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Media and Sensation

In a New York Times article, technology writer Nellie Bowles suggests that readers “go gray” – to set their smartphone screen to grayscale. She writes:

I’ve been gray for a couple days, and it’s remarkable how well it has eased my twitchy phone checking, suggesting that one way to break phone attachment may be to, essentially, make my phone a little worse. We’re simple animals, excited by bright colors, it turns out.¹

What’s going on here? Diagnosing herself with a “smartphone addiction”, the writer suggests a sort-of primal and inadvertent reliance on personal technology. In a certain sense, I agree with her: it’s hard to deny that many are captivated by the stimulation of contemporary media. However, I’m not sure that turning an iPhone to grayscale will reverse course.

The Internet and social media have reconfigured reality beyond the screen. Take as an example Amorino, a popular new international gelato chain that recently opened a storefront near my house in New York. The shop differentiates its product in a unique way: it sells its gelato in the shape of a flower. Consumers can pick as many flavors as they wish, and a line of employees promptly begin the labor-intensive process of balancing ‘pedals’ of gelato onto a thin cone. The colorful ‘gelato roses’ that get produced are arguably connected to the ‘addiction’ that Bowles laments – they aren’t necessarily on her phone, but they have the same color-saturated lure that she wants to avoid.

¹ Nellie Bowles, “Is the Answer to Phone Addiction a Worse Phone?” *New York Times*, January 12, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/12/technology/grayscale-phone.html>.



We can characterize Amorino's edible kitsch as a manifestation of the eye-catching, addictive quality of digital social media. The image comes from an article entitled "These Gelato Roses Are Taking Over Instagram." A retort might be: would gelato be shaped like a rose *if not for Instagram*? Is gelato taking over Instagram, or is Instagram taking over gelato?

Consumer culture and design have radically changed as a result of digital social media. This shift has projected signs onto spaces and structures for reasons that elude most viewers. Amorino's gelato roses join a swath of chic markets, post-modern buildings and restaurant interiors that have embraced kitschy visual motifs.

How can we explain the rise of seemingly purposeless, mimetic forms in our consumerist and iconographic culture? Theorists of media, photography and video may provide hints. André Bazin, in "What is Cinema?" finds the indexicality of photo and video to be an essential property. He writes:

² Image Source: @rovingaround [Instagram handle], used in Lyndsey Matthews and Sarah Weinberg, "These Gelato Roses Are Taking Over Instagram," *Delish*, February 7, 2017, <https://www.delish.com/food/videos/a51420/gelato-roses-video/>.

Photography's objectivity confers upon it a degree of credibility absent from any painting. Whatever the objections of our critical faculties, we are obliged to believe in the existence of the object represented: it truly is re-presented, made present in time and space. Photography transfers reality from the object depicted to its reproduction.³

In the case where a photograph or video captures a sensory experience, we see that a transfer occurs: a video recipe or fast-food advertisement can be easily distributed to large numbers of people and cause many mouths to water. However, the "objectivity" or "belief without reservation" (8) described by Bazin don't seem to accurately describe the experiential effect of digital media. For example, heavily doctored photos of fast food in an advertisement may captivate us, even when we know full well that these photos are not quite indexical of the fast food experience. Similarly puzzling, gelato in the shape of a flower may grab our attention more successfully than equally-delicious but visually uninteresting gelato.

Thus, I find that the ease of audio and visual reproduction does not just index a past sensory experience. Instead, it *invokes* a sensory experience, and by doing so *changes* the sensorium. Because of social media, we have a radically new economy of sensory consummation.

In other words, Amorino's success forces a new understanding of consumer experience. It's not just the taste of the food or the service that brings profit and attention. Visual stimulation is displacing tactile and olfactory sensation. Simultaneously, the buyer is no longer the only consumer. Every Instagram follower who sees a reproduced image shares in the experience of an Amorino visit.

