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FILM, MEDIA, AND THE SILLY:
ON THE FORMS AND FEELINGS OF QUEER AND TRANS SILLINESS

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plus c'est bête, c'est mieux
the sillier the better

- Julia Kristeva

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the aesthetic, affective, and political dimensions of “silliness” across popular digital culture, taking the silly to be a key category of analysis for queer and trans of color studies of media. While the silly comes up widely across media, culture, and theory, its uses are surprisingly inconsistent. In this dissertation, the silly reveals itself to be aesthetically ambiguous, affectively opaque, and politically ambivalent—a deeply slippery, sticky, and messy term called on to do a range of work without being articulated as its own concept. Seizing on its internal incoherences, I argue that the silly finds distinctly transqueer/ed expressions in media through its playful de/re-familiarizations, minor aesthetic irritations, and often-unbearable affective forms. Through a series of cases, I look at how we can see, hear, and feel the silly in digital media objects. Working to upend familiar and sober ways of knowing, thinking about, and doing things with silliness across assemblages of race, gender, and sexuality, this dissertation takes the silly’s transqueer inflections to be key to studies of media and culture in the humanities that aim to resist, refuse, and unravel the sovereign and humorless, but only ever incompletely, reluctantly, briefly, or accidentally. The silly’s deep conflict with redemption in crisis times is central to this project, which nonetheless insists on sillily flailing with/in media’s small, minor, or otherwise inconsequential details, soaring aimlessly into the silly’s wild nonsovereignty.

While the first chapter offers an initial conceptualizing and calibration of the silly and the transqueer in media studies, the remaining three chapters take on specific digital media objects as case studies for thinking transqueerly with silliness. In Chapter 2, I look at irritational aesthetics of silliness in hyperpop music videos by transgender and nonbinary artists, such as SOPHIE and Arca, where abrasive digital modulations produce silly effects in the face and voice, and where silliness is deployed as a transfeminist opacity tactic. In Chapter 3, I turn to the screenlife horror

film *Unfriended* (2014) and its use of the desktop gimmick, which formally exploits the silly exteriorizations of thinking with computers as it playfully refamiliarizes the neoliberal queer politics of the 2010s cultural moment via its confrontationally silly response to and reworking of an early Google ad campaign for the “It Gets Better” movement. In Chapter 4, I explore more aggressively abject forms of silliness in *The Eric André Show* (2012-), a television comedy series saturated by the intensities of queer negativity, black anality, and often-unfunny forms of silliness, which all interoperate and become uniquely difficult to bear, allowing for ambivalent, unruly, and less-sovereign possibilities that recuperative, representational politics do not.

Across these chapters, I turn to silliness at the intersection of form, feeling, mediation, and culture, overall working to trouble its counter/political guarantee. The silly appears, in this dissertation, as neither wholly frivolous nor inherently affirming; rather, it is a contested, ambivalent force that can equally unravel or reinforce our cruel attachments to the normative, to the self-sovereign, and to the promises of good life fantasies.

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PREFACE
Silly This, Silly That



I was in a cell. I knew that all night long my tube of vaseline would be exposed to the scorn [...] of a group of strong, handsome, husky policemen.[...] I was sure that this puny and most humble object would hold its own against them; by its mere presence it would be able to exasperate all the police in the world; it would draw down upon itself contempt, hatred, white and dumb rages. It would perhaps be slightly bantering—like a tragic hero amused at stirring up the wrath of the gods—indestructible, like him, faithful to my happiness, and proud. I would like to hymn it with the newest words in the French language. But I would have also liked to fight for it, to organize massacres in its honor and bedeck a countryside at twilight with red bunting. I would indeed rather have shed blood than repudiate that silly object.

- Jean Genet¹



Some words seem to almost insinuate their meanings just by the way they sound. I have always felt that “*silly*” is one such word. Almost onomatopoeic. Perhaps it’s (the sound of) *-illy*.

And this is just the beginning of the goosery...



I don’t know what silliness is...

...but I refuse to repudiate it.



Silliness. It’s a concept with a relentless power to frustrate all efforts to pinpoint it down to stability. It’s sticky, slippery. It’s internally incoherent. *Queer*, even? Let’s que(e)ry...

¹ Jean Genet, *The Thief’s Journal*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Grove Press 1964), 21-22.

For one, it's a bubbly, poofy thing. It's bright. It's goofy.

Like a helium high. A glittery mist. Shimmers only ever held lightly.

A nimble reaction to demands of hardness. To the weight of living.

It rubs. But only gently? A wink, a wobble. Like a small skipping stone's soft ripples, delicately kissing the water's smooth and shiny surface. Mildly irritational, the reverberating echoes of its brief dance contorting a face's specular reflection.

*"Where got'st thou that goose look?"*²

The world is turning into stone, a slow and tenebrous petrification, and the "only hero able to cut off Medusa's head is Perseus, who flies with winged sandals," laments Italo Calvino; "To cut off Medusa's head without being turned to stone, Perseus supports himself on the very lightest of things, the winds and the clouds, and fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an image caught in a mirror."³ A fugitive lightness.

Sillied vision. A soft side-eye, working *aslant* and *askance*. Like the silly's *-illy*.

For two, it's also a heavy, gloopy thing. It's hard. It's dense.

Like a viscous blast of snot-green slime. Or a queer's tube of vaseline.

Where hallucinogenic yams grow on a Swamp Thing. A *jouissance* in the mud.

² William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (Simon & Schuster, 2003), 169.

³ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the next Millennium* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 4.

It cuts. Often violently? A hard hit from something as soft as whipped cream. It's a dollhouse of mutilated Barbies, gleefully beheaded. It's a titty twister. A wet willy. It steps on the tines of a garden rake and...SMACK! Goofs lacerate. An out-of-nowhere grand piano, tumbling, falling, squashing a thing flat. A boulder, a cartoon anvil, a steamrolled coyote who snaps back to life, instantly reshaped like Putty (of the Silly™ variety).

A suspended moment...a *slight* break...and the systems quickly reimpose themselves...

Am I depressed or just silly?

...silliness slips dangerously into the orbit of anxiety.

The *DSM-V* defines “silliness” as an affect of childlike “lability (i.e., the alternation among euphoria, dysphoria, and irritability)” that is potentially indicative of psychosis in adults.⁴

Why is *silliness* so close to *illness*? ∩(°_o)∩

It's either-or, neither-nor, both-and. A *willy-nilly* nonbinariness. Somewhere between (or beyond) a whoopie cushion and a thumbtack in the ass. “(I'm) too silly to distinguish (the two),” as goes the Chinese slang.⁵ It's a not-too-light being. Not-too-enlightened or gravity-defying. It's a not-too-heavy feeling. Not-too-benighted or gravity-obedient. It's weightless and crushing, featherlight and leaden. Perhaps gravity ambivalent? *Trans**, even?

⁴ American Psychiatric Association, ed., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5-TR*, 5th ed., rev. ed. (American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022), 144-145.

⁵ From the phrase “傻傻分不清楚,” meaning “cannot tell (two things) apart,” “cannot tell one thing from another,” or “(I'm) too silly to distinguish (the two).”

And fungible, like balloons and honey.

Christopher Robin: *Oh, Pooh, there's more to life than just balloons and honey.*

Winnie-the-Pooh: *Are you sure?*

Christopher Robin: *Silly bear.*⁶

Silly, barely there. Like sudden, successive, choppy leaps, now forwards, now back. It escapes from the devouring jaws that rush forward in a straight line, from all sustained attention.

Airheaded yet thickheaded. It asks: "Is mayonnaise an instrument?"

It answers: "Horseradish is not an instrument either."⁷ But perhaps it is...

It's... a diamond and a zircon. A silk and polyester blend.

A towering boloney and *foie gras* sandwich, Scooby-style, swallowed whole.

A talking catdog. A frantic spongeboy...both household product and poriferan, manufactured and natural, prepackaged and wild.

It's... an avant-gardist shopping for the "most breastlike, most splendidly citroid" fruit.⁸ From darkness, a bright yellow nippily ellipsoid gradually comes into sight, then disappears back into shadow. Seven minutes of erotic-cosmic imagery from a fucking *Lemon* (1969).

Just sitting there.

⁶ *Christopher Robin* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018).

⁷ "Band Geeks," *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Nickelodeon, 2001).

⁸ Hollis Frampton and Scott MacDonald, "Interview with Hollis Frampton: The Early Years," *October* 12 (1980): 116.

It's... the smirk and the shriek, the wink and the wound, the joy that splits open into something unbearable. It makes the corners of your mouth twitch a little...upward?

It makes others' faces tense, eyes roll, brows furrow, assholes pucker.

Therein lies its magic—it's always teetering on the edge of something else. Too much. And not enough. "Well maybe it *is* stupid, but it's *also* dumb."⁹ And dumber...and dumberer. Silly, much like the optical illusion that invites perception to register a duck and then a rabbit, then the "aha!" it's a duck *and* a rabbit, a duck-rabbit, a rabbit-duck. Is it dabbit or ruck season?

Yes, and...? Too silly and sillier still...

... "*the seely Goose beguiles.*"¹⁰



But *ζαθανβ λυμ*...Queer as in..."That's so gay!" as in..."That's so silly!" as in...

...not so s—t—r—a—i—g—h—t—> as in...not curved or bent as in...unswerving...as in quite clear, not so opaque. Some hetero-serious no-nonsense nonsense.

A straight answer? The spirit of a film's "'silly', giggly, *naughty* quality...which at times feels irritating, unhelpful to the cause of gay rights, but at others is a tonic refusal to grow up into the drab oppressiveness of normal straightness."¹¹ Silly as in...queer's irreverent swerves...

The nonsovereignty of a fart.

⁹ "The Camping Episode," *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Nickelodeon, 2004).

¹⁰ Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *The Paradise of Dainty Devices (1576–1606)* (Harvard University Press, 1927), 46

¹¹ Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2003[1990]), 132.

It's a smug little *la-la-la* in the face of...*gestures broadly at current events.* A *leedle-leedle-lee* at la-di-da bureaucrats that cultivate a whirlwind of insignificant *blah-blah-blahs* and pointless *wah-wah-wahs*—the serious business of a “Ministry of Silly Walks”...

*“But Eeyore was saying to himself, ‘This writing business. Pencils and what-not. Over-rated, if you ask me. Silly stuff. Nothing in it.’”*¹²

Perhaps what we need is a “Ministry of Silly Thoughts”...

...to think with the giggle in the glitch.

To ask queerer que(e)ries. The precarious trans*forms of a nonbinary concept. Agnostic to boundaries. *Transqueerying* the unexpected and unexplained. It winks at (anti)normativity but rarely ever lingers in its gaze. *Sillying* as in...“To queer something doesn’t mean just to stick an antinormative needle into it,” writes Lauren Berlant, “but to open up a vein to unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions.”¹³ To be infected by the silly’s contaminants...

It’s... like MSG. Marginalized yet ubiquitous, feared yet desired. That mysterious crystalline powder. An umami taste, a deliciously (not-so-)dangerous (not-so-)foreign matter. Disconcerting when non-whites use it...but just fine everywhere else. MSG is good stuff...

...“plus c’est bête, c’est mieux,” or “the sillier the better.”¹⁴

¹² A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1926), 157.

¹³ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Duke University Press, 2022), 16.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, “Ellipsis on Dread and the Specular Seduction,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, trans. Dolores Burdick (Columbia University Press, 1986) 238-239.



What if, instead of chasing coherence, we let ourselves trip and tumble toward something more dazzlingly askew? Something sillier? Sillier somethings?

And this is *still* just the beginning of the goosery...



*“No! You dense, irritating, miniature beast of burden!
Ogres are like onions! End of story! Bye-bye! See ya later...”*¹⁵

...welcome to the Ministry of ∞ILLY Thoughts.

¹⁵ *Shrek* (DreamWorks Pictures, 2001).



A silly place where...

...a different strategy of reading can be productive for the analysis of contemporary American life. One does not find the materials of the patriotic public sphere theorizing citizenship in either beautiful or coherent ways. These materials frequently use the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things, like what constitutes intimate relations, political personhood, and national life. In this book I am conducting a counterpolitics of the silly object by focusing on some instances of it and by developing a mode of criticism and conceptualization that reads the waste materials of everyday communication in the national public sphere as pivotal documents in the construction, experience, and rhetoric of quotidian citizenship in the United States. The very improvisatory ephemerality of the archive makes it worth reading. Its very popularity, its effects on the law and on everyday life, makes it important. Its very ordinariness requires an intensified critical engagement with what had been merely undramatically explicit.

- Lauren Berlant¹⁶



◆ *Now let's return to where we began...* ◆

¹⁶ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), 12.

INTRODUCTION

What Is | Silly? | Trans? | Queer? | Media?

Put something silly in the world / That ain't been there before.

- Shel Silverstein¹

I.

“Silliness” is an internally incoherent category; it is a concept with unstable forms, feelings, and politics. I hope, by now, that this—the silly’s definitional slipperiness and stickiness—has become “clearer”...and perhaps even a bit queerer. But this dissertation is not here to clarify silliness. Silliness is messy shit and sometimes shit stays messy. In the spirit of the silly’s opacities, this dissertation does not aim to introduce a new concept with the idea of “silly media.” Nor does it aim to produce a distinct “theory of silliness,” or even a clear “definition” of the term. It is not a taxonomy, an index, or a guide, not a defense of the frivolous or a manifesto for the unserious. This is a project that begins in refusal—a refusal to define, to stabilize, to resolve. A refusal to settle into a single form, feeling, or function. A refusal to “repudiate that silly object,” in the words of Jean Genet. A refusal to categorize the silly as either normative or radical. But silliness is not a refusal of the serious—it flirts with its familiarity, leaks into it, makes it weird/er. Silliness, much like transness or queerness, is not a concept to be mastered but a mood, a motion, a mess to move with, to get lost in...a beginning with no clear end in sight.

Slipping and sticking across the term’s muddled incoherences—its elastic trans*forms and nonbinary shapes, its stuff-like things and thing-like stuffs—I think queerly with the silly: queerying the silly and sillying the queery. More specifically, I aim to think *transqueerly* with the silly, *transqueerying* its ambiguous forms, ambivalent feelings, and general messiness, not as an afterthought but as a structuring force in contemporary digital media cultures—one that flits,

¹ Shel Silverstein, *A Light in the Attic* (HarperCollins, 1981), 22.

fizzes, loops, and wobbles in ways that are at once pleasurable, unbearable, and at times even mildly transformative. What emerges in this dissertation is not a new concept or category, but a *transqueer* method: a way of transqueerly thinking, feeling, and making meaning with and through the silly's shapeshifting aesthetics and politics in and across digital film and media, taking a look at some of the specific ways in which it moves through texts as a form of affect.

II.

I admit I am anxious to define "silliness." The "anxiety to define," which for Lauren Berlant is "a key feature of being in proximity to all magnetic ideas," cleaves to silliness, as it does to "love" for Berlant, and so it follows that its conversion "into a properly political concept must induce attention to what to do with the freight the term ports with it: in this case, quite a huge dust ball."² For the silly is already doing too much and not enough—just like queerness, just like transness, just like theory when it's trying too hard. Working with the "silly" as a key concept for transqueer studies of digital media thus lies in "reconciling its essential marginality with its evident ubiquity, in acknowledging its diversity while still making sense of it," as Mark Booth does in his work on "camp."³ Doing so, I take the minor status of the "silly," a critically marginalized and yet culturally near-ubiquitous category, and show that it operates in (often quite small) ways that no one has yet formalized, partly because it has, across its historical and contemporary usages, consistently come up in ways that are completely incoherent.

III.

Picture that thing we call "laughter." What does it look like? A smile? A chuckle? An emoji? A "lololol" or "hahaha"? This is a key question for Frances McDonald in *Posthumorism*:

² Lauren Berlant, "A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE: Three Approaches in Ten Pages," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 683.

³ Mark Booth, "'Campe-Toi!: On the Origins and Definitions of Camp,'" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 66.

The Modernist Affect of Laughter, her 2023 formalist study of humorless, human-less laughter.

McDonald opens her book with a set of related questions, strategically positioned underneath a reproduction of American artist Forrest Myers' abstract sculpture *E = MC³* (1963), asking:

What is the shape of a laugh? How would you sculpt one from plastic or glass? Perhaps you are picturing the human body caught in a spasm of laughter—a ridged throat and a red, round mouth. This is to be expected but try, now, to extract laughter from the fleshly coordinates of the human body. What shape is this laugh? What materials would you use to give it form? Do you envision a monumental stone curve? A fibrous lattice? A soft, labial fold?⁴

Can we *see*, *hear*, or *feel* “laughter” in *stuff* and *things*, in plastic, glass, light, shadow, fabric, flesh, etc.? Through these questions, McDonald considers how we might figure “laughter” as something beyond humor and other than an expression and index of the human—something more like a minor formal affect. She argues that we “must rewire language’s conventions and structures” in order to “say” laughter—to utter the shape of an affect after humanism.⁵

To do so, McDonald turns to a 1966 essay by American artist Robert Smithson. In his search for what he calls the “ha-ha-crystal,” or “solid state hilarity,” Smithson claims that Myers’ minimalist abstract structures—with their hard, brilliant surfaces—give form to laughter. In its “unsmiling geometries of aluminum, plastic, and glass,” Smithson senses the presence of a kind of humorless “silliness” stripped of its human coordinates. “Myers sets hard titter against soft snickers, and puts hard guffaws onto soft giggles,” he writes; “A fit of silliness becomes a rhomboid, a high-pitched discharge becomes prismatic, a happy outburst becomes a cube, and so forth.”⁶ Extracted not only from the human, but also from any sense of humor, the “silly” takes shape in “lines and surfaces, angles and vectors.”⁷ This “fit of silliness,” which moves between

⁴ Frances McDonald, *Posthumorism: The Modernist Affect of Laughter* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 1-2.

⁵ McDonald, *Posthumorism*, 16.

⁶ Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (University of California Press, 1996), 22, quoted in McDonald, *Posthumorism*, 2.

⁷ McDonald, *Posthumorism*, 2.

soft and *hard* feelings, takes shape not as disorder but as a felt excess of order. This is silliness as a material substance—pure form. It is a formal affect uncoupled from individual bodily response.

I am driven to ask a related question: What is the shape of silliness? How can a “fit of silliness” become a rhomboid, a lame geometric shape? If silliness, as I construe it in this dissertation, is distinct from laughter as such, how (if at all) do its aesthetics and formal qualities differ? Can you picture the silly? What do you see? While, in a simpler mode, the laugh has a much more easily recognizable form, that bent line we call a smile (☺), the silly has no obvious shape or form. And, more difficultly, silliness is never just one thing—it is dull and sharp, light and heavy, soft and hard—and it is not easily reducible to exteriorizations of the human body, to simple facial reactions or bodily movements. In fact, the most common emoji used to convey a “silly” expression is :3 which combines : (eyes) with 3 (cat-like smile). Human expression alone is evidently not enough to convey a translingual “silliness.” The silly, moreover, is never just one feeling—it flickers between delight and irritation, pleasure and discomfort. And it stretches and strains across mediums, modes, genres, bodies, formats, performances, gestures, and sensations.

So, then, how do we *see* silliness? How do we *hear* it? How do we *feel* it? How do we *utter* silliness? How do we *make* it? *Something* silly. Silly *somethings*.

IV.

The *stuff* of silliness...it’s like one of those ridiculously slippery water snake wriggler toys from the 90s. Does it even have a name? How do I describe it? It’s that squishy, eggroll-shaped, translucent, plasticky tube filled with some kind of opaque (likely toxic?) pearly plasma or glittery goo and sometimes with little sea creatures and which endlessly slips and slides from hand to hand, only ever held loosely, until one day it pops! And all its slimy insides get everywhere, slippery, sticky, kind of gross, and impossible to clean up.

V.

This dissertation argues that, in the twenty-first century, the digital has become the *stuff* of silliness—holding together a massive, disorderly, and “silly” archive of digital artefacts, a wacky assemblage of memes, gifs, posts, shares, fails, glitches, LOLs, emojis, backrooms, AI goofs, and all sorts of other cursed, dank, deep-fried, or otherwise “unserious” content. It’s clear that digital media has had and continues to have a deep, entrenched affinity for the forms and feelings of silliness. The digital makes silliness contagious, a contaminant that spreads, mutates, and reinvents itself with each remix, each repost, each unexpected error. The digital is the potent platform where the unruly ordinariness of the “silly” can also double as a politics, a born-digital language for both ridiculing the powerful and oppressing the powerless. By regularly consuming these artefacts, users have learned to manipulate the digital to make particular things silly and to feel silly in political ways. More generously, users have learned to make and feel silliness out of and in just about everything, everyway, and in every direction. Silliness is “our” politics.

But, beyond goofy memes, gifs, and posts, this dissertation asks: what does born-digital silliness really *look* and *feel* like, and what can it tell us about how silly aesthetics and affects gather, take shape, and disperse through digital environments—from algorithmic manipulations to electronic modulations, computational glitches, special effects, sonic shimmers, crude filters, fake faces, bad chroma-keying, weird composites, irritating montages, strange color-gradings, excess mediations, uncanny familiarizations, and so on?

As I argue, it is the digital’s inherent malleability—its receptivity to all sorts of screwing around—that makes it especially prone to silly creation and silly reception, from the quirky fuckery of the silly’s digital aesthetics to the queasy precarity of the silly’s digital feelings. In this dissertation, I argue that (reading with) the digital requires a closer engagement with and

more careful consideration of its contagiously silly formalisms—the screwy shapes and tacky surfaces of silliness in/as the digital—just as (a reading with) the silly requires close and careful attention to the increasingly weird, amusing, and often-unruly forms of the digital. In other words, this project slips and sticks with silliness as a surface-level phenomenon, engaging in a more sensuous and sensual approach to its superficial, opaque, and/or minor textual erotics—a *transqueerying* of the silly with/in the digital through an intimate, passionate, and nonsovereign attachment to the surfaces, textures, and rhythms of a born-digital silliness.

VI.

But where to begin? Perhaps it's useful to first look at a more explicit usage of the “silly” in contemporary media. Consider the digital music video for Ghanaian American rapper V.I.C.'s song “Get Silly,” a hyphy one-hit wonder from 2008.⁸ The digital video features V.I.C. and producer Soulja Boy “getting silly” against a flat backdrop with fluctuating, vibrant colors, 2-D computer-generated (CG) animations, and flashing neon text. The digital video's aesthetics are fairly straightforward, a simple digital landscape matching the song's barebones but bouncy synthesized beat, built from just a handful of basic royalty-free sounds—including a repeated high-pitched, lullaby-like xylophone-patch melody, occasionally punctured by staccato “hey!s” and hard “orchestra hits.” The video not only finds its silliness in the titular, lyrical, or bodily performance of “getting silly,” but also expresses itself through the formal simplicity of the video's unabashedly crude digital effects and its bold and bright CG, color-changing backdrop.

Here, an aesthetic of silliness takes shape in/through an excess of simplicity, where an exaggeration of color meets a simplification of shape via the video's basic early-digital effects. At the same time, amidst this clunkiness, the aesthetic fluidity of the color-changing backdrop

⁸ “Get Silly” is produced by Mr. Collipark and Soulja Boy. The video is directed by Dale “Rage” Resteghini.



Figure 0.1. Stills from the music video for V.I.C.’s “Get Silly” (2008).

often matches the aesthetic fluidity of the dancing performers, where, in one particular shot, the digitally manipulated bodies of V.I.C. and Soulja Boy are rendered as the flowy liquid inside of a percolating lava lamp. Such “silly” formal manipulations of the black body are frequent in the music video, where in other instances we see the artists shrunk, enlarged, or even duplicated across the flat digital landscape (Figure 0.1). The titular “Get Silly” dance that’s featured in the video also emphasizes a kind of physical fluidity in/through the simple yet unruly movement of limbs—of goofily wobbly arms and legs. In tandem with the aesthetic flux of colors and bodies, the sudden punctuations of poor, rudimentary digital 2-D animations—e.g. an island, bowling pins, various geometric shapes, and flat neon text—also have a musical correlation in the generic yet hard-hitting “orchestral hit” sound that punctuates the song.

