to predefined limits rather than intrinsic media qualities. So, while there is a self-evident truth to the claim that works in principle retain their identity across media, the deep digital reorganisation of the content of an artwork is rarely without perceptual consequences, which in turn may produce unexpected conceptual consequences.

As Sean Cubitt has noted, the MPEG-4 codec, an amalgam of standards and features including the H.264 standard, widely used by platforms including *YouTube*, appears at first glance as "an apolitical aesthetic vehicle" (2014, 247) of which nothing is expected or demanded but efficiency. Even to the extent that this belief holds true among the committees responsible for producing these standards, video codecs and compression standards play a role in sustaining a politico-aesthetic hierarchy premised on the supremacy of high definition, high performance, and high fidelity that determines both what is seen and how it is judged and valued (even prior to the algorithmic sorting that co-determines a video's visibility). The codecs and compression standards that facilitate the near-instantaneous transmission of digital video are a necessary condition for the protocological hegemony of HD. Image resolution is valorised as an indicator of aesthetic quality and desirability. Screen size and an image clarity premised upon photographic realism, qualities long-associated in cinema and television with wealth or costliness and techno-social 'progress', retain in this digital *dispositif* a contentious and ill-defined affinity with the beautiful and the good. It is in the context of their challenge to this aesthetic hegemony that Benning's videos (both in their analogue and digital instances) are here reconsidered.

PixelVision

Sadie Benning began making videos in 1989, at the age of fifteen, after having been given a *Fisher Price* PXL-2000 camcorder (often referred to as *PixelVision*). The camera recorded black-and-white

images and sound onto the two channels of standard audio cassette tapes, with each tape holding about eleven minutes of footage in total. To decrease the required bandwidth for storing video, it produced frames at a very low resolution (120x90 pixels) and scanned the image sensor only fifteen times per second. To compensate for the small image size, a thick black border was added to the frame, preventing pixel loss to overscanning. The result was a highly distinctive visual style, characterised as grainy, blurry, dream-like and primitive in comparison to the images of high-end camcorders and television. The camera was released in 1987 and marketed as a toy for children, but its $179 price tag (the equivalent of over $400 or £300 today) meant it found little success in this market. However, the distinctive aesthetic and relatively low cost compared to high grade camera equipment made it an attractive option for a generation of artists and filmmakers for whom professional video technology was not available or simply not desired. Benning, who produced work using her *PixelVision* camera from 1989-1995, is the most well-known of these artists. Her works, largely made in the safety of her own bedroom, confront the anxieties of adolescence and her burgeoning queerness in a fragmentary, diaristic way that draws on popular media while rejecting the conventions of mainstream television and cinema. The marked 'Otherness' of the *PixelVision* image in relation to the hegemony of commercial image production served as a potent formal vehicle through which Benning was able to express and experiment with her queer adolescent experience.

The question of the value of images has long been a concern of Benning's. In a 1993 interview she remarked: "when I started making videotapes, I didn't realize their importance"; "I'd been taught all my life that because I was young, a woman, and queer, what I thought and felt was not valuable, so I was embarrassed by my creations"; "I don't see my images on TV. That means I'm not valuable. That means my sexuality doesn't sell beer" (Yablonsky 1993, 20). Decades prior to the digitisation and upload of her work to platforms like *YouTube* and *Ubuweb*, Benning perceived the devaluation of her work according to a representative regime which marginalised images that did not offer themselves up for exploitation. At this time, her work circulated almost exclusively though film festivals and institutional screenings through which it accrued some measure of cultural capital, but now, as digitally distributed video files, her works sit directly alongside conventionally valuable images on a platform which capitalises upon spectatorial attention itself. To watch Benning's work on *YouTube* is to participate in a system of exploitation in which the artworks exist primarily as content appropriated to extract data, command attention and generate advertising revenue.[2]

In relation to the increasingly high-resolution videos that flood *YouTube*, Benning's work— unlawfully uploaded and unauthorised, hidden from copyright claims behind a misspelt title[3] and safeguarded from deletion by its algorithmic invisibility—is typical of what Hito Steyerl has called the poor image, "a copy in motion": "an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution" (2012, 32). In Steyerl's account, the poor image is liberated from the cinema (or the archive), yet the result is the sacrifice of sensorial quality for the sake of accessibility. The poor image is degraded by its acceleration through digital networks, a process that mocks the promise

[2] Exemplary descriptions of this new mode of extraction and exploitation, generally seen as a new variation of capitalism, are found in Srnicek (2017), Wark (2019), and Zuboff (2015, 2018).