In "Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Fredric Jameson brings up the relationship between media, the sensorium and architecture: "The appetite for

³ André Bazin, translated by Timothy Barnard, "What is Cinema?" *caboose*, Montreal. Originally published 1967. Page 8.

architecture today . . . is [in reality] an appetite for photography: what we want to consume today are not the buildings themselves, which you scarcely even recognize as you round the freeway.”⁴ Here, Jameson echoes Heidegger’s “Age of the World Picture,” in which he characterizes the modern era as uniquely concerned with representation and reproduction.⁵ Despite significant changes to the media landscape since Heidegger wrote, we see that, indeed, our sensory perception has been totally molded by our picture-driven media exposure. Jameson continues:

Many are the postmodern buildings that seem to have been designed for photography, where alone they flash into brilliant existence and actuality with all the phosphorescence of the high-tech orchestra on CD. Any return to the haptic and the tactile . . . seem to hearken back to Louis Kahn and the ‘late modern,’ when building materials were expensive and of the finest quality and people still wore suits and ties.⁶

Here, Jameson observes a transition away from “the haptic and the tactile.” In its place, a photo-realistic, hyper-colorful world has taken shape. This is the world that Bowles laments is causing her “smartphone addiction,” and the world that Amorino has brilliantly capitalized on. Jameson continues, “what we take for color in the outside real world is nothing but information on some inner computer program, retranslating the data and marking it with the appropriate hue, like the tinting of classical Hollywood movies.”⁷ The sensorium not only drives the medial conditions of our time – it is completely predicated on the media landscape that we find ourselves embedded in.

Thus, the kind of negotiation that occurs between different aspects of the sensorium is driven by media exposure. The ease of visual and audio transmission has led to a marked

⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *Duke University Press*, published 1991. Pages 98-99.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” *Harper Colophone*, first published 1977.

⁶ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 99.

⁷ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 99.

shift away from olfactory and tactile perception. In exchange, new accessibility gives rise to developments and understandings that strip away the individuality of the sensorium. Indeed, some sensations have only recently been identified or understood because of the advent of social media. Autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR, got its name in 2012 and has since become a massive Internet phenomenon. The feeling is described as tingly, and satisfying, and the term has become a top-ten search term on YouTube internationally.⁸ Similarly popular, “slime videos” depict people playing with and squishing slime with their hands. The heightened audio and visual aspects of these videos (often with bright colors and sprinkles) imply a need to compensate for the sensations that are not as easy to transmit.



⁸ Joshua Hardwick, “Top YouTube Searches (as of February 2019),” *ahrefs blog*, February 1, 2019, <https://ahrefs.com/blog/top-youtube-searches/>.

⁹ InThe Best Satisfying [YouTube page], “The Most Satisfying Slime ASMR Videos | Relaxing Oddly Satisfying Slime 2019 | 125,” *YouTube*, screenshot at 9:49. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JY3ep0yiU0c>.

These videos re-produce a presumably tactile concept of ‘slime’ with audio and visual stimuli and, by doing so, are transforming our perception. The use of objects like sprinkles – colorful kitsch motifs that grab our attention – indicate an embrace of color-saturated visual legibilities and a simultaneous de-emphasis on less reproducible senses – taste, smell, and touch. To invoke the sense of ‘slimy’, therefore, we no longer need to get our hands dirty.

Walter Benjamin speaks about the transitions that result from reproducibility in photography. He too finds that media conditions can deeply alter the sensorium:

The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for all that is the same in the world has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction.¹⁰

By its nature, reproduction does something to the senses. For Benjamin, the signature of the new kind of perception that arises from reproduction is a “destruction of the aura,” which we might think of as a sort of annihilation of individualized sensation. Suddenly, reproduction requires that we make sensation explainable, reproducible and thus transactional. While Bazin believed photography to be indexical of a kind of static or frozen past, Benjamin seems to account more for photography’s ability to change perception over time.

Of course, our contemporary media landscape is complex and poses many new and unique challenges. However, by understanding the media theoretic underpinning of our image-saturated culture, we begin to shed light on the vast impact of social media and personal devices. In the case of sensory-experiential reproduction, Bazin’s account of image-as-index seems to fall short of explaining what’s going on. Instead, we situate the kind of

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media,” chapter entitled “Little History of Photography,” *Harvard University Press*, 2008, page 286.

sensory economy using Jameson and Benjamin's theories of photographic reproduction. Rose-shaped gelatos suggest that social media is changing the way we sense. Whether we switch our iPhones to grayscale, roll our eyes at ASMR, or prefer to eat regular gelato, we're unlikely to radically change our society without grappling deeply with our relationship to media.

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