All throughout, the colorful shots in the video are intercut with unmanipulated scenes of black joy in ordinary places (a car, barber shop, club, etc.). Some moments even adopt protest

imagery, with a group of black youth and background dancers appearing uniformly dressed in black t-shirts that read “Get Silly” while holding up picket signs that also read “Get Silly.” Set against these images, the lyrical repetition of “Get Silly” becomes a sort of rallying cry, a potentially rebellious, radically unproductive manifesto. For decades in hip-hop, the phrase “get silly” (especially in the hyphy scene) has been viewed as a form of playful self-expression, typically referring to acts of going “crazy” and/or a type of dance. With “Get Silly” releasing at a time when working-class black Americans were hit especially hard by the Great Recession of 2007-2009, “getting silly” promised a needed reprieve. In these moments, in the video and beyond, “getting silly” is extended to a wider public, becoming a connective and collective performance, one that I will later argue takes the shape of a lovingly nonsovereign relationality.⁹

Beyond the obvious titular and lyrical citation of the “silly,” V.I.C.’s song itself adopts a playfully silly sonic aesthetic, sounding more or less like a club-worthy, hyphy-style lullaby, while its video also adopts a silly digital sensibility, using color, amongst other visual elements, to illuminate the (potentially) resistant and communal forms of silliness central to ordinary black life. This, however, is not without its complications and ambivalences. In the song and video, the formal affects of “getting silly” are inextricably linked with self-aggrandizement, braggadocios masculinity, wealth accumulation, and aspirational living. In part, “getting silly” becomes a neoliberal mantra for racial uplift tethered to capitalist fantasies—aimed at getting the working-

⁹ While the “Get Silly” video now exists on YouTube only as a very low-grade, low-resolution copy, the “silly” has been forcefully adopted by more recent black artists like Houston rapper TisaKorean, a.k.a Mr. Silly Flow, the King of Silly. Tisa’s entire ethos as an artist is about getting silly—it’s in his music, videos, and performances, which bring to mind hip-hop’s “get silly” era in the 2000s. Tisa’s silliness puts him at the vanguard of a new movement that’s as punk as it is puerile. His albums, including “pResiLly” and “In Silly We Trust,” adopt an abstract, chaotic approach to rap. For example, “Tilly Wonka,” the intro to his album “mr.siLLYfLow,” flips a sample of Gene Wilder’s “Pure Imagination” from the 1971 *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* into a canvas for Tisa to punch in brushstrokes of unpolished silliness, turning the sample up to deafening levels and mixing in hand claps, a rumbling bass, and an oddly relaxed flow. “Imagine if you was this silly,” he repeats, offering a thesis for the following tracks. The music is unmistakably the product of an artist in sync with their silliness. “I can tell you’re not that silly / Just be honest, you’re not that silly,” he lambasts, and reiterates: “I don’t care if you go hard / I just care if this shit silly.”

class black person closer to accessing the “good life” in crisis times. At times, “getting silly” seems dependent on already having access to the “good life.” V.I.C. brags: “I’m the man,” “girls throw me fish,” and “drillin’ hoes like a dentist.” He also raps: “I’mma sell like silly” and “I’m worth a millie.” The video echoes these claims in its close-up shots of V.I.C.’s shiny bling, grills, and rims as well as shots of women dancing over a blown-up close-up of the rapper’s face.

While it may be easy to categorize these forms of silliness as masculinist, misogynist, neoliberal, and hence unambiguously “bad,” one of this dissertation’s objectives is the troubling of the silly’s political guarantee: that silliness disrupts (or embraces) norms in any coherent way or that its disruptions are always clearly resistant (or problematic). As an initial example, “Get Silly” demonstrates the valuable ambiguities and ambivalences internal to the silly’s politics and subjects, even (and perhaps especially) when it is deployed intentionally and explicitly. Useful here is Brian Sutton-Smith’s work on the ambiguity of play, where he brings forward an analysis of the central ambiguity of the historical “trickster” figure, emphasizing how they “enacted playful protest against the orders of the ordained world.”¹⁰ However, Sutton-Smith refutes the idea that the trickster *needs* to be a “rebel,” instead bringing our attention to how the trickster “occupies a dialectical position within culture”—they are simultaneously “the good and the bad, the sobriety and the insobriety, the body conventional and the body uncontrollable,” standing “both for order and disorder at the same time.”¹¹ To hold silliness close, then, is to hold its both/and ambivalences even closer, finding value in its messy forms, feelings, and politics.

In this dissertation, I expand upon this sort of play with digital audiovisuals, unruly affects, and ambivalent politics, all of which are also in/formed by and through the disjointed category of the “silly” and its complicatedly racialized dimensions. This dissertation proceeds to

¹⁰ Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 2010), 11.

¹¹ Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 211.

explore the aesthetic and affective dimensions of “silliness” across popular digital culture, taking the silly to be a key category of analysis for queer and trans of color studies of film and media, especially for those that value the political potential of ambivalence, ambiguity, and opacity in the digital age. While silliness is often perceived as an apolitical or privileged affect, this dissertation focuses extensively on race and marginalized subjectivities as critical components of my analyses, with each chapter investigating the racial dynamics of silliness in different ways.

In her instructive work on Latinx forms of silliness, Kristie Soares examines the crucial racialized dimensions of silliness, suggesting that in American media, “silliness has been the exclusive domain of whiteness,” citing figures like Andy Kaufman, Will Ferrell, Lucille Ball, and Amy Poehler who have dominated its cultural terrain.¹² However, this claim about the silly’s privileged relation to whiteness risks overlooking the long and complex history of racialized silliness in this country, thus ignoring the ways in which race and silliness have always gone hand-in-hand, in both devastating and generative ways (a view I elaborate on in Chapter 3). In their work, Soares argues that queer and trans people, particularly those of color, are granted little public access to silliness, as their survival often demands constant vigilance against racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Indeed, silliness can appear as a luxury, inhering in a place of privilege, seemingly at odds with survival, and entirely dependent on having access to excess time, safe spaces, and mental well-being. Yet, as I show, this is not always the case, as the silly can be essential to (and often inextricable from) the marginalized experience.

Through a queer of color analytic, Soares theorizes a “politicized silliness” as a “version of joy” in the crisis times of neoliberal capitalism.¹³ Like others, Soares swerves away from

¹² Kristie Soares, *Playful Protest: The Political Work of Joy in Latinx Media* (University of Illinois Press, 2023), 186.

¹³ Soares, *Playful Protest*, 185.

definitions of the silly as mere foolishness or a lack of judgment, especially within Latinx media, instead considering it to be a “deliberate lightheartedness in the face of the absurd,” a strategic performance of “silliness as politicized affect” that deploys “a type of joyful self-styling” to expose the ridiculousness of oppressive structures, rendering even the deadly silly.¹⁴ The result, for Soares, is quite radical, such that “silliness refuses colonial notions of rational subjectivity, which assume rationality (affectively performed as seriousness) as a precondition for entrance into the civic order,” leading her to suggest that “the most rational affective response to absurdity may at times be silly.”¹⁵ Others, like Donald Hoffman, offer similar approaches, writing that “it is entirely possible to be very silly and very Marxist simultaneously” for if the human condition under capitalism is essentially alienated and absurd, “silliness becomes the most appropriate and accurate response.”¹⁶ Even if the object of demystification is trivial, silliness might provide the basis for the questioning of systems that are too often assumed to be eternal and unchanging.

This dissertation builds on these insights, further working against colonial and capitalist notions of rationality while, at the same time, transqueerly challenging views of silliness that imagine a universal positive social value—that all silly things are radically joyful or innocently puerile—and views that insist on eradicating any unruly embodiments of silliness in favor of positive representations, respectability, and/or racial uplift. I argue that silliness is neither wholly frivolous nor inherently affirming—it is a contested, ambivalent force that can equally trouble or reinforce cruel attachments to fantasies of “the good life” and its promises of upward mobility.

VII.

¹⁴ Soares, *Playful Protest*, 185.

¹⁵ Soares, *Playful Protest*, 185.

¹⁶ Donald Hoffman, “Not Dead Yet: Monty Python and the Holy Grail in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (McFarland & Co, 2002), 145.

While the silly comes up widely across media, culture, and theory, its uses, as we've begun to see, are surprisingly inconsistent; silliness is called upon to do a range of conceptual, aesthetic, affective, and counter/political work without ever being focused on as its own category, leading to numerous problems. Sometimes, something is silly because it is pushed into excess, it's exaggerated. And so, silliness stupefies and overwhelms. Or something is silly because it does not fully commit, it lacks (seriousness, artfulness, or just a more committed silliness). It bores and underwhelms. Or something feels silly because it feels so familiar and/or ordinary. It's #relatable. ("Lmao I'm so silly in my silly ways just like everyone else is so silly in their silly ways that are just like my silly ways...") Sometimes silliness is only accessible when one is alone, unafraid of outside judgement. Sometimes it is deeply relational, forming a key component of sociality. Sometimes things that oppress are silly, and sometimes things that resist are silly. And so on. As an example, author Henry Harland, in an essay discussing the "poor" quality of English novels in the late nineteenth century, expresses that the "peculiarly insidious kind of silliness which, hand in hand with its sister graces," the *vulgar* and the *slipshod*, "one would have difficulty in characterising by a single word" adding that "one feels it everywhere" but "the appropriate epithet eludes one."¹⁷ He asks: "Is it a sentimental silliness? A fatuously genial silliness? A priggish silliness? A pruriently prudish silliness? Yes, yes; it is all this; but it is something else. The essential flavour of it is in something else."¹⁸ Silliness is "all this" and yet "something else," and this is key; the silly uniquely tugs at affective seams, fusing binaries while also undoing coherence, vibrating with/in tensions of pleasure and exhaustion, attraction and repulsion, intimacy and alienation, rebellion and conformity, and remaining difficult to name.

¹⁷ Henry "The Yellow Dwarf" Harland, "A Birthday Letter," in *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, vol. 9 (Ballantyne Press, 1896), 16.

¹⁸ Harland, "A Birthday Letter," 16.

Reveling in the silly's unruly messes, my dissertation seizes upon the term's ambiguities and difficulties, which, I argue, allow the silly to take on distinctly queer and trans expressions in digital film and media through its playful de/refamiliarizations, aesthetic irritations, and often-unbearable affective forms—all of which we nonetheless might desire, long for, and even love. So, if the silly wobbles, this project wobbles with it, embracing its precarity and ambivalences. In a series of studies, I ask: what work does the silly do for queer and trans of color scholars, artists, and/or consumers of media? What does the silly signal in the creation and reception of digital media objects? An aesthetic? An affect? An experience? An expectation? A mode? And, crucially, how does the silly take shape across assemblages of race, gender, and sexuality?

This project, then, is a study of the silly as form and feeling, as structure and sensation, which shapes and is shaped by the ways we move, feel, touch, and linger *transly* and *queerly* with media. It considers the quirky and the chaotic, the whimsical and the weird, the bits that don't quite land for us but still leave us tickled. This dissertation works to upend familiar, sober ways of knowing, thinking about, and doing things with the "silly" in contemporary media, with all its pleasures and irritations, euphorias and dysphorias, taking the queer and trans inflections of silliness—and the silly inflections of queer and trans—to be key to studies of digital media objects that aim to resist, refuse, reroute, deflate, or unravel the sovereign and humorless, but only ever incompletely, reluctantly, partially, briefly, or accidentally.¹⁹ While this dissertation's silly-ish "intervention" may thus fail to realize the full extent of such lofty, serious-ish aims, endlessly and hopelessly wading through uselessly unproductive objects or ideas, I nonetheless insist on sillily flailing with/in every screwy counter/political inadequacy, all the small, minor, or otherwise inconsequential details, and soaring aimlessly into the silly's wild nonsovereignty.

¹⁹ That I upend the sober is, of course, only a half-truth given the necessary academic sobriety of a dissertation.

VIII.

The “silly” is a term that resonates widely across twentieth and twenty-first century life. It appears in the titles of a range of popular media, from songs like Deniece Williams’s “Silly” (1981) and the Wings’ “Silly Love Songs” (1976) to films like those from the archive of Disney’s “Silly Symphonies” (1929-1939), children’s television like “VeggieTales: The End Of Silliness?” (1998), popular products like “Silly Putty” (1943-), “Silly String” (1972-), and “Sillybandz” (2010-), indie games like “My Silly Life” (2020), comedy sketches like Monty Python’s “Ministry of Silly Walks” (1970), vernacular phrases like “silly goose” and “scared silly,” and all across contemporary social media where “#silly” appears on millions of posts across platforms. The “silly” is also a term that floats around in a range of scholarly and philosophical works, featured sporadically across the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Theodor Adorno, Lauren Berlant, Stanley Cavell, Sara Ahmed, Jack Halberstam, Francesca Royster, Geert Lovink, Sara Warner, and Cael M. Keegan among others.

While the term appears in all these works, often marginally, sometimes prominently, the “silly” itself remains a largely untheorized category, one with no obvious or canonical examples. The “silly,” in its contemporary usage, is mainly used to describe a person “lacking in judgment or common sense; foolish, thoughtless, empty-headed; characterized by ridiculous or frivolous behaviour.”²⁰ The word is generally not meant as a compliment. “Don’t be silly!,” we say. It is a term of opprobrium and dismissal that commonly indicates a lack of seriousness, sensibility, or sophistication in a person, practice, or object, identifying it as emphatically minor.²¹ “That’s so silly!,” we say. The term might also suggest “impropriety in the realm of the trivial,” as when we

²⁰ “Silly, Adj., n., and Adv.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary*, December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4265967977>.

²¹ Accordingly, Prince William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester, and King William IV both received the nickname “Silly Billy” to capture their foolish, empty-headed ways.

say “a petty, bureaucratic policy is silly because it is ineffective and senseless,” as Michael Gelven describes.²² Moreover, we don’t talk about “the silly” itself so much as *things* that are silly—silly objects, silly faces, silly decisions, silly policies, and even silly people.

I suspect that it is largely due to this marginalization—the minor status and the lack of recognition given to the “silly” as its own critical category—that the “silly” rarely appears as a (key) term in critical and theoretical contexts where it would seem to belong. “Silly” is not mentioned once in the four-hundred and sixteen page *The Affect Theory Reader* from 2010, which brands itself as a “field-defining collection.”²³ In an earlier collection, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* from 2007, the term appears once in passing.²⁴ The same is true for the updated *The Affect Theory Reader 2* from 2023.²⁵ Even in *The Comedy Studies Reader* from 2018, where the “silly” would seem to have even stronger affinities, the term only appears as a marginal descriptor a few times across the three hundred and thirteen page text.²⁶ Surprisingly, the term is also not once cited in the definitive work on the category of “play,” Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s 1938 book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*.²⁷

While no one has yet to isolate the silly as its own critical category, its peculiar etymology has been studied. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the “silly” has been employed variously across its history of usage to describe “senses relating to worthiness or blessedness,” “senses relating to weakness, vulnerability, or physical incapacity,” “senses relating to simplicity of character or form,” and that which “provokes sympathy or compassion;

²² Michael Gelven, *The Risk of Being: What It Means to Be Good and Bad* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 42.

²³ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁴ Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean O’Malley Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures* (Duke University Press, 2023).

²⁶ Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz, eds., *The Comedy Studies Reader* (University of Texas Press, 2018).

²⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

that is to be pitied; unfortunate, wretched.”²⁸ Edith Whitehurst Williams argues that “the word [‘silly’] must be considered in the light of its long history of semantic change.”²⁹ Contrary to many of its associated terms, like irony or nonsense, which have undergone little semantic change, “silly” has “a distinctive history,” Williams states; “It is the classic and oft-cited example in English of a word which has undergone degradation in the course of ten centuries to the extent that its present meaning is almost opposite to the original one. It descends from Old English *saelig* ‘blessed, happy, fortunate’ [...] but its meaning has moved downward to the present day ‘foolish, stupid.’”³⁰ Williams adds that the “earliest historical meaning in English of ‘silly’ compares to the loftiness of spirit once held dear by men and eulogized in the great elegies of the past; its present meaning focuses on the inconsequential ignominy of men in ‘intellectual disgrace.’”³¹ Peggy A. Knapp elaborates on this history:

Although in a few instances its sense of innocent as harmless shades into helpless, Middle English *sely* most often conveys a positive sense of guilelessness. A frequent implication of *sely*, therefore, contains a built-in irony about power, for calling a person *sely* in Middle English conveys both apparent victimization and ultimate moral enfranchisement. The affect associated with the term is pathos.³²

The story this etymology of the silly tells is about “the gradual abandonment of a structure of feeling valorizing innocent piety [...] for a more entrepreneurial sense of human control of knowledge and social welfare,” of the sovereign-self controlling the silly-self.³³

²⁸ “Silly, Adj., n., and Adv.” The OED includes no instances under “happy” after 1483, none under “blessed” after 1400, and only one under “innocent, harmless” after 1604 (144)

²⁹ Edith Whitehurst Williams, “Auden, Yeats, and the Word ‘Silly’: A Study in Semantic Change,” *South Atlantic Review* 46, no. 4 (1981): 17.

³⁰ Some historians, Williams notes, “attribute this change to an ironic use of the word to mean its opposite, but it is unlikely that irony, especially literary irony, would have been widespread or universal enough to bring about a systematic change in ordinary speech.” See: Williams, “Auden, Yeats, and the Word ‘Silly,’” 18.

³¹ Williams, “Auden, Yeats, and the Word ‘Silly,’” 30.

³² Peggy A. Knapp, *Time-Bound Words: Semantic and Social Economies from Chaucer’s England to Shakespeare’s* (Palgrave Macmillan London, 2000), 143-144.

³³ Knapp, *Time-Bound Words*, 144.

Rather than undergoing an inevitable linguistic decline, words like “silly” might lose or take on prestige over time, reflecting broader social and cultural forces. For example, between its various medieval instances as “blessed” and its modern instances as “foolish,” Knapp notes that the “silly” passes through “an oddly nuanced association with women and sheep,” which were both “accorded a high and unchallenged place in Christian imagery.”³⁴ Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, “the degenerated meaning of ‘silly’ had become established. An American grammar published in 1851 includes a note ‘Of Silliness’ which makes the pronouncement that ‘Silly remarks and idle truisms are the traits of a feeble style,’” as Williams cites.³⁵ Silliness, however, maintained some of its flexibility and ambivalence. A few years later, for example, Mary Ann Evans, under the pen name George Eliot, claimed in the 1856 *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* that “the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form,” writing that such “silly novels” by women were “determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them—the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic,” a silliness that is “a mixture of all these—a composite order of feminine fatuity.”³⁶ I offer this brief history of semantic change not only to point out the internal incoherences of the term “silly” and its chronological uses across time, but also to highlight what seems to be an overly neat methodological imperative towards etymology in research on the “silly”—an imperative that, as I argue, limits its critical capacity.

Present day uses of the term are no more coherent, with scholars using the “silly” in drastically contradictory ways. Or as Peter Timms notes, “Silliness is a slippery concept: messy, unsettling, and difficult to pin down.”³⁷ Timms, however, argues that silliness has three defining principles: (1) silliness “thumbs its nose at the conventions of form”; (2) silliness “must be, or at

³⁴ Knapp, *Time-Bound Words*, 144.

³⁵ Williams, “Auden, Yeats, and the Word ‘Silly,’” 21.

³⁶ George Eliot, “*Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*,” *Westminster Review* LXVI, no. 130 (1856): 442–61.

³⁷ Peter Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History* (Wakefield Press, 2019), 1.

least appear to be, pointless”; and, (3) silliness “must be intentional.”³⁸ (Though, silliness is quite often unintentional, and when it is intended, it can also appear purposeful not pointless.) Timms sees silliness as an “essential irritant” and “a transgressive response to normality [that] carelessly tramples on everyone’s sensitivities.”³⁹ In a different mode, Weinstock defines silliness as “a sensibility or disposition that is related to, but not quite the same as carnival, camp, satire, and absurdity” as it is “gentler and takes on smaller targets. It plays acceptingly with the given world in ways we hadn’t realized or remembered were possible. Rather than functioning as cogent or caustic social critique, it presents itself as ostensibly lacking a political dimension,” inoffensive and “*innocently* playful.”⁴⁰ Weinstock, however, contradicts himself in a later piece where he claims that “silliness is never as simple or innocent as it may appear” and “often functions as a form of critique.”⁴¹ (Is the silly that which is innocent and yet never *just* innocent?) Others like Joseph Litvak claim that “silliness is [...] the place of delirious excess where the ‘intellectual’ meets the ‘childlike,’ where professorial erudition meets puerile regression,” suggesting that “if silliness is not simply absurd, neither is it innocent,” and arguing that in dismissing it we would be “depriving ourselves of a sharp comic weapon” against racism, sexism, and homophobia.⁴²

IX.

How does one begin to conceptualize and put into practice a concept that is evidently so slippery and incoherent? A concept that is mis/identified with so many associated terms and harboring wildly contradictory political stakes? Rather than adjudicating between definitions, or

³⁸ Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 6.

³⁹ Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 10.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” in *Science Fiction Double Feature*, ed. J. P. Telotte and Gerald Duchovnay (Liverpool University Press, 2015), 235.

⁴¹ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “In Praise of Silliness: The Cult of Python,” in *And Now for Something Completely Different: Critical Approaches to Monty Python*, ed. Kate Egan and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 200.

⁴² Joseph Litvak, “On Second Thought,” *Studies in American Humor* 9, no. 1 (2023): 8.

trying to pinpoint my own, I look at how an expanded media studies might benefit from thinking with the specific incoherences of a term like “silliness,” which I argue finds unique affinities across the work of queer and trans studies, critical race studies, affect studies, and formalist analysis. Silliness might then be understood as a problematic of form as well as a methodology and a reading practice, one with the potential to combat the staggering miserabilism of academia.

Thinking through these questions, and putting them into dialogue with specific digital media objects, I venture to embrace, as Christine Hoffman does, “the queer, deviant, stupid humanism” that carries the potential to serve as a “valuable critique of the logical rhetorics and the liberal philosophies” that neatly operate according to “troublingly, smugly circumscribed assessments of social definition and contribution.”⁴³ My goal is not to peel back the layers of silliness’s grossly incoherent exterior to reveal an eloquent, intelligent core. Without reducing silliness to something serious, this dissertation takes care to read closely, carefully, and playfully with silliness as a slippery, sticky, and internally incoherent concept. As Fredric Jameson does in his turn to Theodor Adorno’s “astonishing insistence on the deeper mindless silliness or ‘simplicity’ [*Albernheit*] of all true art,” I aim to embrace the irritating ubiquitousness of silliness in digital film and media art.⁴⁴ Indeed, Adorno not only acknowledges art’s silliness but defends it, arguing that “in its silliness, art sublimates the circus,” aligning it with a clownish uselessness and an inherent “enigmaticalness” that is in “inextricable conflict” with redemption.⁴⁵

The silly’s deep conflict with redemption, particularly in ongoing crisis times, is central to this dissertation’s investigations. Case in point, Sianne Ngai explains that for Adorno, “in the

⁴³ Christine Hoffmann, *Stupid Humanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 12-13.

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2007), 145.