[3] This misspelt title, "A Place Colled Lovely1)", gives its title to this essay. That the title remains easily recognised by human users of *YouTube*, and that the video is discoverable by contextually-informed searches perhaps highlights the limitations of an algorithmic approach to copyright enforcement, though the video's persistence on the platform is probably better understood as a signal of moving image distributors' inability to devote time and financial resources to the fight against illegitimate circulation of their works.

of digital technology. Within the hierarchy of digital video dominated by crystal-clear high-resolution images, the poor image is marginalised—but poor images also reveal "the conditions of their marginalization, the constellation of social forces leading to their online circulation as poor images" (38). In Benning's case, the socio-aesthetic processes of exclusion and delegitimation that were the context for her *PixelVision* videos are reanimated as a set of protocols, software standards, and algorithmic decisions that determine the conditions of the work's visibility, whether on corporate content platforms, curated online archives, or peer-to-peer file sharing networks.

However, Benning's *PixelVision* works and their uploaded copies deviate from Steyerl's account of the poor image in an important way. Rather than degraded copies of 'superior' originals, the digital videos that circulate online or on DVD are encoded and decoded at a resolution higher than their native 120x90. Even at 144p, the lowest resolution at which Benning's *A Place Called Lovely* is viewable on *YouTube*, there is a significant transformation of the image which is particularly evident in the smooth blurring of the once-jagged edges of objects, especially those in motion. Where the sensor of the *PixelVision* camcorder was scanned at a mere 15Hz, producing a discrete image fifteen times per second, MPEG-4 videos, subject to lossy compression algorithms, coordinate the movement of pixels between keyframes at a much higher rate. The result is an image that does not flicker from one image to the next, but is in constant motion, displayed with constant luminosity. Compression artifacts, media distortions like fuzziness or blockiness caused by lossy compression, are thus common, ironically distorting Benning's work by artificially and arbitrarily subjecting the video to processes which find themselves tasked with compensating for a lack of information, rather than a surfeit. The work's sound, too, is subject to lossy compression, involving the removal of certain frequencies (outside the standardised range of human hearing) and of sounds below a certain decibel threshold, and the introduction of audio distortions especially noticeable at the lowest resolutions.

These digital effects also serve to add a new layer to what Laura Marks has called haptic visuality, "a term contrasted to optical visuality, [that] draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinaesthetics": "Haptic cinema does not invite identification with a figure so much as it encourages a bodily relationship between the viewer and the video image. Thus, it is not proper to speak of the object of a haptic look so much as to speak of a dynamic subjectivity between looker and image" (1998, 332). For Marks, Benning's work was already characteristic of a haptic cinema, with the unfocusable, low-resolution *PixelVision* camera producing images which exhibit an "uncanny loss of proportion in which big things slip beyond the horizon of [...] awareness while small events are arenas for a universe of feeling" (1998, 331). This erotic dimension of haptic video is, for Marks, the result of the viewer's look being pushed back to the surface of the image, which they respond to as to another body; "to the screen as another skin" (1998, 333). The compression artifacts present in digitised versions of Benning's video emphasise both the image's surface and its materiality; block boundary artifacts and 'mosquito noise', the shimmering aura that appears around objects as a result of pixel motion prediction, make sensible the algorithmic and protocological functions to which the image is subject. Rather than seeing these features as degradations of the image, their presence in this digitised version of Benning's work amounts to their recuperation as part of "the haptic as a feminist visual strategy", expressing a disaffection with hegemonic optical visuality and inviting not the deep gaze of cinema but the "caressing look" of haptic video (1998, 337-338). This mode of perception is intimately connected to embodied ways of knowing, attending to the deep connection between (non-visual) sense and memory as an escape from an increasingly optical regime of capture and control.

Benning's videos, in their digital form, embody a notion of the haptic that merges feminist materiality and strategies of embodied subjectification with an aesthetic and social critique of the conditions of image marginalisation within digital video networks.

Benning's videos reveal the limits of the protocological hegemony of digital images, inverting the standard functioning of the codec-induced transformations on which this HD hierarchy depends. In this way, the videos demonstrate how evolving technology continues to marginalise certain content based on aesthetic standards and socio-economic privilege while, from this marginal position, rearticulating the critical resistance and oppositional strategies that characterised Benning's *PixelVision* works in the first place. For all the supposed evolution of imaging technologies and channels of distribution, the imperfect upload of Benning's low-resolution artworks demonstrates how little the conditions of their marginalisation have changed. In our post-Internet context, their unruly pixels signify the same queer counterhegemonic opposition all the more sharply.

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Biography

Arron Santry is a PhD student at Goldsmiths, University of London, researching the aesthetics of digital artists' moving image. His work explores the question of art's autonomy and capacity for resistance in the context of digital control.

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