

For this prompt, I will be representing Hito Steyerl's *In Defence of the Poor Image*, through the structure and form of Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*.

"In his Exercises, Raymond Queneau demonstrates not how to build a style but how to dismantle one."
(Igarashi, 2013)

A comparison between *Exercises in Style* by Raymond Queneau and Hito Steyerl's *In Defence of the Poor Image* is not one that appears significantly far-fetched; as Queneau dismantles styles of writing, Steyerl forces us to address the "class society of images" and the hierarchies created as a consequence of it.

Throughout her essay, Steyerl lists and describes various meanings for the poor image, beginning immediately with: *"The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard...It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image."* (Steyerl, 2012) Here, within this definition itself, we have eight meanings of the image: a copy, a ghost, a preview, and so on. The list goes on—from distribution to file name to the very system in which it exists—the poor image is inseparable from the way it is represented. It is here that we understand how Queneau's exercises are conducted in a similar manner: much like the image, a story is inseparable from the way that it is told.

In her text, Steyerl examines the hierarchy of images and the process by which non-commercial imagery is obscured. By doing so, she attempts to take apart our inherent and socialized undervaluing of the poor image - which has the power to democratize visual culture, resist privatization and commodification of content, and create alternative economies of images. We find a similar approach in Queneau's work, which challenges the hierarchy of the literary form, exemplifying the ways in which literary meaning can be unstable and ever-expanding.

However, while Steyerl's essay is powerful in describing the poor image and its dynamics, it refuses to substantially address the connection between violence, oppression, and the (poor) image.¹ Images of violence are often circulated in "low resolution" and "raw" forms; here, the poor image hardly has a glorious function but rather comes with various ethical concerns. Interestingly, a large part of Steyerl's enquiry relate to images as existing in the social structures of commodification, post-colonialism and post-socialism; it should then become evidently impossible not to examine how violence and trauma within these structures is shaped, informed, witnessed and distributed directly through poor images.²

I will thus be working with a quote that I believe reflects this dissonance metaphorically, while also drawing attention to the potential overlap between the "poor" and violent image:

"Poor images are the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores. They testify to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images...They spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification. Poor images show the rare, the obvious, and the unbelievable—that is, if we can still manage to decipher it."

In re-presenting Steyerl's writing through the form of Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, I am attempting to reproduce and reframe her arguments such that their meaning can be emphasized, as well as distorted. This exercise acts as a performance of the poor image in itself: the (re)writing becomes a "poor image" of its original form.

¹ Needless to say, I also have personal reservations against the referencing of Woody Allen and/or his work as a central example, however relevant or significant the point being made might be.

² Here, we might consider Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, which addresses devaluation through over-use or repetition (the poor image as "reproduced, ripped, remixed, copied and pasted") and the aestheticisation of suffering.



I don't really know what the poor image is...are they the miserable remnants of the screen? The scraps of visual production? The leftovers of the digital economy? Yes, I think that's what they are.

But rather, what do these images represent? How are they really created? Surely through certain violent means; perhaps through transfers and displacement?

And for what? For pleasure and death? Conspiracy theories? Are they an act of resistance or futility? More precisely... Maybe they show the rare or obvious... Perhaps even the shocking. But for who? And can we actually understand them?

³Illustrations and titles have been sourced from Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*; in order to reflect the style of writing, a few phrases and words have also been repeated from the source.



Images.

Images that are poor.

Wretched of the Screen. That's what they are.

Debris of audiovisual production.

Trash on the shores of digital economies.

Violent dislocation. That's the formation.

Dislocation.

Transferrals.

Displacement.

Spreading pleasure or death. That's the action.

Conspiracies or bootlegs.

Resistance or stultification.

Rare, obvious and unbelievable. That's what they show.

Often difficult to decipher. That's the conclusion.

Logical conclusion.



Manifesto for the Poor Image.

We are the Wretched of the Screen. We claim the debris and the trash of digital economies. We travel through violent and unrestricted means: dislocated, transferred and displaced. We are the leftovers of audiovisual production: we spread pleasure and death. Resistance and stultification. We are defiant and rare; obvious and unbelievable.

The poor image is ours to decipher.

References

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