⁴⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Continuum, 2002[1970]), 160.

face of historical catastrophe, art's impotence is so magnified that it begins to look silly."⁴⁶ This leads him to suggest that "artworks fall helplessly mute before the question 'What's it for?' and before the reproach that they are actually pointless."⁴⁷ So, one cannot defend an artwork by claiming that it is useful or that it makes a positive social intervention, posing a clear challenge to discourses that suggest art should be productive, relevant, or at least "relatable." Instead, as Adorno explains: "There is nothing innocuous left. The little pleasures, expressions of life that seemed exempt from the responsibility of thought, not only have an element of deviant silliness, of callous refusal to see, but directly serve their diametrical opposite."⁴⁸ The "deviant silliness" of minor pleasures are tainted by systems that serve to reinforce the norm. Caroline Hovanec calls this "art's redemptive weakness."⁴⁹ At its best, then, this is all part of "a condemnation of empirical rationality," an ally in the struggle against a society ruled by instrumental reason but from which art cannot be separated.⁵⁰ At its worst, this aspect of art "merges with the calculated *fun* of the culture industry" and is made useful for the reigning capitalist, instrumentalist society.

Embracing these tensions, the significance of this project lies in its commitment to the silly's "redemptive weakness," to all its minor "enigmaticalness," thinking with and through the ambivalences of this critically marginalized, culturally ubiquitous, and untheorized category in media. For when the ubiquitous is left unexamined, we often assume a common-sense definition of the term—a term that paradoxically evades common-sense. We think we know it when we see it, hear it, or feel it. Though, as I have already shown, the "silly" is used in vastly different ways, often entangled with a set of associated terms that complicate its easy recognizability.

⁴⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 103.

⁴⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 121.

⁴⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. Edmund F.N. Jephcott (Verso, 2005[1951]), 25.

⁴⁹ Caroline Hovanec, "'Animal/Fool/Clown': Stevie Smith's Frivolity," *Journal of Modern Literature* 45, no. 1 (2021): 23.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 121.

Taking the “silly” to be a key word across the conjoined latticework of radical formalism, affect studies, media studies, critical race studies, and transqueer theories reveals something within (and outside of) common sense understandings of the term with the potential (but not the promise) to loosen (but not undo) aesthetic orders that govern social worlds. In this way, silliness as a category both inhabits and evades available common senses; it is that “wild profusion of existing things,” as Michel Foucault puts it, loosed from the “ordered surfaces” of its disciplinary scaffolding, and emerging “out of the laughter that shatter[s] [...] all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age.”⁵¹ I aim to show that the silly possesses a powerful counter/political purchase on studies of digital media at the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality. With a fuller appreciation of its ambiguously destructive and playfully creative capacities, I use silliness to investigate the less shocking, but no less important, which nonetheless creates and exploits cleavages in aesthetic orders, cutting against (or with) the grain of aesthetic givens. Surveying works ranging from hyperpop music videos to desktop horror cinema, commercial ad campaigns, and comedy television, I aim to show that the concept of the silly provides an unusual and helpful perspective from which to queerly, transly, and critically view our wonderfully weird, politically messy contemporary digital media landscape.

X.

Chapter 1 begins by further positioning the “silly” within existing scholarship. I elaborate on the silly’s precarious relation to a set of cousin terms, including *camp*, *nonsense*, *absurdity*, *stupidity*, *play*, *humor*, and *foolishness*. This chapter explores the overlapping yet distinct place of the silly among these seemingly like terms, offering an intentionally loose and fluid mapping of silliness. This chapter also lays out my approach to “transqueering” (with) the silly in digital

⁵¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Routledge, 2001[1966]), xvi.

film and media, outlining how this dissertation employs silliness as a queer and trans reading strategy, and situating its significance within contemporary queer and trans theory. Finally, this chapter considers how the silly can be a kind of nonsovereign relationality and a form of love.

The following three chapters all focus on transqueer close readings of the silly with/in popular twenty-first century digital media objects, most of which are from the 2010s, and nearly all of which are from America and the West. (This is, of course, a glaring limitation of my dissertation, one which requires further research and deeper consideration.) Through these chapters, I build my understanding of silliness from the specificity of the media objects in each case study. Across these chapters, I center the question of how silliness—as aesthetic, affect, and politic—is uniquely mediated, presented in and through the shapes of digital media.

In Chapter 2, I survey aesthetic uses of silliness in music videos by trans and nonbinary artists within the loosely defined genre of “hyperpop.” Drawing on studies of trans* opacity tactics and aesthetics of change, I offer close readings of the abrasive digital modulations in SOPHIE’s 2018 music video for “Faceshopping” and Arca’s 2020 video for “Mequetrefe,” which obfuscate and produce silly effects in the face and voice. I argue that these irritational forms of silliness are taken up as transfeminist opacity tactics, the significance of which lies in its reluctance of identification and unraveling of oppressive demands for transparent visibility.

In Chapter 3, I read with silliness and/as a refamiliarization of computational forms in desktop media from the 2010s. This chapter focuses on the queer relationship between Google Chrome’s early “search story” ad for the “It Gets Better” campaign and its sillied critical unmaking in Levan Gabriadze’s screenlife horror flick *Unfriended* (2014), which monetizes on the novel desktop mode in tandem with the media-sensationalized gay youth suicides of the 2010s cultural moment. Drawing on work on “queer computation,” this chapter suggests that

such popular desktop media can frequently exploit, refamiliarize, and centrally make silly our everyday encounters with the underlying processes of computational media.

In Chapter 4, I turn from the opaque to the hyper-visible, exploring more aggressively abject forms of silliness in *The Eric André Show* (2012-), a “comedy” series in which the unique intensities of blackness, queerness, and silliness all interoperate and become difficult to bear. Turning to André’s fascination with sexual perversity and his play with forms of black anality, I argue that the show allows for ambivalently silly, unruly, and self-shattering possibilities that recuperative projects and representational politics do not.

In my Conclusion, I offer a short reflection on the silly’s precarious relationship to the category of the “serious,” transqueering the academic imperative to not only take silliness seriously but to take all our objects of study seriously. I end my dissertation with two short Codas. The first explores the transqueer history of popular memes that evoke the silly’s ordinary intermingling with depressive feelings, and the second offers some final thoughts on the silly’s ordinary affects in an early episode from the animated show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-).

XI.

Overall, this dissertation turns to silliness at the intersection of form, feeling, mediation, and culture, focusing at once on media objects that make explicit use of this aesthetic and affective concept, often in the modality of race, gender, and/or sexuality, and on the deployment of the silly as a category of critical analysis. Out of the intersection between absence and ubiquity, dismissal, and fascination, this dissertation loosely maps out a cultural and aesthetic politics of the silly, demonstrating that silliness finds distinct expressions in and across digital media through its uniquely irritating, ambivalent, and minor forms and feelings—slipping, sticking, stretching, and straining media to their various limits.

CHAPTER 1

Transqueerying the Silly in Media Studies

Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness, but come down into the green valleys of silliness. [...] [T]here is more grass growing down in the valleys of silliness than up on the barren heights of cleverness.

Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

Without neatly cleaning up its gross incoherences, this chapter attempts to establish some loose conceptual parameters for “silliness” going forward. The problem is that the “silly” often does not explicitly appear as that term; instead, it is frequently mis/identified with other “silly”-like forms and feelings that are not named as such. To understand what silliness does formally and politically, this chapter begins by putting it in conversation with some of its cousin terms—a mess of affiliated concepts including camp, carnival, satire, pastiche, absurdity, irony, failure, triviality, ridiculousness, foolishness, zaniness, cuteness, lightness, weirdness, irreverence, comedy, humor, fun, joy, amusement, stupidity, simplicity, nonsense, play, the ludic, the puerile, etc. For the fact that the silly is used *so* frivolously and appears to be *so* indistinct matters.

Many of these other terms, moreover, have already been theorized in isolation, singled out as their own concepts: from Johan Huizinga’s work on play to Avita Ronnell on stupidity, Jack Halberstam on failure, Susan Sontag on camp, Maurice Merleau-Ponty on nonsense, Albert Camus on absurdity, Italo Calvino on lightness, Desiderius Erasmus on folly, Henri Bergson on laughter, John Morreall on humor, Sigmund Freud on jokes, Jacques Derrida on frivolity, Sara Ahmed on happiness, Mikhail Bakhtin on carnival, Sianne Ngai on the cute and zany, Linda Hutcheon on irony, Nicole Seymour on irreverence, and so on. This scholarship has fostered deeper insights into these terms’ aesthetic, affective, political, and potentially transgressive roles in media and culture, from “campy cinema” to “nonsense poetry” or “carnavalesque literature,”

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (The University of Chicago Press, 1980[1977]), 76, 80.

which, as Jeffrey Weinstock argues, “can all be justified or recuperated as canny social commentary or as avant-garde transgression,” marking audiences’ tastes as rebellious or elite.² In her writing on camp, Sontag insightfully gestures to the fact that “[m]any things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have-been named, have never been described.”³ The “silly,” I argue, is certainly one of these “things,” and it needs re/calibration.

I. Re/Calibrating the Silly

In this section, I offer some provocations rather than clear definitions in an attempt to loosely differentiate the silly from its others. While the silly and its cousins at times feel quite similar, they are not the same. In a way, we might think of these other categories as the silly’s various genres or modes—from the campy to the nonsensical, absurd, or stupid. Silliness can work in and through these terms, sometimes more than one at a time, leaving the path to distinguishing them quite difficult.⁴ Setting up an ambivalent dynamic of contamination and contrast, this chapter, following Derrida’s methodology in *Glas*, which “induces by agglutinating rather than demonstrating, by coupling and decoupling, gluing and ungluing rather than by exhibiting the continuous, and analogical, instructive, suffocating necessity of a discursive rhetoric.”⁵ (Inspired by Genet’s “tube of vaseline” in *The Thief’s Journal*, which also prefaces this dissertation, that little “silly object” offers Derrida a method that is fundamentally sticky and slippery like “a very fluid glue—some vaseline”—and like all those other heavy, fluid substances which will “glide into one another, be agglutinated, agglomerated, stretched out.”⁶) In this

² Weinstock, “In Praise of Silliness: The Cult of Python,” 190.

³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966[1964]), 275.

⁴ In *Culture and Value*, Ludwig Wittgenstein also writes about cognate terms to silliness, emphasizing their similar value. Silliness is related to humor, for example, and humor itself is a productive perspective, akin to wonder. He also praises the stupid, the trivial, the cheap, and the humble.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand (University of Nebraska Press, 1986[1974]), 75.

⁶ Derrida, *Glas*, 139-140.

manner, I aim to loosely canvas rather than neatly triangulate the “silly,” working in and through the silly’s messy thesaurus of concepts, and aiming not to distinguish too much.⁷ Overall, in my approach to the “silly,” I advocate for description over definition. In what follows, I offer an open-ended set of descriptions, a loose “taxonomy” of sorts, wading through a few of the silly’s “cognate” terms, specifically *camp*, *nonsense*, *absurdity*, *stupidity*, *play*, *humor*, and *foolishness*.

Camp: It is perhaps worthwhile to begin with that other marginal concept that is—ontologically or by happenstance—always already tethered to the queer: that is, “camp.” Both “queer” and “camp” are known for their nebulous natures, yet some like Fabio Cleto confidently argue that “*camp* and *queer* are cognate terms.”⁸ Alexander Doty likewise claims that “one thing about camp is certain—at least for me: Camp is queer. There is nothing straight about camp.”⁹ And in the first collection of essays on “gay camp” from 1993, David Bergman delineates the very few spots of critical agreement among (queer) scholars of camp:

First, everyone agrees that camp is a style (whether of objects or of the way objects are perceived is debated) that favors ‘exaggeration’, ‘artifice’, and ‘extremity’. Second, camp exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture. Third, the person who can recognize camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp is a person outside the cultural mainstream. Fourth, camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire.¹⁰

I see the “silly” as sharing, at most, only one of these four criteria—that it *can* be a style of excess. But this is not always the case, as the silly is often small, simple, and/or recessive in expression. It is also certainly not in tension with popular, commercial, or consumerist cultures

⁷ In my uses of the silly and its cousins, I seek to first embrace vernacular understandings while also complicating and pushing against them at points. This dissertation turns to silliness, in part, because it is a more widely used and confounding vernacular in twenty-first century media and culture than terms like “frivolity” or “triviality,” even “foolishness” or “lightness,” while acting at times like an umbrella term.

⁸ Fabio Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 30.

⁹ Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (Routledge, 2000), 82.

¹⁰ David Bergman, ed., *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 4-5.

but regularly resides within them, and those in the cultural mainstream can readily identify the silly, at least loosely. This also means that the silly is not necessarily or exclusively bound to queer (or trans) cultures. Cis-hetero cultures are *quite* silly, sometimes even dangerously so.¹¹

Camp discourse is also grounded in the varying modes of circulation of its key elements, including “aristocratic detachment, theatricality, ironical distance, parodical self-commitment, sexual deviance,” which have been over the years ascribed to camp.¹² Sontag’s 1964 “Notes on Camp” essay further outlines camp not through strict definition but a set of criteria emphasizing marginality, artificiality and exaggeration, outmodedness, style over substance, and objects of the kind prized by witty hedonists and homosexuals. Sontag, in short, offers a way of seeing things as “good” because they are “bad.”¹³ But the silly is not an ironic indulgence in what is “so-bad-it’s-good.” At most, the silly, like camp, relishes in its own internal tensions between seriousness and play, mockery and affection; but, unlike camp, the silly dwells in contradiction without resolution, redemption, or transformation. Silliness is thus not always, ever, or necessarily aristocratic, detached, theatrical, ironic, distant, parodic, committed, or deviant.

Silliness also lacks camp’s element of “preciousness and luxury.”¹⁴ For something to be camp, it must be loved or desired by a discerning few. The goal for the queer critic, Cleto argues, is to “distinguish the camp diamond from the zircon it had been taken for,” writing:

The camp gem requires a discerning eye or, in critical jargon, a certain deployment of (cultural) capital, not only to ratify the refined stone as a desirable ornament, but also to distinguish it from its cheap counterpart—a banal, and rather vulgar, zircon—which

¹¹ Consider, for example, the widespread silliness of “gender reveal” parties, which have, in the past few years alone, resulted in dozens of deaths, explosions, downed planes, and massive wildfires that have burned tens of thousands of acres of land and resulted in millions of dollars of damage.

¹² Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” 6.

¹³ As Mark Booth summarizes, camp for Sontag is “a way of seeing things as good because they are bad, particularly when: 1) they are marginal; 2) they are artificial or exaggerated; 3) they are *démodé*; 4) they emphasise style at the expense of content; 5) they are objects of the kind prized by daring and witty hedonists, and by ‘the Dandies of Mass Culture.’” See: Booth, “‘Campe-Toi!: On the Origins and Definitions of Camp,’” 67.

¹⁴ Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” 1.

virtually anybody can have access to, and which brings with itself the seamless, dreadful realm of anonymity.¹⁵

This is not necessarily the case with the silly. If camp is precious, silliness is pitiable. Silliness *is* that “banal, and rather vulgar, zircon,” transparent and “cheap” enough to be available to the less-discerning masses yet also elusively opaque—slipping, sticking, and slithering around in murky shimmers that continuously evade complete, prolonged capture—and ultimately brittle enough to shatter into pieces, into more and more cheap zircons. Much like camp, my version of silliness is also invested in close reading practices driven by the work of a kind of “discerning” reader. However, this is not a matter of discerning that which is “precious” and/or “refined.”

Moreover, there is an integral element of seriousness within camp that the silly does not hold close. Weinstock describes both camp and carnival as “silliness with teeth,” or silliness with a serious edge, suggesting that they are playful but “more strategic and even threatening as they use social outsiders (court jesters, drag queens) or transgressive practices to comment on—or mock—the inside.”¹⁶ Carnival is “arch,” he suggests, “deliberately or affectedly playful and teasing,” and camp is as well, as it “provocatively elevates bad taste to the level of art.”¹⁷ (And Morreall suggests that the “carnavalesque” is also a kind of “institutionalized silliness,” where for “thousands of years we have even institutionalized silly action with festivals where the ordinary rules are temporarily suspended.”¹⁸) Often, the “so-bad-its good”-ness of camp is understood as a seriousness that fails. That is, “seriousness always takes part in the production of a camp effect, and it does so through the self-undermining, queer strategy of its ‘tranvestic thinking.’”¹⁹ It is a

¹⁵ Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” 2.

¹⁶ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 246.

¹⁷ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 246.

¹⁸ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (State University of New York Press, 1983), 118.

¹⁹ Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp,” 28. For Cleto, camp’s polarities are combined in a “perpetual cross-dressing movement,” further alluding to the trans* inflections of queer camp.

queer's discerning eye that acts as the trans*formational bridge between the perception of (failed) seriousness and its participation in camp. (Camp furthermore has a temporal component that silliness does not possess, as camp is at least partly about outmoded objects, like cheap costumes or jewelry, which become camp over time via the queer's discerning eye.)

As a character in a Christopher Isherwood novel says: "You can't camp about something you don't take seriously; you're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance."²⁰ The "you" here *is* the queer—more specifically, a sophisticated, serious "queer" with an "unserious" yet ironically judicious taste. This sensibility of queerly unserious seriousness (or serious unseriousness) is only sometimes shared by or called "silliness." Though Sontag insists, silliness in camp is an unseriousness in the perception of serious objects; as she has it, camp offers "a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form."²¹ As I have suggested, however, silliness does not always operate as artifice, excess, or exaggeration, nor does it rely on traveling across such contrasts as high-and-low, rich-and-poor, good-and-bad. Though as we will see, it is often reduced by scholars to work neatly *across* (rather than *through*) such either-or distinctions.

Nonsense: Silliness and nonsense share a sense of deviation from conventional logic, seriousness, or coherence, but they operate differently in terms of affect, intent, and context. Nonsense specifically refers to a violation, intentional or not, of the basic rules by which we make sense of things; it can be whimsical, unsettling, or even surreal. But it does not follow logic, and logic is a method of reasoning and arguing from certain principles or conventions. Wim Tigges, in his classic study of nonsense poetry, has argued that nonsense, with its elaborate use of wordplay, faux logic, caricature, and mimicry, both invites interpretation and thwarts it; it

²⁰ Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening* (Random House, 1954), 110.

²¹ Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 278.

“presents an unresolved tension” in its “balance between presence and absence of meaning.”²²

Deliberate nonsense is then ironically quite rational as it requires its practitioner to understand this delicate balance. Silliness, instead, exempts itself from the polarities of sense and nonsense; that is, as Joy Ladin suggests, the “play of sense and non-sense” is complicated by “stirring in a third form of language: silliness.”²³ Silliness is distinguished from, even beyond, nonsense in that it “dispenses with such delicate balance” and gleefully turns to “untrammelled ridiculousness,” as John Patrick Pazdziora and Eric Pazdziora elaborate.²⁴ So while silliness can use nonsense as a tool, nonsense itself is more so about disrupting semantic coherence; silliness is less dependent on undermining rationality, further possessing a more ambiguous relationship to social bonds. Nonsense is thus not necessarily silly, but delighting in nonsense can be silly; as our tendency to suppress our impulses to find delight in our own nonsense becomes more dominant, the silly allows us to circumvent the restriction of “stop the silliness, control yourself, be sensible!”

The queer dimension of silliness, as Maeve Sterbenz elaborates, “lies in its irreverence to the [established] forms of knowledge,” where, in some contexts, “silliness result[s] in a kind of nonsense whose queerness takes the form of illegibility,” and, in other contexts, silliness gives us an *alternative* queer logic instead of true nonsense and illegibility.²⁵ This is a crucial distinction; as I argue, the silly often gives us an *alternative* sense or parallel logic instead of true nonsense, meaning that the silly cultivates the “less-than-sensible,” which is “another way of expressing ‘generative ambiguity,’” affording the possibility to opaquely re-distribute (but not destroy) the

²² Wim Tigges, *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (Rodopi, 1988), 51.

²³ Joy Ladin, “Emperors of Ice Cream: Sense, Non-Sense and Silliness in American Poetry,” *The American Poetry Review* 43, no. 1 (2014): 32.

²⁴ John Patrick Pazdziora and Eric Pazdziora, “The Anxious Laughter of Silly Songs,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 13, no. 1 (2021): 82.

²⁵ Maeve Sterbenz, “Movement, Music, Feminism: An Analysis of Movement-Music Interactions and the Articulation of Masculinity in Tyler, the Creator’s ‘Yonkers’ Music Video,” *Music Theory Online* 23, no. 2 (2017).

sensible.²⁶ In other words, silliness does not *not* make sense. “Silliness is language that makes syntactical sense, but the sense it makes clearly, and risibly, doesn’t correspond to reality,” Ladin explains; and so, “when properly deployed, silliness can add a surprisingly expressive dimension to the play of sense and non-sense,” defusing the usual tension between the polarities to “confect language that is both and neither.”²⁷ Admittedly, the distinction between silliness and nonsense is a fine one, and the two words are often used interchangeably (in phrases like “that’s silly!” and “that’s nonsense!”). But it would be odd to call John Cleese’s “silly walk” a “nonsense walk,” perhaps simply because of its onomatopoetic resonance—“silly” *sounds* sillier than “nonsense.”

Absurdity: The silly is not (necessarily) absurd. And what appears to be absurd is not (necessarily) nonsense. Silly Putty is not absurd, nor is Silly String. A cat with zoomies is not absurd, nor is singing in the shower. Nor are these things nonsensical, but they are all silly in their own ways. Weinstock explains that absurdity bears “an asymptotic relationship to silliness as it deploys something that seems fundamentally impossible. This is not to criticize [...] so much as to destabilize. Like carnival and camp, absurdity depends upon an implicit contrast with conventional generic and social norms,” just as nonsense depends on its contrast with sense and camp with the serious.²⁸ While nonsense challenges the coherence and meaning of language itself, absurdity challenges the rationality of situations or actions.

Absurdity thus carries a much heavier philosophical weight than camp, nonsense, or silliness. The absurd, for Camus, is Sisyphus straining to push his rock up the mountain, watching it roll down, then descending after the rock to begin all over, in an endless cycle.²⁹ Yet

²⁶ Klaus Dodds, “The Distribution of Non-Sense and the Cultivation of the Less-than-Sensible,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 12, no. 2 (2022): 254.

²⁷ Ladin, “Emperors of Ice Cream,” 32.

²⁸ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 246.

²⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Vintage Books, 2018[1942]).

the absurd also has a kind of utility as it is used to critique norms or examine existential dilemmas, leading to forms of critical discomfort, irony, distanciation, or even despair. While silliness can intersect with absurdity, absurdity tends to emphasize these more utilitarian, potentially generative kinds of existential dissonance rather than plain goofiness, unruliness, frivolity, or playfulness. And unlike absurdity, which gestures toward existential crisis, or nonsense, which plays with meaning itself, silliness then tends to be a mode of engagement that revels in a kind of meandering, irredeemable ridiculousness with no clear aim.

We might also think of the “weird” as a smaller, more minor version of absurdity while the “ridiculous” is that which is weird or absurd *and* met with derision or mockery. In Chapter 3, I also offer some more thoughts on the distinction between the “strange” and the “silly” through practices of “defamiliarization” and “refamiliarization” respectively in digital film and media.

Stupidity: If *camp* is relational to *seriousness*, *nonsense* to *sense*, and *absurdity* to *rationality*, then *stupidity* is relational to *knowledge* (and *failure* to *success*). Stupidity is typically perceived as a kind of intellectual failure—a lack of intelligence, awareness, or understanding (with potentially damaging consequences). While it may be framed as a willful ignorance, it is often an absence of knowledge or reasoning rather than an intentional (or strategically subversive) act. Much more so than silliness, stupidity is very rarely desired or perceived as a positive attribute. (Though, as Eve Sedgwick has it, “stupidity isn’t a lack but an aggressively positive, entitled presence, and to chafe my own mind and psyche raw against it would be cruel medicine.”³⁰) For Jack Halberstam, however, both “stupidity” and “failure” can function as “counterintuitive modes of knowing” through a transqueer perspective.³¹ Failure, as Halberstam argues, represents “a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within

³⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “A Dialogue on Love,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 619.

³¹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 11.

capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing.”³² And stupidity, for Halberstam, rather than being a mere lack of knowledge, reveals the limits of certain, dominant ways of (inhabiting structures of) knowing. Stupidity, in this counterintuitive sense, marks an absence of memory or wisdom, which for Halberstam can lead to new forms of knowing, creating the possibility for alternative, even subversive, ways of being.

Silliness, by contrast, does not exist in a dialectical relationship with either knowledge or success and is not just a form of intentional (potentially subversive) unknowing or unintentional (potentially harmful) ignorance. It is something else, outside the stupid-smart, failure-success binary. Silliness, as Peter Timms suggests, “is not the unfortunate by-product of a lack of grey matter” but rather “can be a very effective weapon against stupidity.”³³ Stupid things are thus not necessarily silly things or even unserious things, and stupid people can be *very* serious people (like many obtuse politicians, for instance). While stupidity is usually unintentional and lacks self-awareness, silliness is frequently (though not always) an intentional and self-aware departure from the strictly serious, sensible, reasonable, or otherwise productive.³⁴

In their study of “stupid media,” Aaron Kerner and Julian Hoxter also suggest that what is intentionally *silly* now, overtime and through repetition, becomes unintentionally *stupid*. They claim, for instance, that “as the *Transformers* franchise has run its course the silly has been transformed into the stupid.”³⁵ So while the 2007 *Transformers* movie was intentionally “silly,” the 2017 *Transformers: The Last Knight* has become unintentionally “stupid.” Silly fun becomes

³² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 11-12.

³³ Peter Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History* (Wakefield Press, 2019), 10-11.

³⁴ Joe Parslow, however, suggests that there is a very “subtle, and often barely visible” distinction between “failure” and “silliness” (and thus “refusal” and “resistance,” respectively)—concepts which, in many ways, “could name the same thing,” he admits. See: Joe Parslow, *Their Majesty: Drag Performance and Queer Communities in London* (Routledge, 2025), 113.

³⁵ Aaron Kerner and Julian Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media: De-Naturalizing Story Structures in the Cinematic, Televisual, and Videogames* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 36.

stupid in Hollywood out of corporate necessity, where the seriality of a once-silly franchise is debased by strategies of one-upmanship, making each new entry bigger, louder, and stupider.

At the same time, silliness can exist within even the most rigorous and rational intellectual pursuits; for instance, pure mathematics, driven largely by intellectual curiosity rather than utilitarian application, can appear wildly silly, especially to an outsider, and trivial in comparison to applied, “useful” mathematics. It is essentially useless, pointless, or eons away from real applications and practical use, and so the appeal (for its practitioners) resides purely in its intellectual and aesthetic value. This playful embrace of the non-utilitarian distinguishes silliness from stupidity’s consequential ignorance, and this example further complicates the high-low, serious-silly boundary that many other theorists seem to dwell or get stuck on. To embrace silliness is to engage in unproductive, chaotic, even incoherent provocations—an aesthetic, affective, epistemological, erotic, and/or political mode that resists the pressure to be made legible, useful, or otherwise meaningful to wider publics. Or, as Lil Wayne raps in “Get Bizzy” over an interpellation of V.I.C.’s “Get Silly” track: “Get silly, not stupid man!”

Play: In his classic 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga observes that nearly all human activity partakes of ludic play. In this formulation, then, “some play can be very serious indeed.”³⁶ Even children’s games, he claims, are played “in profound seriousness,” allowing the element of play to become part of our constructions of seriousness. And in our present experience economy, “play” not only characterizes leisure time, but it enters into domains considered more serious, such as work, education, politics, and even warfare.

But surely, ludic activity can also be quite silly, and the silly can be quite ludic. After all, what’s sillier than child’s play? While it seems obvious that silliness and play ought to share

³⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 5.

some common ground, Huizinga peculiarly *never* mentions the “silly” or “silliness” in his entire monograph. He does, however, write that we can name “several other fundamental categories that likewise come under the heading ‘non-seriousness’ yet have no correspondence whatsoever with ‘play,’” giving *laughter* and the *comic* as key examples.³⁷ In a sense, silliness is also “opposed” to seriousness while only partially being bound up with play. Moreover, Huizinga suggests that play “is not foolish. It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly.”³⁸ Summing up the formal characteristics of play, he calls it “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly,” proceeding within its “own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.”³⁹ This is the “magic circle” that Huizinga describes as the boundary that demarcates the space of play, separating ludic activities from “ordinary” spatiotemporalities, and thus suspending and changing the very rules of everyday life.⁴⁰

Unlike play, silliness does not strictly describe an activity or social function. Play always describes a ludic *activity* which happens in the demarcated space-time of Huizinga’s “magic circle.” Silliness may be an act/ivity performed in asynchrony from things, but it is, as I see it, primarily an aesthetic and affect. But as Patrick Jagoda asks: if play is “traditionally provisional and temporary”—that is, it happens in that ludic “magic circle”—what then happens when play is “everywhere and [its] boundaries are more blurred than ever before?”⁴¹ The play that “once largely followed the limits of the ‘magic circle’” now extends everywhere “as metaphor, form, model, and framework,” resulting in something more porous and permeable.⁴² The same can be

³⁷ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 5-6.

³⁸ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 6.

³⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.

⁴⁰ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.

⁴¹ Patrick Jagoda, *Experimental Games: Critique, Play, and Design in the Age of Gamification* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 62.

⁴² Jagoda, *Experimental Games*, 66.

said of silliness, which is everywhere (in politics, in play, in the digital) and cannot be limited to a “magic circle.” We might also extend this comparison to the categories of “fun” and “joy,” which are likewise everywhere, but they are also both much less problematic than the “silly.”

Sometimes, silliness combines both “play” and “lightness,” and it is defined as “playfully lighthearted.” Silliness may then be perceived as a kind of ludic and affective “lightness,” a trivial unseriousness. As Eugenie Brinkema summarizes: “Light, whether *lumen* or *lux*, is also *levis*, what is not heavy, what is opposed to *gravis* and to weight—nimble, in place of burdened; even trivial or without consequence, as opposed to what is of the greatest consequence, the very essence of the serious.”⁴³ In this formulation, then, the “silly” (while unnamed as such) is a kind of lightness. But, as I’ve suggested, what is heavy, dense, or weighty is also oftentimes quite silly, even if it is also deadly serious. Austere political actions, for instance, can be coded as affectively serious while still throwing open the door to the general silliness of “serious” politics.

Humor: Enter the word “silly” into a Google Image search, and you’re confronted with an assortment of funny faces—close-ups of adults, kids, and bright yellow emojis with wildly contorted smiles and crazed facial expressions—eyes wide, cheeks raised, tongues out, palms open, and fingers pulling lips diagonally (Figure 1.1). Clearly, the silly has come to be associated with the face and the humorous plasticity of physiognomy—the excesses of smiles and laughter, giggles and chuckles, duck faces and blown raspberries. These images suggest that silliness *is* a smile, a laugh, presenting a version of silliness that is necessarily fun, funny, joyful, and puerile (if not also slightly irritating). Is silliness then just an exaggerated version of humor, laughter, or joy? While this may at times be the case, it is not the entire picture. We find silliness mistakenly

⁴³ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Duke University Press, 2014), 110.

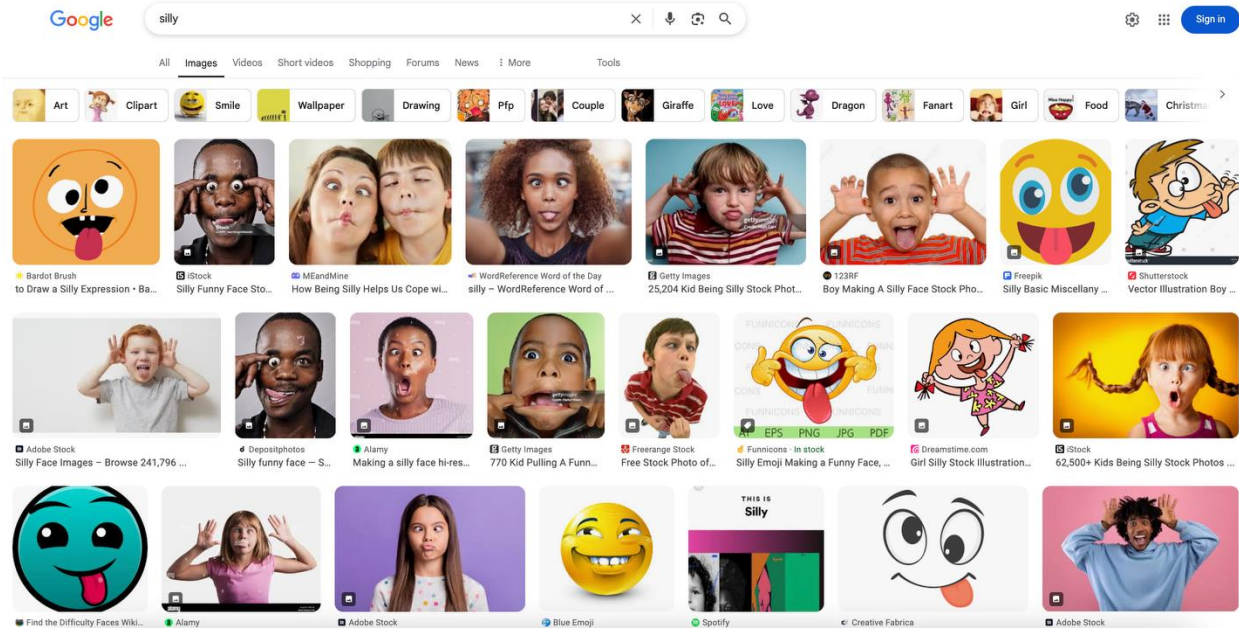


Figure 1.1. Google Image search results for “silly.”

identified with humor and laughter; yet, as I discuss at length in Chapter 3, silliness is not the same as humor, amusement, or the comic as it does not necessarily result in joy or laughter.

Case in point, in a 1914 article in *The Spectator* titled “The Silly Side,” the argument is made that “silliness” and “high spirits” only “sometimes go together, but not very often,” and furthermore that “there is generally something serious about the worst forms of silliness. Sentimentality and high spirits are seldom combined in one character, and humor and silliness are almost incompatible.”⁴⁴ While I do not claim that the silly is almost “incompatible” with humor, I do affirm their necessary differentiation. Laughter, as I see it, is not a mode but an embodied response that can happen, among other things, in response to silliness.

Yet, in an article about laughter in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Christine Nicholls identifies no less than five different kinds of laughter: laughter that originates in feelings of superiority, incongruity, release, existential crisis, and, finally, laughter that occurs during play. Nicholls identifies “anarchic silliness” within this final category of laughter, further

⁴⁴ “The Silly Side,” *The Spectator*, January 24, 1914, 125.

confusing the distinct categories of *laughter*, *play*, *silliness*, and now *anarchy*.⁴⁵ However, as critic Elle Hunt explains, silliness is “more than an appreciation of comedy or jokes, it is...a kind of contriving whimsy for whimsy’s sake, that could easily be dismissed as juvenile in adults.”⁴⁶ (And here we get yet another category to confuse with the silly: the *whimsical*, a contrasting term that this dissertation does not discuss much further.) Overall, then, there are certainly affinities, and silliness can take shape with/in laughter, but this is rarely the case.⁴⁷

Foolishness: “Though we all are fools, we need not be silly, for the silly are vulgar,” writes philosopher Michael Gelven.⁴⁸ For him, the “foolish” and the “silly” are both subdivisions of “folly” in the broader sense. However, the key difference, for him, is that the silly is laughed *at* while the foolish is laughed *with*. Gelven deems the former “bad” and the latter “good.” The silly is “potentially very dangerous,” ghastly even, while the foolish, in its very impotence, is “redeemable and likable.”⁴⁹ And so “the foolish are clearly more loveable than the silly.”⁵⁰ He maintains that an aesthetic distance from silliness redeems us while an embrace of foolishness affirms our finite humanity. Others, like English author Bernard Capes, contrarily argue that it is in fact silliness that is the more favorable of the two. Foolishness, he argues, is “an exacerbating manifestation” while silliness is “often a loveable” one.⁵¹ Capes even goes on to describe a kind

⁴⁵ Christine Nicholls, “Online Humour, Cartoons, Videos, Memes, Jokes and Laughter in the Epoch of the Coronavirus,” *Text Matters - a Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, no. 10 (2020): 279.

⁴⁶ Elle Hunt, “Why It’s Sensible to Be Silly,” *The Guardian*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/aug/23/why-it-is-sensible-to-be-silly-serious-times-call-for-drawing-smiley-faces-on-fruit>.

⁴⁷ Silliness might also be differentiated from “jokes” as such, which for Timms mostly “make sense (more or less) and conform to well established patterns”; Jokes are thus “a little too neat and tidy: a little too predictable” to be a true cognate to the silly. See: Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 18.

⁴⁸ Michael Gelven, *The Quest for the Fine: A Philosophical Inquiry into Judgment, Worth, and Existence* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 93.

⁴⁹ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 42.

⁵⁰ Michael Gelven, *Truth and the Comedic Art* (State University of New York Press, 2000), 27.

⁵¹ Bernard Capes, *The Fabulists* (Mills & Boon, 1915), 111.

of “silliness which verges on sublimity”—that is, a “silliness so silly as almost to achieve the sublime,” which is *quite* different from Gelven’s degrading approach.⁵²

While today, in most cases, calling someone “foolish” is a harsher offense than calling someone “silly,” Gelven considers silliness to be a devastating accusation. He further suggests that “outraged pride, vainglory, pomposity, and blinding arrogance are all silly,” stemming from “irrational and petty distortions of self-importance,” and so the silly that is lacking in the merely foolish is both “puritanical” and “irreverent.”⁵³ “The foolish,” however, “takes the ridiculous seriously” while “the silly makes the serious ridiculous.”⁵⁴ Gelven asks how we can confront, outwit, and overcome silliness—to “embrace our own foolishness without being silly,” that is “not by the intensification of the dour, the grave, and the solemn, but by comic foolishness itself. Comic folly is the antidote to the bane of silliness.”⁵⁵ He furthers this position, arguing that:

the success of the silly guarantees a failure of the foolish. The silly giggle like geese at the victims of their own plotting, the foolish laugh at themselves, for the silly is always slightly shameful, the foolish always overt. In the silly we alienate ourselves from the warmth of universal mankind; in the foolish we embrace the finite with an acceptance of our faults. [...] To learn about our frailty in this regard can itself be a kind of wisdom—what might be called comic wisdom. To fail to learn what this means is a silliness that destroys all capacity to judge and hence is ghastly.⁵⁶

For if “to be good is to confront the bad” and “to be silly is to be bad,” that is, for Gelven, “to be foolish in a nonredeemable way,” then “we must confront this ‘bad’ kind of foolishness.”⁵⁷

Yet, it is precisely the “nonredeemable” quality of the silly, and its proximity to queer and trans ways of being, knowing, thinking, and feeling, that I hold close across this dissertation. Indeed, as Weinstock also affirms, part of the “attraction of the silly movie” for the lover of silly

⁵² Capes, *The Fabulists*, 112.

⁵³ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 42, 44.

⁵⁴ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 46.

⁵⁵ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 47.

⁵⁶ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 44, 46.

⁵⁷ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 47.

movies inheres precisely “in its appearance of unrecuperability.”⁵⁸ Against redemption through aesthetic distance, this dissertation values an aesthetic closeness to the irredeemably silly in film and media—every goof, flop, and fizzle. If for Gelven, “the silly...is self-incoherence that defies redemption or forgiveness,” and “the foolish...denudes or reveals our finitude and hence is both redeemable and forgivable,” then the nonsovereign transqueer critic, as I will argue, values the unproductive, nonreproductive silliness above a sovereign-style foolishness.⁵⁹

II. Un/Specifying the Silly

Silliness, as a minor, nebulous category, is still generally dismissed as “childish” or “deficient in social import,” Weinstock suggests, implying that the silly is “all surface, lacks profundity,” and is not worth the serious (and even unserious) viewer’s time; this leads him to ask, “But what does one do with something that, as we have construed it here, simply seems silly?”⁶⁰ Taking one step back, I ask: what *is* “simply” silly? Is silly ever truly “simple”? We are all silly occasionally, and we all know what silliness feels like (to us). But when it comes to making definitive statements about what the silly “simply” is, we fall further and further into silliness. The result, as we’ve seen, is that the silly becomes closely (and incoherently) connected with a mess of associated terms, appearing in/as these other guises or modalities, sometimes “simply” so and other times quite messily so. The silly, then, is *not* many things; in sum, we might (quite crudely) think of “nonsense” as *illogical*, “absurdity” as *irrational*, “stupidity” as *unintelligence* or *unknowing*, “play” as *ludic activity*, “humor” as *comic amusement* (that results in *laughter*), “foolishness” as *redeemable folly*, and “silliness” as (a kind of) *irredeemable folly*.

⁵⁸ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 235.

⁵⁹ Gelven, *The Risk of Being*, 46.

⁶⁰ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 235.

Such neat “definitions” will always prove to be insufficient since silliness, as I have argued, is aesthetically, affectively, and politically muddled. But it is also nearly impossible to entirely avoid the query “what is silliness?” (Surely, anyone reading this dissertation is looking for a kind of answer to this question.) To truly “define” silliness is, perhaps, to betray it—but in the spirit of playful contradiction, I flirt with exactly that betrayal. Let me now attempt to offer some descriptive criteria—a series of key attributes—for thinking with and through the silly:

1. *Silliness is **opaque***, embracing incoherence and enabling inappropriateness while maintaining an accessible, recognizable, and yet elusive quality. The silly is not simply illegible or nonsensical, but it navigates ambiguity by strategically obscuring clear definitions, making its formal and felt manifestations unclear, irreducible, and often unreadable to oneself and others.
2. *Silliness is **ambiguous***, embodying multiple meanings and describing different aesthetic sensibilities (often at the same time). It is a mode of both/and-ness. Its formal registers can be excessive and simple, dramatic and undramatic, too much and not enough all at once. Its epistemic boundaries and heuristic expressions are equally indeterminate, fluid, and open to interpretation. What is silly to one may be quite un-silly to another. The silly is always an assemblage of loosely amalgamated fragments, maintaining an internal mobility and vibrational instability that refuses to settle into a singular meaning or coherent audiovisuality.
3. *Silliness is **ambivalent***, evoking mixed or conflicting feelings (both within and without the self) and inhabiting (wildly) unstable or contradictory politics. Its affective registers blur distinctions between pleasure and discomfort, attraction and repulsion, as well as senses of belonging and alienation. It is a phenomenological and experiential ambivalence—an unsure way of moving through the silly world. Its political implications are equally ambivalent. Being in the muddle of silliness demands an interrogation of its mutually subversive and normalizing political potential, challenging conventional understandings of the value of “disruptive” forms.
4. *Silliness is **minor***, taking shape in/across emphatically minor aesthetics, affects, and politics that often break across and disturb the major key’s caricatured surfaces. Its forms are often small, its feelings are fleeting, and its politics are low stakes. Silliness works in and through (seemingly) inconsequential and often trivial expressions, resisting the drama, legibility, and authority of major modes and discourses. The silly lingers in the ordinary and the unrefined.
5. *Silliness is **nonsovereign***, enacting a (willed or unwilled) relinquishing of the sovereign self. To be silly is to give oneself over to the undisciplined and contradictory, testing the limits of rigid attachments to (an imagined) self-sovereignty. Silliness illuminates aspects of human experience that defy coherence, control, and mastery, that resist purposefulness and invite exploration of internal and external tensions. Silliness requires a kind of letting go, such that we become willing to relinquish ourselves to silliness without knowing where it will take us.

6. *Silliness is messy*, sticking to certain cognates, shapes, structures, and moods, while slipping between and across others. It thrives on the agglutinations and entanglements of queer and trans thinking, smearing neat borders, boundaries, and binaries. The silly screws around, making a mess out of sober academic scholarship with its unhinged sense of playfulness.

Across these criteria, the silly appears to resist rigidity, denying stability, and loosely taking shape in the space between things—an *opaque, ambiguous, ambivalent, minor, nonsovereign*, and *messy* both/and-ness. It is precisely the nonbinariness of this “taxonomy” of silliness and its constant crossovers with cousin categories that constitutes the centrally slippery, sticky, and yet provocative dynamic of the term for this dissertation—a dynamic that, as we’ll see, will help to activate its transqueer potential. If “contamination is the companion of categorization,” as Kadji Amin writes, the question becomes “whether we can develop a tolerance for contamination” and for the “inevitable misfit” of categories.⁶¹ This dissertation not only tolerates misfit but aims to harness it as an alternative to unity-based logics. My *transqueer* approach to the “silly” in what follows opens onto its multiple integrations, perforations, and complex twinings, focusing on the silly’s sticky relational patterns, its nonbinarisms, and assemblage of irresolvable fragments.

III. Transqueerying the Silly

How, then, does this mess of silliness lead us into and through queer and trans thought given its vast incoherences and the many ways of inhabiting, knowing, feeling, and constructing silliness? Building on my general account of the silly thus far, this section explores how I use queer and trans thought to deploy silliness as an aesthetic, an affect, and a politics that takes on distinct critical and cultural significance within these frameworks. As I show, the “silly” can be used in queer and trans studies to hold together wildly different ideas—from the silly’s tangled connections to forms of positivity, protest, joy, negativity, trauma, oppression, and more.

⁶¹ Kadji Amin, “We Are All Nonbinary: A Brief History of Accidents,” *Representations* 158, no. 1 (2022): 117.

Drawing connections between the queer and the silly, Diederik F. Janssen for one suggests that queerness and silliness partake considerably in each other's deeply negative and pejorative connotations, perhaps even ontologically so. Janssen notes:

queer has a long history of being figured precisely as puerilist—as stagnant, over-refined, antisocial, futureless, spineless; a permanent self-centered silliness; a cultural symptom of stasis, regression, fixation; a catastrophic and contagious confusion of otherwise complementary and productive functions; a trivialization and perverting, lastly, of purpose and conquest, all lost to clubs, badges, marches, and slogans, to distraction and the cultivation of idiosyncratic, idle pleasures.⁶²

Here, the silly and its cognates take on a deeply negative attachment to the queer—a radical passivity, uselessness, nothingness, and/or antisocial nonsovereignty.⁶³ Even certain queer “acts of gaiety” or modes of “joyful” protest can connote a negative, “self-centered silliness.”

At the same time, of course, silliness is not strictly negative and negotiates what Sara Ahmed calls “inappropriately positive affects” as its attraction inheres in its queer/ed appearance of un-recuperability and “worthless happiness.”⁶⁴ The very same acts that Janssen identifies with negativity are also those that a scholar like Sara Warner sees as positively joyful and resistantly silly. Just as Kriste Soares foregrounds the relationship between silliness and joy within a queer of color analytic, Warner invests in a “silly archive of feeling,” borrowing from Halberstam's “silly archive” and Ann Cvetkovich's “archive of feeling.” While Warner approaches the silly as “a research object, a methodology, and a pedagogical project,” she mostly draws on an archive of what she terms “acts of gaiety,” a type of “imaginative playfulness typically associated with silly

⁶² Diederik F. Janssen, “Puerilities/Masculinities: Introducing a Special Issue on Boyish Temporalities,” *Boyhood Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013): 98.

⁶³ Taking this perverse negativity to an extreme, Lee Edelman argues (in his usual polemical way) that “queerness makes nothing happen; it incises that nothing in reality with an acid's caustic bite.” While few would characterize Edelman's self-serious work as “silly,” he nonetheless maintains that queerness promotes “*bad education*, the education that teaches us nothing but the nothing of the *thing which is not*.” Edelman's queer, then, can be said to revel in the silly *jouissance* of nothingness. (But as the great philosopher, and “bear of very little brain,” Winnie-the-Pooh once said: “Doing nothing often leads to the very best of something.”) See: Lee Edelman, “Learning Nothing: Bad Education,” *Differences* 28, no. 1 (2017): 124–73.

⁶⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 220.

subjects.”⁶⁵ Warner takes up such “playful methods of social activism and mirthful modes of political performance [including ‘zap actions, pageants, parades, spectacles, kiss-ins, camp, kitsch, and drag’] that inspire and sustain deadly struggles for revolutionary change.”⁶⁶ In this way, Warner’s version of “silliness” lies much closer to Huizinga’s notion of play, inflected through radical and resistant queer acts of joy—acts that may or may not be strictly “silly.”

Moreover, like the minor aesthetic categories of the zany, cute, and interesting in Sianne Ngai’s work, to call something silly is “often to leave it ambiguous as to whether one regards it positively or negatively.”⁶⁷ While “a century of study of humour has come to view the trait as a character strength,” as Hunt notes, “silliness itself is still not considered entirely positive” as there is “usually some judgment attached, though the precise meaning is unclear.”⁶⁸ The lack of clarity around the meaning of silliness prompts me to turn to discussions around the categories of the “positive” and the “negative,” which continue to be a tense topic of debate in queer and trans critique, where relational “positivity” and anti-social “negativity” crudely forms a schism that splits queer and trans theorists into what Mari Ruti identifies as “semiantagonistic factions.”⁶⁹

In this dissertation, I aim to show how silliness—in its opaque blurring of negative and positive—can ambivalently bridge the gap between seemingly immiscible schools of thought, not as a perfect emulsifying agent, neatly homogenizing oppositional views, but rather colliding and dispersing them dissonantly across a willfully contradictory, heterogeneous suspension. This project is not exclusively invested in either side of this schism, since such binary perspectives, as Freeman argues, “risk evacuating the messiest thing about being queer: the actual meeting of

⁶⁵ Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 192-193.

⁶⁶ Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, xi.

⁶⁷ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 19.

⁶⁸ Hunt, “Why It’s Sensible to Be Silly.”

⁶⁹ Mari Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 10.

bodies with other bodies and with objects.”⁷⁰ In this way, silliness has the potential to draw together oppositional understandings of transqueerness as that which is fundamentally at odds with normativity, where transqueerness is a strictly antinormative project, and views of transqueerness as that which is the weirdness always already internal to the ordinary, an unstable embrace of the generative ambivalence, ambiguity, and discomfort with/in the normative.

Some scholars have vaguely begun to use the silly to draw these schools of transqueer thought together. Peter Kraftl, for one, works to introduce “silliness as a necessary counterpart, corollary or accompaniment to trauma,” turning to queer theory to argue that the two are not dialectically opposed but co-constitutive.⁷¹ Silliness, he suggests, can be used to “loosely capture a series of modes of being, interacting, researching, writing and experimenting whose potential might [...] offer generative insights that could work against or mitigate forms of trauma.”⁷² In doing so, Kraftl moves to consider the interface between trauma and silliness via Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” which considers why we desire and stay attached to certain objects or deferred fantasies that become blockages to our flourishing in the now. Kraftl proposes that “cruel optimism combines trauma and silliness” through its defamiliarizations of capitalist fantasies, which, while pernicious, harmful, and traumatic, also appear “ridiculous, illogical and silly.”⁷³ Kraftl’s work ultimately suggests that the deep entanglement between silliness and trauma might open new, unusual, and much messier and nonbinary avenues for queer thought.⁷⁴

The manner in which I have been discussing the “silly”—as ambiguous, multiple, and opaque—resonates with Eve Sedgwick’s well-cited formulation of the “queer” as an “open mesh

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), xxi.

⁷¹ Peter Kraftl, *After Childhood: Re-Thinking Environment, Materiality and Media in Children’s Lives* (Routledge, 2020), 206.

⁷² Kraft, *After Childhood*, 206.

⁷³ Kraft, *After Childhood*, 208.

⁷⁴ Kraftl admits, however, that he could also have chosen other terms, suggesting that the “silly” is mainly used because “it sounds so frivolous, so ephemeral, so unimportant, so childish.” See: Kraft, *After Childhood*, 206.

of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”⁷⁵ I hold these parallels close, dwelling in their crossovers, and lingering on silly’s queerness and queer’s silliness. But the “silly” is not exclusive to the “queer” within queer and trans studies. While Halberstam, Warner, Janssen, Kraftl, Soares, and Parslow, among others, turn exclusively to the relation between the *queer* and the *silly*, it is also important not to ignore how silliness might speak in different capacities to queer studies and trans studies, which are increasingly treated as unique disciplinary formations. Much of the work in queer studies has misapprehended trans through a queer lens, meaning queer (silliness) remains hierarchized over trans (silliness). “Queer,” writes Steinbock, retains its “dominance as *the* optic for seeing disorder in visual culture at large,” leading Steinbock to intervene by offering the aggregate “trans-inter-queer” to describe the complex affiliations between trans, intersex, and queer in audiovisual cultures.⁷⁶

In a similar manner, Aqdas Aftab responds to the erasure of transness from queer theories by adopting what they call a “transqueer” hermeneutic, which for them serves two functions: “first, it foregrounds the centrality of movement in the prefix ‘trans’; and, second, it emphasizes how this movement queerly manipulates gender and sexual normativity.”⁷⁷ Like Steinbock, Aftab holds close the etymological connotation of trans-as-movement, as “moving from one side of a border or boundary to the other.”⁷⁸ As an analytic rather than an identity category, Aftab’s “transqueer” also gestures at the “close connections” between trans and queer, combining the

⁷⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

⁷⁶ Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019), xxi.

⁷⁷ Aqdas Aftab, “Transqueer Negotiations and Decolonial Space-Making in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 55, no. 1 (2024): 105.

⁷⁸ The word “trans” comes from the Latin *trans*, meaning “across,” “on the other side,” or “beyond.” Signaling that binaries are, and have been, always already false, the prefix “trans” allows Z. Nicolazzo to further affirm: “We are neither one nor the other. We are both/and. We transcend, transgress, and transmute the fallacious grounds upon which such dangerous dichotomies persist.” See: Z Nicolazzo, “Imagining a Trans* Epistemology: What Liberation Thinks Like in Postsecondary Education,” *Urban Education* 56, no. 3 (2021): 511–36.

already sticky terms to “bring together ideas of spatial beyondness and sexual/gender non-normativity.”⁷⁹ And as Ann Light reminds us, “to queer something, taking the Greek root of the word, is to treat it obliquely, to cross it, to go in an adverse or opposite direction. It has movement and flex in it,” slipperiness and stickiness.⁸⁰ Both “trans” and “queer” then work to problematize apparently neat structures with critical intent, and as such their messy union “may involve mischief and clowning as much as serious critique.”⁸¹ Aftab’s negotiations of quotidian spaces also insightfully propose “a transqueer politics of resilience and lingering rather than one of resistance and protest,” again emphasizing the need for a transqueerness that is just as lingeringly sticky as it is fluidly slippery.⁸² This approach is key, resiliently lingering in the messiness of transqueerness and its forms, feelings, and politics of silliness in and across popular digital media cultures—that is, to stay with the silly trouble of transqueer failings and flailings.

Thinking with and across these scholars, this dissertation hopes to mobilize trans not as ancillary to queer but as a critical complication and rearticulation of its terms of engagement—a complex entanglement between the fluid both/and-ness of the terms. To do so, I extend Aftab’s “transqueer” one step further by embracing a kind of “transqueerying,” or “transqueer querying,” to describe the mixed, joint thinking of this dissertation—a critically trans-and/as-queer way of thinking in-between and across categories, transqueerly analyzing, questioning, and querying the opacities, ambivalences, and goofiness in and of digital media objects, cultures, and spaces.⁸³ While at times this dissertation may privilege the trans-inflections of queer, and other

⁷⁹ Aftab, “Transqueer Negotiations,” 107.

⁸⁰ Ann Light, “HCI as Heterodoxy: Technologies of Identity and the Queering of Interaction with Computers,” *Interacting with Computers* 23, no. 5 (2011): 432.

⁸¹ Light, “HCI as Heterodoxy,” 432.

⁸² Aftab, “Transqueer Negotiations,” 111.

⁸³ We might also consider the phrasing of “trans*queerying” to even further think with “the paratactical stickiness of the asterisk,” which for Steinbock “references the (im)possible holding together of multiplicity,” and which I explore in more depth in Chapter 2. See: Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 21.

times the queer-inflections of trans, I work to embrace the stickiness and slipperiness between the terms. As Heather Love reminds us, queer and trans analytics have a “shared commitment to crossing disciplinary and identity boundaries.”⁸⁴ The silly’s unbounded nature resonates as well with how Susan Stryker defines the concept of transgender as “*the movement across a socially imposed boundary from an unchosen starting place*,” capturing the force and flexibility of the term.⁸⁵ And finally, it resonates with David Getsy’s claim that queerness “might examine the ways in which forms exceed boundaries.”⁸⁶ As such, transqueerying pursues a synergistic rather than confrontational approach to analyzing partial perspectives and differences therein, holding together many possibilities for unanticipated trans and queer assemblages and conjugations.

IV. Feeling and Forming the Silly

In reading with the mixed feelings of silliness, I take affect as a methodological guide, and I take inspiration largely from Lauren Berlant’s studies of mass culture and cultural forms through affect. I follow Berlant’s commitment to radically minor materials that yield, through queer ways of reading, “a counterpolitics of the silly object.”⁸⁷ These “silly objects” are also what Berlant terms their “hated archive,” where general academic disdain and dismissal directed at their “unserious” cultural objects means, for Berlant, that they require “an intensified critical engagement.”⁸⁸ Silly things are valuable resources into the production and reproduction of national culture, shaping the public sphere precisely in their fleeting, trivial abundance. As a result, the refusal to participate in politics’ competing standards of seriousness produces, as

⁸⁴ Heather Love, “Queer,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 174.

⁸⁵ Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 2nd ed., rev. ed. (Seal Press, 2017), 1.

⁸⁶ David J. Getsy, “Queer Relations,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 256.

⁸⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), 12.

⁸⁸ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 12.

Berlant and Michael Warner point out, a fear in many critics that “queer studies promotes both dangerous and silly objects of analysis,” leading many queer scholars to celebrate this fear.⁸⁹

Precisely because of such ties to impropriety and the trivial, and its marginalization as a critical term, the “silly” has been (loosely) seized on by a range of queer and trans scholars. Most notable, perhaps, is Jack Halberstam’s work on the “queer art of failure,” which proposes the concept of a “low theory” that embraces the eccentric, ephemeral, immature, or otherwise “stupid” media artifacts of a “silly archive,” further developing the queer component to Berlant’s “counterpolitics of the silly object.”⁹⁰ Halberstam’s underlying argument is that these “silly” artifacts constitute a unique form of queer theory, providing queer ways of looking at the world while losing oneself in “avenues of charming ignorance and spectacular silliness.”⁹¹ For the most part, however, Halberstam deploys the “silly” in his book as a simple substitute for a “popular” or “unserious” media object.⁹² Berlant’s catchy, oft-cited phrase has likewise been used quite narrowly by scholars as a call to create or recuperate archives of “silly objects,” those situated below the level of “serious” meaning, into different academic disciplines and discourses.⁹³

Instead, this dissertation seeks to develop an account of the silly that goes beyond such narrow investments in a silly “low” opposed to a serious “high,” as the silly is not (only) that

⁸⁹ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?,” *PMLA* 110, no. 3 (1995): 346.

⁹⁰ Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister similarly suggest that “silliness is a perfect place from which to contemplate a reimagining and redeployment of archival processes and institutions, as well as the intellectual work they enable.” See: Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, “Computer Game Archiving and the Serious Work of Silliness,” *Animation Journal* 19 (2011): 67-77.

⁹¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 59.

⁹² The “silly” also underlies Halberstam’s work on “gaga feminism,” defined as “a form of political expression that masquerades as naive nonsense” and which “finds inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish.” See: Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012).

⁹³ As an example, Cael M. Keegan argues, “‘bad trans’ texts function much like Lauren Berlant’s ‘silly’ objects,” whose ordinariness as seemingly ‘transphobic’ requires even more intense and careful scrutiny than “good” trans texts. See: Cael M. Keegan, “On the Necessity of Bad Trans Objects,” *Film Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2022): 29.

which appears to challenge good “taste.”⁹⁴ Silliness, I claim, can no longer be mapped onto categories of taste, quality, worth, value, or respectability, all of which simply reiterate the much older high-versus-low debate that took place during the postmodern period, long before our current digital and social media age. In our times, where popular TikToks get exceedingly more views than most “serious” media, claims that popular “lower cultural forms” constitute “bad taste” are outmoded and exceedingly irrelevant. Not only does a methodological silliness often turn to objects deemed serious or tasteful, but it also asks us to think beyond these terms into that more “chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing” that Halberstam promises to explore.⁹⁵

Operating on a more metatheoretical level, I interrogate “silliness” as an aesthetic, affective, and (counter)political category of transqueer thought, swerving towards Berlant’s more complicated embrace of “silliness” itself as a “different strategy of reading” that integrates both affect and mediation.⁹⁶ The “silly,” I argue, should not be used synonymously with “low taste” or the “bad object,” for Berlant’s usage suggests that silliness cannot *only* reside in the object itself but it must also, more importantly, guide “a mode of criticism” that reads the “waste materials of everyday communication,” using “the silliest, most banal and erratic logic” to describe and move through the quotidian.⁹⁷ I use Berlant’s “counterpolitics of the silly object” as a methodological pivot not only to consider the limitations of disciplinary seriousness but also to explore the

⁹⁴ Halberstam understands the “silly” as subcultural in its counterintuitive embrace of low cultural forms, operating, as Stuart Hall argues, at a “more concrete, ‘lower’ level of operation.” I aim, however, to complicate Halberstam’s view that the silly offers an archive of “alternatives that are markedly different from the claims that are made in relation to high cultural archives.” See: Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 5–27.; Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 20.

⁹⁵ While claiming to embrace “a more chaotic realm of knowing and unknowing,” Halberstam nonetheless maintains a rigid “back and forth between high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge,” investing in something that he readily admits seems to “confirm rather than upset the binary formation that situates it as the other to a high theory.” See: Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2, 15.

⁹⁶ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 12.

⁹⁷ For, as Homi Bhabha summarizes, “Berlant’s wit and insight lie in going with the ‘silliness’ of everyday existence, inhabiting its persuasive, popular forms, and then, in ways you least expect, throwing up a devastating picture of the way we live now.” See: Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, back cover.

possibilities opened up by an epistemo-erotic sensitivity to the aesthetics and affects of a silliness informed by transqueerness, critical race theories, class politics, and digital media studies.

Given the silly's vast incoherences, there are many ways of forming and feeling silliness as a (counter)politics in and across film and media. That the silly is always already viewed as superficial with no real depth, however, leads Weinstock to argue "the silly film so assiduously disavows political engagement on the surface."⁹⁸ Yet it is precisely in the silly's surfaces and "shallow" aesthetics that its mess of politics emerges. As such, this dissertation is much less concerned with "deeper" ontological questions (like *what is silliness?* or *what is a silly object?*) and is more so concerned with silliness as an epistemological, methodological, and also erotic orientation to (popular) digital media, enabling a kind of "silly erotics," that is, a epistemo-erotic orientation to the "superficial" forms and feelings of silliness.⁹⁹ Working to upend familiar ways of knowing, feeling, thinking, and doing things with a range of media objects, my dissertation turns to the various ways in which silliness embraces the (pleasurably) irritating and (irritatingly) pleasurable formal affects and textual erotics of the (radically) minor in and across the digital.

To further specify, I understand that the radically minor is, as Erin Manning has it, not simply what is just insignificant or happening at a micro level, but rather it is "a gestural force" that deflects an experience, event, or text from the "major key," opening it to the possibility of variation, difference, diversion, and indeterminacy.¹⁰⁰ The minor, as Gregory J. Seigworth and

⁹⁸ Weinstock, "Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film," 241.

⁹⁹ Here, in part, I build off the work of Uygur Baspehlivan and Alister Wedderburn, who outline three sites of ontological, epistemological, and methodological interventions that emerge from a counterpolitical embrace of silliness. They insightfully ask what a "silly ontology" can teach us about "the world as a silly object," what a "silly epistemology" can teach us about "knowledge as a silly object," and what a "silly methodology" can teach us about "constructing a silly archive." These are good questions, as a receptivity to silliness can shift the horizons of thought and knowledge production available to scholars and political subjects. See: Uygur Baspehlivan and Alister Wedderburn, "Disciplinary Seriousness in International Relations: Towards a Counterpolitics of the Silly Object," *Global Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2024): 1-10.

¹⁰⁰ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

Carolyn Pedwell add, names the “continually unfolding, yet often un(re)cognized, dynamics” that loosely index “the unpredictable, aleatory forces that run through it all, creating or signaling possibilities for established formations and tendencies to materialize differently.”¹⁰¹ This is, in a sense, a transqueerying of the major key, as the minor is “out of time, untimely, rhythmically inventing its own pulse” in chrono-nonnormative temporalities.¹⁰² The effect is operational, says Manning, as it “shifts the field, altering the valence of what comes to be.”¹⁰³ Each chapter in this dissertation, then, adopts a minor approach that slightly “shifts the field” in which its specific object is usually situated, transqueerly playing with its alternative valences.

An engagement with the silly’s minor status pushes forward the sensorial possibilities of form. If seriousness generally requires a focus on depths, secrets, and hidden truths—a focus on hermeneutics, interpretation, and making interiors more visible—then silliness is a refusal of depth—a focus on affect, sensation, and erotics, on exteriors and surface meanings. The silly is that which tickles, distracting from the flow of things, and lingering on the most inconsequential details. The silly’s minor statue might even offer a kind of “intuition,” which for Seigworth and Pedwell, borrowing from Henri Bergson, is “an immersive form of sensorial engagement with the richness and flux of material life, which operates in excess of analytical thought”—a supple set of minor (and sometimes even slightly major) affect provocations.¹⁰⁴ It is a proliferation of little feels, light vibes, and small thoughts that might occasionally hit hard, intermingling intense encounters with slight impingements, generating an often confusing affective landscape.

¹⁰¹ Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, “Introduction: A Shimmer of Inventories,” in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Duke University Press, 2023), 26.

¹⁰² Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2.

¹⁰³ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ Seigworth and Pedwell, “Introduction: A Shimmer of Inventories,” 26.

In this way, silliness becomes marked by a sense of thinness, an affective genre of the minor. Silliness invites us to “think thin through the thick of affect,” to borrow Omar Kasmani’s formulation.¹⁰⁵ Thickness, as Kasmani defines, is “European history’s pervasive and suffocating sense of mastery, certainty, and knowingness.”¹⁰⁶ Thinness, on the other hand, takes shape as the nonsovereignty of the minor, which allows the reader to think *through* major, sovereign-style feelings. The silly’s thinness, then, “articulates and enables an affective besideness to dominant history,” a way of turning and acting “obliquely or opaquely.”¹⁰⁷ Such “thin, opaque, or queer modes of relating” exercise the right to be “hazy” to broader, dominant publics.¹⁰⁸ Robert C. Roberts expounds on the silly’s hazy thinness, stating that “silliness has quite a bit of descriptive specificity,” it is “descriptively pretty thick,” but it is short on “evaluative specificity” and is thus “evaluatively pretty thin,” meaning that the silly is “parasitic on evaluative concepts: lamentable silliness, amusing silliness, contemptible silliness.”¹⁰⁹ As a result, different emotions can “supply the affect with which the evaluative quality of...silliness is perceived,” leading to a multiplicity of possible judgments about its value.¹¹⁰ Unlike more evaluatively dense or major qualities, like rudeness or pettiness, the silly’s moral or affective significance depends on the context in which it is embedded, emerging with “one value or another other than just plain silliness.”¹¹¹ (These evaluative differences are obscured by the abstract formulation “X is silly.”¹¹²) The result is an affective praxis of the minor that, as Ann Cvetkovich describes, scrambles the juxtaposition of

¹⁰⁵ Omar Kasmani, “Migration: An Intimacy,” in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Duke University Press, 2023), 227.

¹⁰⁶ Kasmani, “Migration: An Intimacy,” 227.

¹⁰⁷ Kasmani, “Migration: An Intimacy,” 227.

¹⁰⁸ Kasmani, “Migration: An Intimacy,” 227-228.

¹⁰⁹ Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 58-59.

¹¹⁰ Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 56.

¹¹¹ Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life*, 58.

¹¹² Paul de Man also defines “silliness [as] being deeply associated with reference.” See: Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (Yale University Press, 1979), 209.

“positive and negative affects, or critique and reparative strategies” so that “mourning and joy, pessimism and utopia, are not distinct” but coexist in simultaneity with the silly.¹¹³ The silly then allows us to explore how to address minor feelings beyond simple binarisms, in messier ways.

Of course, there is a sense in which all academic disciplines lean on seriousness as a marker of “proper” scholarship. Steven Connor aptly suggests that “we take it for granted that thinking is a serious matter.”¹¹⁴ Yet thinking can be (and perhaps always is) a deeply silly intellectually fumbling, flailing, and screwing around. Following Connor’s approach, I propose that silliness is “a vehicle for the negotiation of our emotional ambivalence not just about the large kinds of things to which philosophy pay attention ... but also about the act of thinking that we like to think makes us human and enables us to know ourselves.”¹¹⁵ In other words, it is not possible to think “seriously” about silliness without having to think about our thinking itself, and it is not possible to think “seriously” about thinking without stumbling on, and into, silliness (an account I elaborate on in Chapter 3 through Stanley Cavell’s view of thinking as silliness).

Further instructive is Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze’s call for an “unserious” approach to theorizing “desire.” In a roundtable discussion, Guattari explains their shared position:

We are certainly not going to suggest that desire be taken seriously. We would much rather undermine the spirit of seriousness, beginning with the domain of theoretical inquiry. A theory of desire in history should be presented as something not too serious. [...] To achieve this, we must knit a new breed of intellectual, a new breed of analyst, a new breed of militant: blending the different types and running them together.¹¹⁶ This “new breed of militant,” I argue, is the silly intellectual, one in tune with the masses. How can intellectuals be silly militants? To start, I believe in thinking, as does Halberstam, with/in

¹¹³ Ann Cvetkovich, “Minor Feelings and the Affective Life of Race,” in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Duke University Press, 2023), 165.

¹¹⁴ Steven Connor, *Styles of Seriousness* (Stanford University Press, 2023), 2.

¹¹⁵ Connor, *Styles of Seriousness*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Deleuze and Guattari Fight Back...,” in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. Gilles Deleuze (Semiotext(e), 2004), 217.

“the small, the inconsequential, the antimonumental, the micro, the irrelevant,” in “thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely,” and in “chasing small projects, micropolitics, hunches, whims, fancies.”¹¹⁷ Forms of silliness, then, exceed “speculative fabulation” to tell smaller stories, as Kraft suggests, bringing together “uneasy, quirky, perhaps queer alliances of methods and disciplines.”¹¹⁸ This is the silly intellectual’s aim—to think small thoughts with small things.

As a different strategy of reading, this counterpolitical approach to silliness leads us to read more closely with affect and/in the specificity of form. As such, this dissertation takes up the methodology of close reading, which for Elizabeth Freeman is a queer commitment.¹¹⁹ As she explains, to “close read is to linger, to dally, to take pleasure in tarrying, and to hold out that these activities can allow us to look both hard and askance at the norm,” bringing out “the latent dreams and lost power that dwell within these silly details.”¹²⁰ This turn to “silly details” inspires the transqueer work of this dissertation, further aligning with Eugenie Brinkema’s take on the specificities of “the minor, inconsequential, secret, [and] atomic.”¹²¹ I follow her insights by also “[t]reating affect as a problematic of structure, form, and aesthetics” in order to “reintroduce particularity to any consideration of affects,” including, for this dissertation, the details of the “silly.”¹²² Just as Brinkema discovers affects in the minute formal aspects of the filmic body, in its light, lines, curves, and colors, so too do I aim to feel for the “silly” in and through the “drama of the tiniest detail” in digital film and media objects.¹²³ Though, for Timms, “silliness is

¹¹⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 21.

¹¹⁸ Kraftl, *After Childhood*, 207.

¹¹⁹ Following Elizabeth Freeman, the “queerest commitment” of my work is “close reading: the decision to unfold, slowly, a small number of imaginative texts rather than amass a weighty archive of or around texts, and to treat these texts and their formal work as theories of their own, interventions upon both critical theory and historiography.”

See: Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvii.

¹²⁰ Freeman, *Time Binds*, xvi-xvii.

¹²¹ Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, xv.

¹²² Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, xvi.

¹²³ Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams* (Duke University Press, 2021), 38.

freewheeling and unstructured,” I aim to show that silliness does in fact have forms and structures, including, but not limited to, types of formal simplicity, irritating repetitions, unbearable excesses, amusing recessiveness, de/refamiliarizing modulations, and so on.¹²⁴

Silliness combines ambiguity with particularity, and so it must be considered with/in its aesthetic forms, even if these structures do not persist in the exact same ways across uses. An embrace of silliness as an aesthetic is thus “an attempt to seize the passions of affect studies for textual interpretation and close reading,” as Brinkema purposes.¹²⁵ I deploy silliness mainly as a close reading practice, a playful attunement to silly details. This is a methodology that not only helps reintroduce detail to the study of silliness, but it also helps reintroduce silliness to the study of detail. That is, it seeks to bring out the latent silliness in close reading, which is, according to N. Katherine Hayles, “one of the most privileged terms in the Traditional Humanities,” where “reading is so intimately related to meaning that it connotes much more than parsing words; it implies comprehending a text,” and often forming a theory around it.¹²⁶ The typically “serious” methods of close reading often work to master the meaning of the text, a sovereign-style severity in stark contrast to the fluid wanderings of Freeman’s queer/ed reading practices. Raymond Bellour dramatizes this distinction, claiming that “any true detailed analysis carries the murder of the object to its extreme” and that “it is possible to try to master” and “activate” the always “unattainable image” by “seizing upon” the systematic analysis of a film, dissected shot by shot.¹²⁷ The link between detailed analysis and an activity that seeks to violently “‘seize’ control

¹²⁴ Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 7.

¹²⁵ Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, xvi.

¹²⁶ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 28.

¹²⁷ Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*, ed. Constance Penley (Indiana University Press, 2000), 2, 194, 7.

of a more or less distant object acquires greater import when also considering the long-standing function of ‘targeting’ as a metaphor or figure for thinking itself,” as Samuel Weber argues.¹²⁸

This project proposes a skepticism of the militaristic language of critique, working instead to conceive of sillier alternatives. Without overdetermining the liberatory possibilities of the silly, or of this dissertation, I nonetheless hope to offer a methodological silliness that might begin to illuminate the consequences of thinking militaristically. Contrary to the humorlessness of Bellourian analysis, reading for silly details in film and media offers me something more playfully delinquent and potentially trivial.¹²⁹ After all, the trivial, as A. Y. Campbell argues, can be described as “an insignificant and silly detail to drop, suddenly, into the description of a situation so dramatic.”¹³⁰ Taking silliness as a methodology for “trivial” critique makes central the task of decolonizing intellectuality, that is, of avoiding the fallacies of the superior position when close reading and translating other people’s knowledges and ways of thinking.

Methodologically, then, silliness demands weird(er), (more) awkward, and potentially unproductive modes of engaging, thinking, and feeling with digital film and media. If the silly is *opaque, ambiguous, ambivalent, minor, nonsovereign, and messy*, then a methodological silliness must be equally so. Methodological silliness looks at all the “wrong” things in all the “wrong” objects in all the “wrong” ways. In this way, the silly coalesces different modes and approaches to get at certain gaps or fissures, operating at a curious nodal site and as a wedge term. I venture to think with the silly as an opening to queer and trans analytical strategies, and vice versa. Such sillily transqueer methods of critique involve the “intuitive combination of seemingly disparate

¹²⁸ Samuel Weber, *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking* (Fordham University Press, 2005), vii.

¹²⁹ And as Constance Penley writes in her introduction to Bellour’s book, “The almost infinite possibilities we now have to freeze the frame allow us to turn film analysis into creative play,” potentially developing even sillier and screwier methods of close reading. See: Bellour, *The Analysis of Film*, xii.

¹³⁰ A. Y. Campbell, “ΑΓΚΑΘΕΝ. Aesch. Agam. 3, Eum. 80, 373,” *The Classical Review* 1, no. 3/4 (1951): 131.

objects whose connections emerge through the critic's idiosyncratic style of rhetorical and archival disclosure," as Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez argue. They explain:

When we read each other's work, we often prompt each other to provide grounds for a particular assembly of texts and artworks, especially when those works don't appear bound in an obvious way by historical context, medium, or subject matter. In queer analysis, established categories often take a back seat to affect, feel, style, or disruption. [...] Queer methods of critique [...] reach promiscuously and willfully across texts and time.¹³¹

Following suit, rather than getting bogged down in justifying the suitability of this dissertation's media objects and cultural material—stumbling on questions like why *this* silly object and not *that* other sillier object—I aim to offer a way of thinking with all sorts of media objects in and as a mode of silliness that is simultaneously careful and carefree, detailed and lighthearted. Just as I avoid categorizing a definitive “silly form” or “silly object,” I also choose not to adjudicate what “counts” as a definite “transqueer form”—or even to claim with any certainty that any of the media objects in this dissertation are necessarily or categorically trans, queer, or transqueer.

I instead turn to what Freeman calls the “not-quite-queer enough longing for form”—for those “silly details,” for reading closely and loosely with the silly's textual erotics—and the unpredictable places that this longing can take us.¹³² In slightly different words, this dissertation plays with the not-quite-*transqueer* enough longing for all the pleurably irritating, unbearably delirious, and often overly familiar forms and feelings of silliness. Such a queer “desire for form” is what Octavio R. González refers to as a “queer formalism,” claiming that “what is queer about form is not form itself, but a special relation to it,” a relation of “too-closeness” to the textual erotics of the nonrepresentational—that is, a (trans)queer desire for something more than content, for something leaking out and bubbling through film and media forms themselves.¹³³

¹³¹ Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Pérez, “Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 230-231.

¹³² Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.

¹³³ Octavio R. González, “Queer Formalism As ‘Queer Form,’” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 274.

Overall, this dissertation ventures to explore the precarious transqueer/ed connections between the silly, the digital, and the erotic. To do so, I move away from the content of silliness, instead exploring how such content is “shaped, transmitted, coded, patterned, undermined, and invested by means of form” in the digital.¹³⁴ Looking at the various spatial, temporal, and otherwise audiovisual dis/arrangements of silliness in digital media works, this dissertation investigates the transqueer potential in what Getsy calls “insurrections of form, shape, and pattern.”¹³⁵ In other words, this dissertation is invested in the silly’s transqueer formalisms and the transqueer’s silly formalisms—combining Steinbock’s approach to a “formalism applied to the trans experience” with both González and Getsy’s formulations of “queer formalism,” and Aftab’s designation of the “transqueer.”¹³⁶ To reiterate, rather than expecting that we might find some digital form, formality, or format that is always already trans, queer, and silly anywhere or everywhere—a discrete and definite “transqueer form” or “transqueer silliness”—I aim to engender transqueer formalisms that can pursue what Getsy calls “the intercourse of forms,” striving to see the possibilities of formal relations “beneath, beyond, in consort with, or against ostensible ‘content.’”¹³⁷ Transqueer capacities are thus “engendered by activating relations—between forms, against an opposition or context, or (in the case of complex forms) among the internal dynamics of their components.”¹³⁸ Reading the complex forms, internal dynamics, and relational interfaces with/in the transqueer components of “silliness,” as Kraftl explains, requires a “return to materiality: to interfaces between humans and humans, humans and nonhumans, and all kinds of other combinations.”¹³⁹ The “inadvertent potential” of transqueerness is then located

¹³⁴ Getsy, “Queer Relations,” 255.

¹³⁵ Getsy, “Queer Relations,” 255.

¹³⁶ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 58.

¹³⁷ Getsy, “Queer Relations,” 254.

¹³⁸ Getsy, “Queer Relations,” 254.

¹³⁹ Kraftl, *After Childhood*, 210.

in “the associations, frictions, and bonds between and among forms,” a sillied sense of both/and-ness between serious/unserious, positive/negative, sovereign/nonsovereign, high/low, and so on.¹⁴⁰ With an attention and attachment to such sillied relations between and within forms, to a formalism of the erotic (at the aesthetic register) activated by relationality and intercourse, the silly’s transqueer formalisms cultivates ways to read both with and against the grain, through and beyond intentionality, but always in pursuit of inadvertent potential. This dissertation ventures to turn silliness into a key resource for queer and trans theories and studies of popular digital media.

V. Mediating the Silly

In the last stanza of a poem titled *Mozi [Cinema]*, written shortly after the emergence of sound film, Hungarian author Jenő Heltai offers a devastating evaluation of cinema; accordingly, as Orsolya Milián translates, film is “one centimetre of real poetry / and three thousand metres of silliness.”¹⁴¹ If early twentieth century cinema was 0.0333333% artful and 99.999666667% silly, what then are we to make of this divide between “true art” and “true silliness” in the twenty-first century post-digital landscape? Do such high/low distinctions hold at all anymore? Today, the internet’s silly archive of digital artefacts—every AI generated meme and piece of “brainrot” on our algorithmically personalized FYPs—have become part of the ways in which we make sense of the world. By consuming these artefacts, we have learned to use the digital to make particular (serious) things silly and to feel silly in particular (serious) ways. Steven Connor notes that in the digital, when “every feeling and meaning can be put swiftly on display and into circulation, dramatic slippages between seriousness and silliness can occur.”¹⁴² We have, in other words,

¹⁴⁰ Getsy, “Queer Relations,” 255.

¹⁴¹ See: Orsolya Milián, “‘One Centimetre of Real Poetry and Three Thousand Metres of Silliness’ – Silent Movies and Hungarian Ekphrastic Poetry,” in *Intermedial Encounters: Studies in Honour of Ágnes Pethő*, ed. Melinda Blos-Jani et al. (Scientia Kiadó, 2022), 144.

¹⁴² Connor, *Styles of Seriousness*, 55.

constructed a vast, growing silly archive of digital artefacts appropriate to a world where even the gravest issues, from war to environmental devastation and elite leadership, are continuously mediated memetically as silly, junky fodder, bathetically refracted through a pop-cultural prism.

Intersecting digitality and silliness in media studies, Hoffman further argues that “ludic discourses [are] endemic to digital spaces,” devoted to “content easy to categorize as trivial or stupid.”¹⁴³ The digital is a web of silliness, filled with all sorts of crude images, graphic oddities, sound mishaps, gaming fails, meltdowns, misfires, and much more weirdness. This silliness nonetheless exists side-by-side with the digital’s vast seriousness, from the humorlessness of certain gamer cultures to the graveness of surveillance practices, drone warfare, and more. The silly is thus pervasive to digital spaces and online discourses. As Jenny L. Davis, Tony P. Love, and Gemma Killen note, “a robust infusion of ‘irreverent’ and ‘silly’ politics is distinctly of the internet,” where silliness is “woven into the fabric” of the digital—a significant move towards the silly in the digital that, as they suggest, may provide an “entry point” among those who have been “politically disempowered.”¹⁴⁴ Yet, a tension exists between “participatory potentials,” on the one hand, and the “dissolution of silliness into cynicism and exclusion,” on the other.¹⁴⁵

While the digital is awash with silly “content,” feelings of discomfort, irritation, and ambivalence are pivotal to our experiences online. As Geert Lovink writes, “media, almost by definition, are about filters, switches, technical limitations, silly simulations, and heartless representations,” alluding to an essential quality of discomfoting silliness in all mediation.¹⁴⁶

Lovink describes this sense of silly discomfort in the digital through a “flux” of feelings:

¹⁴³ Christine Hoffmann, *Stupid Humanism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 70.

¹⁴⁴ Jenny L Davis, Tony P Love, and Gemma Killen, “Seriously Funny: The Political Work of Humor on Social Media,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 10 (2018), 3901.

¹⁴⁵ Davis, Love, and Killen, “Seriously Funny,” 3901

¹⁴⁶ Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (MIT Press, 2003), 23.

Dopamine is the metaphor of our age. The neurotransmitter stands for the accelerated up-cycles in our mood, the euphoric high before the inevitable crash. ... Our interconnected life is a story of growth spurts, followed by long periods of stagnation in which staying connected no longer serves any purpose. ... We feel defeated, overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, nervous, stupid, silly, useless. Mood swings are programed.¹⁴⁷

While, for Lovink, the “silly” is just one of the many bad feelings in/of the digital, his overall diagnosis of the ordinariness of such confused, contradictory, and mixed affective expressions and experiences is what I would call the digital’s essentially “silly” condition: the overarching condition of discomfoting silliness inherent to the digital’s programmed mood swings. But is it possible to productively respond to this “deadening” sort of silliness with more silliness, with a different silliness, with sillier kinds of mood swings, with reluctance, or playful ambivalence?

Central to this dissertation, then, are the ways in which the “silly” is (and is not) taken up as a key (or marginal) word in digital media studies and the digital humanities.¹⁴⁸ As I argue, silliness and digital media are inextricably intertwined, yet beyond the digital’s silly archives and objects, I claim that it is the digital’s exceedingly malleable, manipulable, and modulational nature that makes it especially receptive to silly creation and reception, silly aesthetics and affect, and transqueer/ed queries. Can digital modulations be silly forms? Are they always? Is auto-tune a silly form? Can something as potentially malignant as a digital glitch be considered a silly form? How might digital filters, superimpositions, and composite images be aesthetically silly? And how do all these silly forms affect us? Do silly digital forms evoke silly digital feelings?

¹⁴⁷ Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (Pluto Press, 2019), 35.

¹⁴⁸ We can also turn to queer game studies here. Edmond Chang defines “queergaming” as related to “possibilities of noncompetitive, nonproductive, nonjudgmental play, as well as the uncertainty and inefficiency of glitches, exploits, and other goofiness and the desire for queer worlds as opportunities for exploration, for different rules and goals, and even for the radical potential of failure.” [See: Edmond Y. Chang, “Queergaming,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).] And Ruggill and McAllister describe “computer game archiving as ‘a silly little fart’ of a pursuit” and the medium itself “as trivial, worthless, and stupid as it is important, invaluable, and deep.” [See: Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, “Computer Game Archiving and the Serious Work of Silliness,” *Animation Journal* 19 (2011).]

Counter to our preconceived notions otherwise, as Julia Kristeva argues, film and media that emphasize form over content—even, and especially, those that we might consider in poor taste—might offer a well-spring of affect. Julia Kristeva insists “the sillier the better,” for the filmic image does not need to be smart or serious: “what really counts is that the specular present—through its direct signified (object or represented situation)—and that it figure through its plastic rhythm (that network of lektonic elements, sound, tone, color, space, pattern) the drive—the aggression—which has come back to us from the other without reply, and which has consequently remained uncaptured, unsymbolized, unconsumed.”¹⁴⁹ In simpler terms, what is at stake for Kristeva, as Kerner and Hoxter summarize, are “those things that exceed, or ooze out of the narrative, but are not necessarily a component of narrative” such as “an extreme close-up that effectively obliterates what it purports to represent” or “compositions overwhelmed by scale (sublime), color, and so on” that “exalt in the spectacle of excess, which for all intents and purposes has ‘no meaning.’”¹⁵⁰ Silliness might then reside in kinds of spectacular and excessive non-meaning, in “audio/visual signifiers divorced from any apparent significance—BOOM! For the sake of things going BOOM! ‘Ohhhh,’ for the sake of ‘ohhhh!’,” as Kerner and Hoxter suggest.¹⁵¹ Yet, as I argue, the silly also resides in the erotics of less explicit, minor aesthetics—in the small prick of the Barthesian *punctum*, in the gentle itch of the tiniest of details.¹⁵²

Often, the “stuff” of digital film and media (such as the example of an extreme close-up or a loud BOOM!) feels so ordinary and obvious to us that the supposed “excess” of their formal

¹⁴⁹ Julia Kristeva, “Ellipsis on Dread and the Specular Seduction,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen, trans. Dolores Burdick (Columbia University Press, 1986), 238-239.

¹⁵⁰ Kerner and Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*, 2.

¹⁵¹ Kerner and Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*, 9.

¹⁵² In a note, Kerner and Hoxter admit to using an uncommon translation of Kristeva’s phrase “plus c’est bête, c’est mieux,” reading “plus c’est bête” as “stupider” instead of (what other scholars translate as) “sillier.” Either translation is acceptable, but “sillier” comes much closest to retaining the element of *la bête*, the beast or animal, which one might also translate as “horseplay” or even “monkey business.”

and affective silliness registers as completely undramatic. Our relation to mediated silliness, in other words, has become quite de-dramatized. We experience the silly with such frequency, for instance, while we doomscroll on our phones for hours. Such ambiguities involved in mediated engagements with the “silly” and the digital’s endlessly malleable forms (its modulations, mutations, and transmogrifications) make the digital a particularly interesting case for reading with/for the silly’s transqueer conjugations. Silliness, I suggest, allows for a theorization of transqueerness (in this context) as a nonsovereign attachment to certain digital forms, offering a playfully sensuous approach to closely reading with the sticky, slippery, and often-ambivalent erotics of silly digital formalisms—an intimate and passionate attachment to the confounding surfaces, textures, and rhythms of digital media. In this way, the digital, I argue, requires a closer, de-dramatized engagement with its often subtle (and sometimes exaggerated) silly surfaces, a more careful attention to its contagiously silly formalisms, to the minor shapes of silliness in/as the digital. (Indicative of this turn to a de-dramatized silliness, for example, Maria Damon considers an “aesthetic of goofiness,” or “silliness...raised to the level of an aesthetic,” as fundamental to her study of minor forms in early cybertext and digital poetics.¹⁵³)

In their study of “stupid media,” however, Kerner and Hoxter locate the “stupid” within “storytelling” and “story structures,” not at all in deviant forms or aesthetics, despite how they interpret Kristeva’s theorization. The “stupid,” for them, arises when media-makers fail to “play by prevailing storytelling regimes,” resulting in “narratives that experiment with and/or throw off the yoke of storytelling conventions.”¹⁵⁴ Storytelling that “does not conform to conventions of linear cause and effect relations might be characterized as stupid,” they argue.¹⁵⁵ While they

¹⁵³ Maria Damon, “Electronic Poetics Essay. Diaspora, Silliness and ?Gender?,” in *Ergodic Poetry: A Special Section of the Cybertext Yearbook* (University of Jyväskylä, 2002), 157.

¹⁵⁴ Kerner and Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*, 186.

¹⁵⁵ Kerner and Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*, 17.

argue that “storytelling modes are inextricably linked to technology,” Kerner and Hoxter nonetheless insist on focusing on “narrative innovations.”¹⁵⁶ Unlike these scholars, then, I am not interested in storytelling experiments, nor am I invested in neatly or definitively categorizing and “charting the terrain” of that thing we might call “silly media” as they do with “stupid media.”¹⁵⁷

To take a slight step back, digital media studies is oddly not a place where “silliness” itself has been taken to be a key concept. In *Keywords for Media Studies*, for example, the word “silly” appears just *once* in passing while “silliness” does not appear at all.¹⁵⁸ Why is this? While mediated silliness is obviously and increasingly pervasive in digital cultures, media studies has largely glossed over the strong attraction of the “silly” to the digital, and vice versa. We exist in a time of “silly citizenship,” as John Hartley writes, where “the civic and the silly are in intimate physical contact” and where “mediated citizenship seems to be getting *sillier*.”¹⁵⁹ In a different register, cultural critic Lee Siegel begrudgingly calls the post-Internet era the “Age of Silly,” conservatively blaming the “Internet’s attacks on every type of seriousness that had the slightest whiff of authority behind it,” including “its wild creation of every type of silly diversion” and “its celebration of silly enraged opinion over considered, serious judgment.”¹⁶⁰ While other disciplines in the humanities, in cultural studies, in studies of literature, poetry, and philosophy, have displayed more of an explicit curiosity for the “silly,” even mildly so, for its etymologies, transformations, and uses, digital media studies has done much less with/for the “silly.”

Addressing a notable gap in media scholarship, this dissertation works at the transqueer intersections of the *silly*, the *digital*, and the *erotic*, drawing on (trans)queer digital humanities as

¹⁵⁶ Kerner and Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ Kerner and Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media*, 2.

¹⁵⁸ Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray, eds., *Keywords for Media Studies* (New York University Press, 2017).

¹⁵⁹ John Hartley, “Silly Citizenship,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010), 241.

¹⁶⁰ Lee Siegel, *Are You Serious? How to Be True and Get Real in the Age of Silly* (HarperCollins, 2011), 84.

a discipline that makes messes, embracing audacity, play, failure, and disciplinary disruption. I embrace the interventions of the (trans)queer digital humanities, offering a mode of playfully thinking with the silly, ambiguous mess(es) of digital media, or what Saara Särmä calls the everyday “stuff” of digital “junk,” and ultimately enabling a nonsovereign love of the silly.¹⁶¹

VI. Loving (with) the Silly

Silliness (is the love that) sticks us together...or slips us apart. It is, however, always the nonsovereignty that puts us out of control, testing the limits of our self-sovereignty. To be silly is to lose control. And to lose control is to be silly. One of the current uses of the “silly,” according to the OED, is “in phrases denoting actions carried out thoroughly or to an excessive degree, esp. to the extent that the person involved or affected is no longer capable of thinking or acting sensibly, as to drink oneself silly, to bore a person silly, to scare a person silly, etc.”¹⁶² Silly here signifies a forfeiture of self-control, bringing up longstanding worries about being out of control, which is, after all, Plato’s charge, as Morreall describes, that when “we lose control of our rational faculties, [we] become silly, irresponsible, and less truly human.”¹⁶³ (Of course, for Plato, what is less-than-“human” carries clear racial connotations. The “silly” who have no “control” of their rational faculties are the racial Others who depart from Eurocentric colonial norms of self-management—a point that Soares also addresses, and I elaborate on in Chapter 3.) Where the rationality, seriousness, and composure of Plato’s “human” pursues coherent, bounded, and sovereign “distributions of the sensible,” to borrow Jacques Rancière’s phrase, silliness anticipates, revels in, and reckons with the moments of opacity, nonsovereignty, or

¹⁶¹ Saara Särmä, “Collaging Internet Parody Images: An Art-Inspired Methodology for Studying Laughter in World Politics,” in *Understanding Popular Culture and World Politics in the Digital Age*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd and Caitlin Hamilton (Routledge, 2016), 176.

¹⁶² “Silly, Adj., n., and Adv.,” in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁶³ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 99.

excess possibility where the sensible fails to cohere or hang together.¹⁶⁴ To do *something* (drink, bore, scare) to such a degree that it *becomes* silly implies a redistribution of the sensible and a cultivation of the less-than-sensible—or perhaps even of the extra-sensible.

Silliness is an aesthetic, affective, and cultural form of nonsovereignty in and across media, a sensibility which works against what Berlant calls “sovereign-style humorlessness.”¹⁶⁵ Sovereignty, for Berlant, is “a fantasy of self-ratifying control over a situation or space—a stance that might or might not be sanctioned by norm or law.”¹⁶⁶ And for Berlant and Lee Edelman, “nonsovereignty” is “the relentless force that unsettles [that] fantasy,” that is, it refers to “the subject’s constitutive division that keeps us, as subjects, from fully knowing or being in control of ourselves and that prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires.”¹⁶⁷ (We might ask if deliberate silliness is itself always paradoxical because it puts us in control of being out of control. Can deliberate silliness still access the nonsovereign?) Berlant defines “sovereign-style humorlessness” as that which “wedges an encounter in order to control it, creating a buttress of immobility and impasse.”¹⁶⁸ Such humorlessness might take on “any form representationally,” but it is often associated with “a tone drained of whatever passes for warmth or openness” which is why, for Berlant, humorlessness is associated both with “political correctness” and with “the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things.”¹⁶⁹ Silliness, for Timms, is also about thwarting “sensitivities” and “airily undermining political correctness,” which he views as preachy, humorless austerity.¹⁷⁰ And if, as Berlant suggests, the “aspirational sovereign

¹⁶⁴ For Rancière, “the distribution of the sensible” refers to the system of aesthetic registers through which things, actions, and bodies are “placed” and sensory experiences encoded and decoded. See: Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Zed Books, 2013[2000]).

¹⁶⁵ Lauren Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 308.

¹⁶⁶ Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” 308.

¹⁶⁷ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014), viii.

¹⁶⁸ Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” 308.

¹⁶⁹ Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” 308.

¹⁷⁰ Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 14.

can express his humorlessness in many ways: as affectlessness, passive aggression, seriousness, bitter mirth, or any kind of warm emotion, even a smile,” then silliness might likewise take on a plethora of forms and styles in and across media to combat the sovereign and humorless.¹⁷¹

Nonsovereignty is not necessarily a serious, severe, or radically disruptive operation; for, as Berlant suggests, “Farts are the essential confirmation that no one is a bodily sovereign and that decay suffuses the ordinary of life.”¹⁷² Like the gaseous release of a fart, nonsovereignty is an exercise in letting go. And while it may disturb or upset others in its quiet stink, it also necessarily underpins being in common, because being involved with others in the project of world-building demands forms of attachment that are antagonistic to fantasies of control. The “fart” enables, for Berlant, “the possibility of a *good* nonsovereignty,” of common worlds, of relational fart clouds.¹⁷³ In other words, silly farts bring us together as silly subjects.

But do we *want* silliness? Do we *need* it? Do we *desire* it? Do we *love* it? As I argue, silliness might enable a nonsovereign love precisely because it is a condition that accepts the illogical nature of attachment. As a properly (counter)political concept, silliness, like love, is a form of “affective solidarity that admits the irrationality of the principled attachment,” that is, for Berlant, where “we desire to have patience for what isn’t working,” to maintain an “affective binding that allows us to iron things out, or to be elastic, or to try a new incoherence”—to fart together.¹⁷⁴ Love, for Berlant, is an *inconvenience*, “a mess-making force, as its aim is to dissolve toxic sureties.”¹⁷⁵ If for Berlant, “love” involves “a rhythm of an ambition and an intention to stay in sync,” as I see it, “love” may be defined as being in the mess of silliness in

¹⁷¹ Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” 308.

¹⁷² Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” 316.

¹⁷³ “Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant,” posted May 10, 2011, by Barnard Center for Research on Women, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIOeWTa_M0U.

¹⁷⁴ Lauren Berlant, “A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE: Three Approaches in Ten Pages,” *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 685-686.

¹⁷⁵ Berlant, “A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE,” 685.

sync with an other.¹⁷⁶ Silliness, I argue, is always “magnetized to the rhythm of convergence we call love,” integral to its maintenance, its growth, and its thriving.¹⁷⁷ “Underrated form of intimacy: being silly together,” as one meme phrase has it.¹⁷⁸ Silliness is also what allows us to be lovingly opaque together. The “silly,” for Carolyn Veldstra, “uniquely approach[es] the ambiguity of dwelling by admitting rather than dismissing the difficulty and opacity of comprehending one’s position in the world, one’s myriad connections to others and the fundamental opacity of those others.”¹⁷⁹ A silly politics, then, as Welty adds, might lead to a politics of “togetherness that recognizes difference and the unreadability of the Other, but also how that presence can still belong,” and even perhaps generate an unusual lovingness.¹⁸⁰

Many authors have likewise explored the deep connection between silliness and love. Paul Valéry, in *Monsieur Teste*, for instance, claims that “love consists in *the right to be silly beasts together*—the complete license of silliness and bestiality,” stating: “You know what ridiculous names lovers give each other: what appellations of puppy and bird are the natural fruit of carnal intimacy. Speech of the heart is childish. The voice of flesh is elemental.”¹⁸¹ We might also consider Desiderius Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*, where the goddess Folly, in a speech on her own behalf, argues that it is “silliness” and not the calculations of reason that makes possible everything we treasure most in life. Erasmus writes: “For what is or can be more silly than to be

¹⁷⁶ Berlant, “A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE,” 683.

¹⁷⁷ Berlant, “A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE,” 684.

¹⁷⁸ More crude examples have since emerged, including: “Me And The Bad Bitch I Pulled By Being Silly,” “She Let Me Hit Because I’m Goofy,” “She Let Me Hit Because I’m Silly Online,” and other iterations. See: Diana Armstrong [@MafiosoRo], “Underrated Form of Intimacy: Being Silly Together,” Tweet, *Twitter*, October 26, 2019, <https://x.com/MafiosoRo/status/1187998140781285376>.

¹⁷⁹ Carolyn Veldstra, “Laughing at Nothing: A Response to Ryan Weber’s ‘Ironically, We Dwell,’” *JAC* 33, no. 1/2 (2013): 325–36.

¹⁸⁰ William Welty, “Towards a Politics of Stupidity,” *Politics/Letters Live* (blog), March 30, 2018, <http://politicsslashletters.org/features/towards-politics-stupidity/>.

¹⁸¹ Paul Valéry, *Monsieur Teste*, trans. Jackson Mathews (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1947[1896]), 34.

lovers and admirers of ourselves?”¹⁸² And as Morreall summarizes: “It is folly, especially, that allows us to live together and even love one another,” adding that “the completely rational and realistic person, Dame Folly suggests, would love neither himself nor anyone else.”¹⁸³ Being silly together is then a key form of nonsovereign intimacy, attachment, and belonging—a love, which is, for Helle Skovbjerg Karoff, a kind of euphoria characterized by “an intense expectation of silliness where you are ready for both others and your own silliness,” sustaining connection by continually coming up with new ways to be silly and sillier together—a form of being in sync through a readiness for the possibilities of genuinely silly experimentation.¹⁸⁴

In a different register, psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas explains that “silliness” is part of the “unthought known,” experiences we somehow know but cannot fully articulate. Silliness is a “generative mood,” he believes, in that it allows us to temporarily turn inward, contacting “the mute, unknown child self” that has become part of the “unthought known” in adulthood.¹⁸⁵ This “mood of infrequent silliness” is an “unconscious re-creation of the occasionally happy child self,” a kind of memory which is now “refused recognition” by the adult self.¹⁸⁶ Silliness is kid stuff; it is the child self (or childish stuff) that screws with the temporal drive of reproductive futurity, echoing Halberstam’s view of queers and children as structurally homologous subject positions, twin failures on a temporal axis marked by a developmental path to maturity (the non-mature and not-yet-mature respectively).¹⁸⁷ This is the silly’s queer kid stuff, supposedly lost to

¹⁸² Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly* (Reeves & Turner, 1876), 36.

¹⁸³ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, 119.

¹⁸⁴ Helle Skovbjerg Karoff, “Play Practices and Play Moods,” *International Journal of Play* 2, no. 2 (2013): 84.

¹⁸⁵ Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (Routledge, 2018[1987]), 64.

¹⁸⁶ Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object*, 65.

¹⁸⁷ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*.

us as adults.¹⁸⁸ While for Bollas silliness is a “generative” mood and is thus aimed inwards (as opposed to a “malignant mood” which is aimed outward at an other), I argue that silliness is regularly aimed outwards—our “kid stuff” turning towards an other’s “kid stuff.” Silliness is an awareness and celebration of the non-malignant, non-annihilatory nonsovereignty of an other’s being—a silly, nonreproductive being together. Like McDonald’s posthumorist laughter, silliness “shrugs off ‘sovereign expectations of autonomous selfhood’ in order to better attune itself to the disordered and asymmetrical rhythms of the world,” to our messy relationality with others.¹⁸⁹

Or as Christopher Robin says of his best friend Winnie-the-Pooh: “Pooh hasn’t got very much brain, and he might do something silly, and I do love him so.”¹⁹⁰ The “and” here is key. He does not say “*but* I do love him so” or “*still* I love him so,” he says “*and* I love him so.” He is stupid, silly, *and* I love him so. This is, as Erin Nunoda explains, a form of attachment, or “love,” that is not “inherently redemptive or vicious” but enables “less sovereign ways of being,” which, in film and media, allows for less sovereign, transqueer/ed ways of “being intimate with the bad object” via its “instance[s] of frivolity and silliness.”¹⁹¹ Nunoda brings us to this key connection between the silly’s nonsovereign love and our loving attachment to the silly’s media forms—an intimacy with the silly object and/or a longing for the silly with/in the object; this is, again, a not-quite-transqueer enough longing for the silly’s forms and feelings, a longing that may lead us to unpredictable places via the “the political slipperiness” of formal, “erotic affects” like silliness that “do not necessarily perform in expected or intentional ways.”¹⁹² Sharing a similar position, Weinstock claims that “the silliness of the silly cult film functions as the strange attractor” that

¹⁸⁸ Offering a similar position, Adorno explains that the “collusion of children with clowns is a collusion with art, which adults drive out of them just as they drive out their collusion with animals,” leading him to claim that the childish “constellation animal/fool/clown is a fundamental layer of art.” See: Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 119.

¹⁸⁹ Frances McDonald, *Posthumorism: The Modernist Affect of Laughter* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 3-4.

¹⁹⁰ A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1926), 137.

¹⁹¹ Erin Nunoda, “Breaking the Mirror: Hausu and Bad Love Objects,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 85 (2020): 40.

¹⁹² Nunoda, “Breaking the Mirror,” 40.

inaugurates a “chaotic system of desire” such that “the silliness is what one loves in the silly film more than the film” itself.¹⁹³ In this dissertation, then, I am equally inspired by Nunoda’s close attachment to what she terms “bad love objects,” Weinstock’s chaotic and strange attractions to the “silly” in media, and Christopher Robins’s attachment to that “silly old bear” that he loves so.

This dissertation positions silliness as a foundation to relationality’s nonsovereignty. If, as I propose, silliness is the *eidos* of love, and if, as Berlant asserts, “love always means non-sovereignty,” then the silly’s loving is *always* nonsovereign.¹⁹⁴ In fact, Jacques Lacan’s primary example for silliness is love itself. In his late teachings, as Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler observe, “Lacan refers to love as silliness or ‘funny business’ (*bêtise*),” underscoring its centrality in life’s theater, and suggesting that there is something irresistibly silly about love—a silliness that exposes its nonsovereign nature.¹⁹⁵ While it’s easy to assume that silliness, like love, might manifest in an increase of our joy, Berlant suggests that love’s silliness might create feelings that we “can be a mass of incoherent things and not be defeated by that.”¹⁹⁶ Poet Claudia Rankine beautifully captures this affective incoherence, writing: “You smile dumbly at the world because you are still feeling if only the feeling could be known and this brings on the moment you recognize as desire,” a desire that is as silly as it is nonsovereign.¹⁹⁷

Beyond love, silliness also underpins contemporary social relations, particularly in digital media cultures of the twenty-first century where, like its counterpart and corollary melancholia, as Jonathan Flatley writes, it might form “the site in which the social origins of our emotional

¹⁹³ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 236.

¹⁹⁴ Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt, “No One is Sovereign in Love: A Conversation Between Lauren Berlant and Michael Hardt,” interview by Heather Love, May 2011, Coalition Margins, <https://coalition.org.mk/archives/646?lang=en>.

¹⁹⁵ Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler, eds., *Lacan, Psychoanalysis, and Comedy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5.

¹⁹⁶ Berlant and Hardt, “No One is Sovereign in Love.”

¹⁹⁷ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2014).

lives can be mapped out and from which we can see the other persons who share our losses and are subject to the same social forces.”¹⁹⁸ The productive intersection of trauma and silliness, as Kraftl has argued, furthermore generates possibilities for care, love, and connection, fostering new ethical and political formations. To be silly is to be “full of care,” as Parslow suggests, since “silliness actively moves through vulnerability as an always already queer form of subjectivity that allows experiences of community and coming together to emerge” through, because of, and despite the risks of violence.¹⁹⁹ To be silly may be to be vulnerable, but it is also a way of being interested in the world, an openness and playfulness with and in the presence of others.

Consider, for instance, what Mela Miekus and Mita Medri call the “Silly Girl,” a type of “digital girl”—a digital “roleplay” or “persona”—that “utilizes silliness as her way of engaging and disengaging from the world,” providing “a counter-space where logic, rationality, and seriousness are traded in for affect, irony, and quirkiness.”²⁰⁰ The silly here is, as Wittgenstein insightfully writes, “not a mood but a way of looking at the world”—a deeply silly orientation toward the world.²⁰¹ In the digital landscape, silliness can light up a part of our brains that makes us curious, chaotic, and (even more) nonsovereign. The question, however, remains: how, when, and why do people desire or not desire to be silly, nonsovereign, and/or willingly lose control?

VII. Slipping and Sticking with the Silly

And why silliness, and why now? In ongoing, escalating, and increasingly extra/ordinary crisis times—amid climate catastrophe, resurgent fascism, unregulated capitalism, systemic racism, ethnic cleansing, sanctioned genocide, attacks on queer and trans life, and the lingering

¹⁹⁸ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 3.

¹⁹⁹ Parslow, *Their Majesty*, 106.

²⁰⁰ Mela Miekus and Mita Medri, “Silly Girl Theory: Scrolling the Digital Playgrounds,” *Institute of Network Cultures*, February 16, 2024, <https://networkcultures.org/longform/2024/02/16/silly-girl-theory-scrolling-the-digital-playgrounds/>.

²⁰¹ Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 78.

aftershocks of a pandemic that made clear whose lives are considered disposable—silliness may seem like a “trivial” concern. And it is. It’s unproductive. It’s fairly useless. Yet we are still drawn to it and driven by it, even and especially in crisis times, where it’s both hard to feel silly and impossible not to feel silly. That is precisely why the silly matters and continues to matter.

The silly’s perceived uselessness and frivolity is a large part of what makes it potentially effective as a (counter)political tactic. When despair is omnipresent, when exhaustion is a baseline condition, silliness offers something beyond mere escapism, catharsis, or deferral. The silly can incite weird, goofy, and playful methods of social activism and mirthful modes of political performance that inspire and sustain deadly serious struggles for revolutionary change. It swerves, side-steps, and reroutes, giving us a reason to keep moving. And sometimes, perhaps even oftentimes, the silly’s “radical” potential falls flat. It fails us, and we fail with, in, and/or through it. Yet, silliness still *insists* on other, alternative, potentially disruptive way of being, ways that are unusual, unnecessary, and therefore, utterly vital. If “serious” culture demands that we respond to crisis with solemnity, with productivity, with proper emotions, then silliness is a kind of “refusal.” Or more precisely, it is a reluctance. A hesitation. An ambivalence that refuses to take power’s script at face value. The silly is the uncommon sense internal to common sense.

But where does this silliness take us? While silliness can certainly lead to new and different forms of relation and action, the silly is not necessarily an avenue toward resistant practices. Some, like Parslow, however, eagerly suggest that “silliness [is] a strategy of resisting homophobia and transphobia by a refusal to be serious,” a way of engaging in “silly things in the everyday” in order to find strategies to “resist, refuse and survive.”²⁰² He claims that a “queer

²⁰² Joe Parslow, “When the Lights Are Shining on Them: Drag Performance and Queer Communities in London” (Dissertation, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, 2019), 90.

silliness” offers “a utopic glimpse of a queer future.”²⁰³ This is a position shared by others who take up the political potential of silliness, like Miekus and Medri, who define the “Silly Girl” as “anyone or anything that exists in opposition to hegemonic structures.”²⁰⁴ While showing that “the internet is a goofy business,” they claim the “Silly Girl” deploys a silliness that “refuses,” “disturbs,” “ruptures,” and ultimately “*sillifies*” the “smooth and ingrained nature” of essentialist modes of thinking and being online; to “*sillify*,” they write, is “to propose a glitch to the hegemonic modes of doing and being, to perform actions, tasks, and relations in performatively silly ways that oppose neoliberal and patriarchal values.”²⁰⁵ Such a silly orientation to the digital world, however, is not necessarily or always oppositional; silliness does not, as they claim, always serve “as psychic armour and a coping mechanism” nor does it become a kind of “digital reprieve,” serving as a “hideout,” a “distraction,” and a “respite” from “the violence of the socio-cultural matrix,” a way of “tolerating the crushing reality of existing under the hegemonic neoliberal chokehold.”²⁰⁶ This is what Parslow also calls the silly’s utopic “failsafe.”²⁰⁷

Other, like Timms, also overstate the silly’s ethical potential, mistakenly suggesting that silliness “makes us better people.”²⁰⁸ While this may sometimes be the case, Halberstam also reminds us that silly texts “do not make us better people or liberate us from the culture industry, but they might offer strange and anticapitalist logics of being and acting and knowing, and they will harbor covert and overt queer worlds.”²⁰⁹ Silliness, then, is not mere release, or if it is, that’s not necessarily or usually liberatory, nor is it assimilable to utopian frameworks. Silliness might feel like a refusal, like it is “outside” of everything, in its own transqueer space-time or “magic

²⁰³ Parslow, *Their Majesty*, 110.

²⁰⁴ Miekus and Medri, “Silly Girl Theory.”

²⁰⁵ Miekus and Medri, “Silly Girl Theory.”

²⁰⁶ Miekus and Medri, “Silly Girl Theory.”

²⁰⁷ Parslow, *Their Majesty*, 104.

²⁰⁸ Peter Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History* (Wakefield Press, 2019), 19.

²⁰⁹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 20-21.

circle,” and yet it may also feel very much *in* and *of* everything, always anchored with/in the undramatic, ordinary rhythms of the everyday. The silly then feels (to its bearer or spectator) like it is exterior to the domain of the serious and re/productive; it feels like it is apart from the sensible that is sovereign, the affects that are controlled, the aesthetics that fit squarely into boxes, and the bodies that neatly cohere. Yet its ambiguities, ambivalences, and messiness also mean that it might inhabit the less ambiguous, less ambivalent, and less messy—that it can even bolster the illusion of self-sovereignty. The “insistent pattern of silliness” in media and culture offers the “double satisfaction of both rejecting dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them,” illustrating that “silliness inevitably obscures or even defuses political messages,” and that it can even become “a kind of alibi for the doubleness that lurks in these [mass cultural] texts.”²¹⁰ For is this not the state of Trump’s America, which has, throughout two presidencies, brandished a devastating, sovereign-style silliness (intentionally or not)?

The silly, I’ve shown, operates through the fractal logic of ambivalence, which for Michael Dango and Tina Post is “a way of tracking how contradiction resonates across scales of analysis, from subject to aesthetic form, from the interpersonal to the structural, from the basic to the epiphenomenal,” then becoming “a means of grasping the complexity of an object not just in its contradiction, but in its contagious contradictoriness.”²¹¹ Such ambivalence is at the heart of queer (and trans) theory, which Berlant understands as “a training in paying attention to all that, the multiplicity of beats and points of convergence that correlate the surprise and contingency of relationality and desire with threat, delight, and ongoingness,” including the “sustaining rhythms of irregular encounters.”²¹² Rather than resolving ambivalence or neutralizing nonsovereignty,

²¹⁰ Weinstock, “Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film,” 245.

²¹¹ Michael Dango and Tina Post, “An Introduction to Ambivalent Criticism,” *Post45*, no. 8 (2022).

²¹² Berlant, “A PROPERLY POLITICAL CONCEPT OF LOVE,” 686.

transqueer theories provide “a sensitivity and channeling of that very disturbance of control,” maintaining a quietly trans*formational capacity that “does not always manifest as something so coherent as an alternative world” or a complete refusal of things—but perhaps something a bit smaller and sillier. This is key; as Jagoda reminds us, the (trans)queer is “not merely a negativity that positions itself against contemporary systems of power,” but rather it is the weirdness that slithers in and through them.²¹³ It can be approached, Berlant writes, as “an attentiveness and will to make openings,” to open oneself up to minor modes of change in an *ongoing, expansive*, and *varied* now that insists on the present’s irreducible multiplicity.²¹⁴ The silly, then, as Donald Hoffman suggests, is a “minor triumph,” adding that “silliness may not win the war, but it’s not a bad way to being the battle.”²¹⁵ Perhaps, like the carnivalesque, silliness may only offer “a brief release before the systems reimpose themselves and the toys go back in the box,” and yet, as Gina Wisker suggests; their power is “permanently queried,” maybe even transqueered.²¹⁶

Silliness, Parslow suggests, works by “naming the present not as a site to be refused but as something that is not good enough and that must change.”²¹⁷ And while I agree that silliness is less so a strict refusal of things, I disagree that it is necessarily anchored in resistant and hopeful deferrals. The silly is not a utopian possibility carried around in futural fantasy to help mitigate the frustration with our current living conditions. The silly’s temporalities are in fact much *much* messier and represent, as Erin J. Rand describes, “a peculiar kind of movement—not forward, exactly, and certainly not straight ahead on a clear route, but movement into a place and time that

²¹³ Jagoda, *Experimental Games*, 163.

²¹⁴ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 19.

²¹⁵ Donald Hoffman, “Not Dead Yet: Monty Python and the Holy Grail in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (McFarland & Co, 2002), 145.

²¹⁶ Gina Wisker, “‘None Shall Pass’ and ‘The Skull beneath the Skin’: Monty Python, the British Class System and Death,” in *And Now for Something Completely Different: Critical Approaches to Monty Python*, ed. Kate Egan and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 50.

²¹⁷ Parslow, *Their Majesty*, 113.

is unfamiliar and unforeseeable.”²¹⁸ It is unwise, then, to foresee or anticipate where silliness may lead us, even if silliness is (or can be) a form of transqueer political work. While Parslow insists that the “silly” is a “mode of *doing politics queerly*” via a kind of “nonfrontal looking,” he maintains that “silly politics” are “intimately about hope,” providing avenues for resistance and survival that are thus, in a sense, still forward looking.²¹⁹ Silliness, he adds, is essentially fluid, evasive, and resistant to capture, refusing to be immobilized; it is a method and a mode of queer political work that “slips and slides through the cracks, dodges and weaves and refuses to get caught (or get caught up) by violent modes that try to stop it,” and it is thus about “maintaining movement as a strategy of not getting stuck,” of “refusing to stick.”²²⁰ While the silly is slippery and fleeting, it is important to stipulate that the silly can also stick and be sticky.

Silliness requires consideration of how it *sticks* as well as *moves*, how it can be a dynamic mode of movement and a kind of undynamic stuckness between things—impossibly holding together seemingly incompatible affects like trauma and joy, dysphoria and euphoria, despair and hope, furthermore revealing its ambivalent, contradictory, and transqueer qualities. Like the silly, queer is also a “sticky sign,” as Sara Ahmed writes, where “stickiness involves a form of relationality, or a ‘withness,’ in which the elements that are ‘with’ get bound together.”²²¹ Rather than limiting this dissertation’s transqueer approach by universalizing the silly as an investment in utopian modes of movement and hope, I focus on how the silly can also be (and often is) the difficult feelings of stuckness with/in our cruel optimisms—a stuckness to silly objects, forms, feelings, loves, attachments, and deferred investments. In what follows, I aim to slip with just as much as I stick to the silly’s forms, feelings, and (counter)politics in digital film and media.

²¹⁸ Erin J. Rand, “Queer Critical Rhetoric Bites Back,” *Western Journal of Communication* 77, no. 5 (2013): 536.

²¹⁹ Parslow, *Their Majesty*, 104, 107.

²²⁰ Parslow, *Their Majesty*, 107-108.

²²¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 91.

CHAPTER 2

Silliness as Opacity Tactic: Or, Irritating Modulations in Trans* Hyperpop Music Videos

*No you'll never really know, know-know-know, know-know-know
Anything about me, me-me-me, me-me-me
- 100 geecs, "mememe"*

On September 12, 2020, ahead of the release of his “second debut album” *Apple*, artist, producer, and PC Music label head A. G. Cook hosted a virtual livestream festival on Discord entitled “Appleville.”¹ The concert kicked off with a pre-recorded performance from nonbinary hyperpop artist and PC Music-affiliate felicita. After a bright-blue pixelated title card announces the first act, the “livestream” begins with a sudden eruption of harsh metallic noises and bubbly pings set against swirling animated abstractions of pure light, color, and shape.² The strobing animation is briefly overlain with selfie videos of felicita holding a bouquet of flowers up to their face. The pulsing soundtrack propels us into a medium close-up shot of the performer, now filmed rotating around a bare white set, eating the bouquet of flowers, and continuing to record selfie videos on an iPhone.³ A few grating blips resolve into another frontal medium close-up shot of felicita’s now indecipherable, digitally collaged, and glitching face and upper-body, slowly morphing and phasing in and out of a floral green background using extreme motion blur and liquification effects. Felicita slowly moves their arms across their face to further blur and meld the abstracted image with the background, rendering their face and body increasingly opaque and illegible. Flashing white screens and sudden jarring cuts to extreme close-ups of the collaged face also modulate the viewing experience (Figure 2.1). Pitch-shifted vocals are interspersed across the predominantly instrumental showcase, occasionally whispering along, or

¹ Matt Moen, “A. G. Cook Announces Second Debut Album ‘Apple,’” *PAPER*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.papermag.com/a-g-cook-apple-announce-2647029662.html>.

² Felicita’s livestream performance was directed and animated by Kynan Puru Watt.

³ Peculiarly, the official YouTube version of this performance uploaded to the PC Music channel has edited out this portion of the original performance.



Figure 2.1. Stills from felicity's "Appleville Live" performance (2020).

yelling out song titles like "sex with anemone." Despite all this, none of the voices actually belong to felicity, adding another strange layer of opaque distortion and defamiliarization.⁴

One of the more peculiar features of Appleville was that viewers were not able to tell what was pre-recorded and what was in fact live, even though all performances had a "LIVE" indicator at the top of the screen. For Cook, that guesswork is part of the fun and "very much in the ethos of PC Music," which has a history of putting together ultra-polished live shows.⁵ The growth of the livestream concert since 2020 has been notable, but Appleville's many shifts in format made it a unique multi-sensory experience that shuttles between live acts, pre-recorded performances, and a virtual "moshpit" with an assortment of bopping heads in the Zoom grid. As Cook describes, Appleville is "a tribute to live computer music in all its forms. A pastoral escape in the comfort of your own home, an infinite green field where you can sit back and watch some of your favorite musicians grapple with the limitations of time and space" in a global pandemic.⁶ In this spirit, melding sonic distortion, facial modulation, and queasy textural opacities, felicity's act embraces an intentionally silly pre-recorded performance at the outset of the supposed "live"

⁴ The vocals featured are by Astra King and Emma Warner.

⁵ Skye Butchard, "The Rates: A. G. Cook's Underrated Artists Are All about BTS-Loving K-Pop and Live Coding," *Loud And Quiet*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.loudandquiet.com/interview/the-rates-a-g-cooks-underrated-artists-are-all-about-bts-loving-k-pop-and-live-coding/>.

⁶ "A.G. Cook Unleashes New Track 'Xxoplex,'" *DIY Magazine*, September 3, 2020, <https://diymag.com/news/watch-a-g-cook-xxoplex-video-appleville-announcement>.

festival, playfully reimagining the ubiquity of glitching, buffering, and frozen faces of pandemic livestreams—the unwanted, unproductive modulations to the flow of video conferencing.

The musicians at the heart of Appleville, including Charli XCX, Dorian Electra, 100 geecs, and over twenty other acts, are representative of the loosely defined microgenre of “hyperpop.” A manifestation of love for artifice, hyperpop is characterized by a parodically silly and often-abrasive approach to maximalist avant-pop digital productions. Mobilizing squelching synths, pitch-shifted vocals, and plenty of distortion, hyperpop indulges in the most garish, superficial, and derided elements of commercial pop as the raw material for its silly innovations. What Cook peculiarly describes as a pleasant and comforting lightness at the heart of Appleville seems at odds with the hyperpop brand of music, which distinguishes itself as “noisy, ugly, and addictive,” the “countercultural sound of the 2020s.”⁷ Hyperpop is “the new sound for a post-pandemic world,” a 2021 writeup affirms; “It’s the most irritating, confusing, and excellent musical movement of the lockdown era.”⁸ Though the genre predated the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown gave it limbs. The music resonated with people shut inside and looking online, its fractured digital sound speaking to the dislocation of pandemic life. Yet, in the same interview, Cook goes on to describe the “softer side” to the “dark, industrial heart” of his album *Apple* as “a silliness, a sense that anything could happen,” testifying to the aesthetic possibilities of silliness that have become aligned with hyperpop sounds and images since its inception.⁹

Evidently, hyperpop has an ambiguous aesthetic appeal that evades easy categorization. Through its ecstatic embrace of the silly imagination, hyperpop melds the sensibly soft and

⁷ Spencer Kornhaber, “Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive: Hyperpop Could Become the Countercultural Sound of the 2020s,” *The Atlantic*, February 14, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/03/hyperpop/617795/>.

⁸ Günseli Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop Is the New Sound for a Post-Pandemic World,” *Dazed*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/52088/1/hyperpop-new-sound-for-a-post-pandemic-world-spotify-soundcloud-glaive>.

⁹ “A.G. Cook Unleashes New Track ‘Xxoplex.’”

thrillingly hardcore, fantastically strange and annoyingly familiar, patently addictive and vexingly irritating. In this chapter, I explore this silly confluence of registers, interrogating these increasingly multitudinous “pranksters of pop” that view the song format (and its accompanying visuals) as a canvas for irritation, silliness, and bewilderment.¹⁰ I suggest that the affective tensions that manifest in the song format intensify as they are translated into visuals. Felicita’s opening to Appleville is exemplary, where the audiovisual irritants of digital malfunction becomes thrillingly intense and even desirable, a trans*formative process that produces silly effects in the face and the voice through the ecstatic irritation of (already irritating) pandemic-era aesthetic standards. “The sounds of felicita are so hard to explain,” one reviewer notes of their Appleville performance: “The first track almost made my ears itch.”¹¹ The “itch” of felicita’s act is representative of a unique fascination that trans and nonbinary hyperpop artists have with the silly and the irritating, particularly as they coalesce around digital manipulations of the face.

Elaborating on Cook’s provocation, this chapter explores the silly possibilities of hyperpop music and music video production from the late 2010s and early 2020s, focusing on how “silliness” finds an affinity with the aesthetic imaginings of transgender and nonbinary hyperpop artists. The hyperpop scene is fronted by an unprecedented presence of young trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming artists, including Kim Petras, Ayesha Erotica, siouxxie sixxta, Laura Les (of 100 gecs), Arca, SOPHIE, yeule, EllyOtto, underscores, Jane Remover, Black Dresses (Ada Rook and Devi McCallion), Dorian Electra, Frost Children (Lulu and Angel Prost), quinn, Fraxiom, galen tipton, angelus, blackwinterwells, Alice Gas, lieu, d0llywood1, Mood Killer, twikipedia, BABYNYMPH, ABSRDST, Quay Dash, Chester Lockhart, Kid Trash,

¹⁰ Lucas Fagen, “The Pranksters of Pop,” *Hyperallergic*, September 21, 2019, <http://hyperallergic.com/518162/the-pranksters-of-pop/>.

¹¹ Ezra Blanchar, “Appleville: The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far from the Tree,” *Ringtone Mag*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.ringtonemag.com/articles/appleville-the-apple-doesnt-fall-far-from-the-tree>.

PUTOCHINOMARICÓN, girl_irl, More Eaze, Hyd, diana starshine, Petal Supply, Fire-Toolz, RYL0, felicita, JACKIE EXTREME, DJ Re:Code, Katie Dey, and many others. For these artists, the silly is not just what is fun or what simply feels good, but it is instead a non-cathartic irritant. Critics also attribute the silliness of hyperpop to its many irritating formal elements, its plasticky sounds, kiddie voices, noisy samples, confusing identities, and morphing appearances.

Hyperpop takes up such a “formal silliness,” notably via its “cloying little-girl affect.”¹² This chapter interrogates how this specifically transfemme formal silliness, rather than offering mere release, is deployed strategically to mildly irritate, provoke, and discomfort its audiences. Whereas the avant-garde investment in disruption and agitation (a more severe form of irritation) aims to throw the viewer-listener outside the work to provoke a rational critical response, (avant-pop) silliness is much gentler in its irritation, rubbing against normative pleasures rather than wholly disavowing them. Hyperpop music videos by trans and nonbinary artists regularly deploy the aesthetics of silliness as a particularly minor irritant that destabilizes, defamiliarizes, and obfuscates the object of public encounter—the face—through the modulated close-up shot, aggressively confounding demands for trans visibility and “good” representational objects.

Despite its popularity, trans and nonbinary hyperpop aesthetics—from PC Music to the post-pandemic moment—remain largely underexplored in transqueer media studies. While many have noted the prominence of artists that identify as trans, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming in the scene, and many have dubbed hyperpop an “inherently queer genre,” suggesting, as nonbinary artist Fraxiom does, that “queerness and hyperpop are inseparable,” fewer have explored the trans and nonbinary aesthetics and affects inherent and integral to the subgenre and its growth—its undeniable practices of gender-fuckery in/through mutable, plastic, and irritating

¹² Ben Ratliff, *Every Song Ever* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 84.

silly forms.¹³ Designations of hyperpop as both an “inherently queer genre” and, as Noah Simon adds, an “inherently silly” musical ethos thus require a deeper consideration of the important intersections of silliness and queerness, and more crucially here, silliness and transness.¹⁴

This chapter argues that the connection between possibility and silliness, which Cook describes as a “sense that anything could happen,” and its further connection to trans and nonbinary aesthetics and politics, is expressed through the digital modulations in hyperpop music videos, which take on forms of “silly irritation” (and where irritation is a negative affect of silliness.) The silly irritational force of such digital modulations constantly unsettles the position of the viewer-listener in relation to the song and video while still holding them close and tight. Silliness is here an aesthetic of disorder and nonsovereignty with an internal mobility that strategically obfuscates as it refuses to settle on a coherent sound or image. In this way, the silly in/as hyperpop is mobilized as an opacity tactic and form of silly nonsovereignty in media—an irritation of the self as in-control, whole, and autonomous. For these trans and nonbinary artists, modulation specifically irritates the stability of constructions of identity and autonomous agency.

In what follows, I investigate hyperpop music video production for trans aesthetic dimensions, that is, how “trans subjectivities, lives, experiences, and embodiments have been expressed in, if not pressed into, cinematic forms,” or more precisely, music video forms.¹⁵ I develop an account of the transfeminist forms of silliness in the music video works of two hyperpop stalwarts: SOPHIE and Arca. At the nexus of silliness, irritation, and opacity tactics, these trans artists share a fascination with the aesthetic and political manipulation of the face in

¹³ Peter Burditt, “Hyperpop: An Inherently Queer Genre,” *American Songwriter*, June 4, 2022, <https://americansongwriter.com/hyperpop-an-inherently-queer-genre/>.

¹⁴ “Hyperpop Origins (Part 1): Definitions (?) & Aesthetic Influences,” posted May 20, 2021, by Noah Simon, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbAr_5G8yik.

¹⁵ Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Duke University Press, 2019), ix.

digital music videos. Taking my cue from Eliza Steinbock, who reads with trans*forms as “aesthetics of change” through the “shimmering” image, this chapter explores how the digital deformations of the face in hyperpop music videos by trans and nonbinary practitioners draw our attention to the nuanced and opaque modulations that make up born-digital trans* aesthetics of silliness. SOPHIE and Arca mobilize an irritational silliness as an opacity tactic for transness, negotiating and challenging oppressive demands for authenticity and/as transparent visibility.

Unlike many of their contemporaries in the hyperpop scene, SOPHIE and Arca are rarely described as solely privileging “silliness” in their work. Instead, they are regularly described as “serious” artists dealing with “serious” ideas about gender in the art world. Their music has “depth,” or as *Pitchfork* writes of Arca’s 2014 album *Xen*, its “mazelike shape is an indicator of how much lies beneath the surface,” more specifically, how much can be *extracted* for deeper meanings and insights about trans identities.¹⁶ Yet, SOPHIE and Arca both remind us that silly surface play is meaning enough; or, as Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote of the Greeks and their closeness to the surface of life, “it is necessary to keep bravely to the surface, the fold and the skin; to worship appearance, to believe in forms, tones, and words, in the whole Olympus of appearance!”¹⁷ While SOPHIE has been more often celebrated (and critiqued) for her embrace of the silly, the posthumous discourse around her “groundbreaking” and “landmark” sound has now emphatically placed her work within the pantheon of “good trans objects.” Critic Kieran Press-Reynolds, for instance, writes: “SOPHIE made the most eerily poignant anthems about gender fluidity and selfhood in the digital era.”¹⁸ Given the seriousness around which their work has

¹⁶ Philip Sherburne, “Arca: *Xen*,” *Pitchfork*, November 3, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/19836-arca-xen/>.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (Vintage Books, 1974), 4.

¹⁸ Kieran Press-Reynolds, “The Lost Promises of Hyperpoptimism,” *Pitchfork*, October 3, 2024, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/the-lost-promises-of-hyperpoptimism/>.

been taken up in the art world and the public discourse and growing scholarly interest around both SOPHIE and Arca, it may seem unusual to center *these* artists in discussions of hyperpop’s silly aesthetics. Yet, as I hope to show, the “silly object” is not necessarily the “bad object.” For if the silly is often perceived as a text, a surface, with little subtext or latent content of value, it is often necessary to dwell on the counterpolitics of silly surfaces even (and especially) in readings of “deep” or “serious” art. As they play with the exteriorities of silliness in/as irritations of bodily surfaces, SOPHIE and Arca both draw us away from depth as “truer” or more “authentic.”

After an opening section outlining hyperpop’s emergence as a slippery category, I turn to explain some of its defining features including gender nonconformity, surface play, and digital modulation. I then offer close readings of the digitally modulated voices and faces in SOPHIE’s 2018 music video for “Faceshopping” and Arca’s 2020 music video for “Mequetrefe,” attending to the trans* opacity tactics of silliness and/as irritation. In a final section, I return to a discussion of hyperpop vocals, attending to the subgenre’s frequent fascination with flatness and depressive feelings seemingly at odds with its hyper-saccharine, happy-core designations.

I. Curating Silliness: Spotify and “Hyperpop” Origins

We’ll do the fucking goofiest shit and make it hot.

- Laura Les¹⁹

In 2012, London-based electronic-music producer Alexander Guy (A. G.) Cook started a Tumblr blog and small collective called “Gamsonite” which released early tracks from artists such as GFOTY (Girlfriend of the Year), Hannah Diamond, Danny L. Harle, Kane West (a.k.a. Gus Lobban of Kero Kero Bonito), Spinee, and EASYFUN. Their music was bright and loud, “confounding and sometimes irritating,” with bubbly textures, fast irregular tempos, and strange

¹⁹ Emily Carter, “100 Gecs: “We Started out Doing the Goofiest Shit... and We’re Still...,” *Kerrang!*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.kerrang.com/100-gecs-laura-les-dylan-brady-10000-gecs-album-hyperpop-mememe-interview-cover-story/>.

sound design.²⁰ In 2013, the mysterious group of artists began releasing tracks online as part of the new “PC Music” (or “Personal Computer Music”) label, solidifying the maximalist sounds explored in Gamsonite. Led by Cook, this loose electronic-music collective latched onto the most exuberant, absurd, and hyper elements of pop, making cutesy and overblown “plastic pop” tunes with an unsettling aftertaste.²¹ As early as 2013, fans and critics began paying attention to this obscure brand of “computerized fuckery.”²² They were soon labeled “disruptors” of pop with a “grandiose yet silly” style.²³ In late 2023, the PC Music record label, which had, after a decade of music, “forever altered the sound of the 2010s,” finally (and sadly) came to end.²⁴

While other music genres over the years have been associated with forms of “silliness,” such as the 2000s California-derived hip-hop “hyphy” movement, which gleefully reappropriates derisive phrases like “get silly,” “go dumb,” “act a fool,” and “get stupid,” and shares a similarly maximalist, hyperactive style (“hyphy” is Oakland slang for “hyperactive”), hyperpop’s artificial style, opaque intentions, and often-irritating silliness has remained more confounding to critics. Indeed, many were quick to question the sincerity and authenticity of the project: a 2014 *VICE* article asks if PC Music is just “an elaborate joke”; a 2014 *Guardian* article ponders if PC Music is “pure, contemptuous parody”; a 2014 *NPR* article asks, “Is PC Music Pop Or Is It ‘Pop’?”; and a 2015 *Rolling Stone* article simply affirms that “PC Music Are for Real.” Its harshest critics declared that it embodied ironic detachment, “dicking around with incredibly vague ‘concepts’ that require the listener to sink six layers into a web of irony,” effectively reducing hyperpop to a

²⁰ Claire Lobenfeld, “A. G. Cook: Apple,” *Pitchfork*, September 24, 2020, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/ag-cook-apple/>.

²¹ Nick Brownlee, *Bubblegum: The History of Plastic Pop* (Sanctuary Pub Ltd., 2003).

²² Yalcinkaya, “Hyperpop Is the New Sound for a Post-Pandemic World.”

²³ Ben Jolley, “The Evolution of A. G. Cook,” *MixMag*, September 18, 2020, <https://mixmag.net/feature/a-g-cook-pc-music-experimental-pop-interview>.

²⁴ Nina Corcoran, “PC Music to Cease Releasing New Music After 2023, Pivot to Archival Projects,” *Pitchfork*, June 25, 2023, <https://pitchfork.com/news/pc-music-to-cease-releasing-new-music-after-2023-pivot-to-archival-projects/>.

conceptual, anti-sincere, anti-emotional movement.²⁵ Others were uncertain if its roster of mostly anonymous artists even existed. PC Music had no manifesto, and at first, few of its artists rarely gave interviews or showed face at all, leaving the label's intentions up for wild speculation.

PC Music's first official single, the 2014 "Hey QT," illustrates the crystallization of the label's early aesthetic production and critical reception.²⁶ Written and produced by Cook and SOPHIE under the moniker "QT," this track presents a fictitious popstar "QT," the personified embodiment of the also fake "DrinkQT" energy drink. Though musician Hayden Dunham (Hyd) portrays QT in the song's promotional images and 2015 music video, the track itself features the pitch-shifted vocals of British singer Harriet Pittard (Zoe). A combination of sleek, high-tech, corporate visuals (designed in-part by Hannah Diamond), bubblegum pop, Eurodance synths, and maximally edited vocals, this track is one of the label's most high-concept early outputs, demonstrating PC Music's complex understanding of the artificial construction of "the popstar" and embrace of the consumerist "inauthenticity" of pop.

Inauthenticity emerged as a fitting label for a group of artists that "seem too silly to be sincere," as musician Folie notes, a minor artist in the scene; "But there's something genuinely there," they add, alluding to the sincerity of the project's complex investment in aesthetics of silliness.²⁷ One of the first academics to comment on PC Music in print, Nick Prior summarizes the PC Music label's aesthetic as "exaggerated digital sounds" that show "no pretense to analogue authenticity or warmth [...] only layers of twinkling pop sensibility," again drawing connections between silliness and the inauthentically opaque.²⁸

²⁵ Kyle MacNeill, "Is It Time to Pull the Plug on PC Music?," *VICE*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nzmdmm/pc-music-label-op-ed>.

²⁶ At the time of its release, "Hey QT" was thought to be the most concise distillation of the arising PC Music genre. "Hey QT" even received the prestigious "Best New Music" accolade from Pitchfork.

²⁷ Simon, "Hyperpop Origins."

²⁸ Nick Prior, *Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

After a series of showcases at the annual film and music festival South by Southwest (SXSW), the label released their first official compilation album titled “PC Music Volume 1” in 2015. But what’s striking is how often the “silly” comes up in its reviews. In her *Pitchfork* review of the album, Jia Tolentino described the PC Music aesthetic as “airbrushed articulations of digital life in all its silly, beautiful, desperate triviality.”²⁹ Around the same time, Max Pearl for *VICE* described the PC music sound as “almost parodically silly.”³⁰ Hannah Ellis-Peterson for *The Guardian* called it “at once silly and serious,” turning the “macho culture of so much dance and house music on its head.”³¹ PC Music’s own artists also explicitly embraced silliness as an ethos for the subgenre. In a 2015 interview with *Complex* titled “Silly Is A Feeling Too,” affiliated artist Danny Harle notes that “the way I truly love seeing people enjoy our music is through a sense of fun and silliness—but silliness doesn’t negate it being emotional or anything like that. It’s a sort of craziness, a sense of heightened emotion.”³² And as musician Space Candy elaborates, hyperpop has “made people a little bit more open to kinds of sillier forms of music.”³³

The silly sounds of PC Music continued to grow in prominence. In a 2014 *Pitchfork* article, Philip Sherburne writes that the “shadowy operation and its bewildering brand of hyper-pop have been everywhere in the past few months,” and their “influence seems to be growing on a daily basis.”³⁴ Sherburne’s fitting use of the term “hyper-pop” generated quite a bit of traction,

²⁹ Jia Tolentino, “PC Music Volume 1,” *Pitchfork*, May 4, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20542-pc-music-volume-1/>.

³⁰ Max Pearl, “PC Music Is Post-Internet Art,” *VICE*, January 8, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nz5pkg/pc-music-is-post-internet-art>.

³¹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “PC Music at SXSW Review – Good Taste Goes out the Window in Pop Makeover,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/mar/20/pc-music-sxsw-good-taste-pop-makeover>.

³² Graham, “Danny L Harle: Silly Is a Feeling, Too,” *Complex*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/2015/06/danny-l-harle-silly-is-a-feeling-too>.

³³ Simon, “Hyperpop Origins.”

³⁴ Philip Sherburne, “PC Music’s Twisted Electronic Pop: A User’s Manual,” *Pitchfork*, September 17, 2014, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/485-pc-musics-twisted-electronic-pop-a-users-manual/>.

becoming a catchall for the many subgenres, artists, and micro-communities that PC Music un/knowingly helped shape. Hyperpop's post-PC Music second wave was largely ushered in by the experimental duo 100 geecs (Dylan Brady and Laura Les) and their unexpectedly popular, delirious, and cleverly referential sort of hyperpop, which mixed typical PC Music sounds with pop-punk, ska, heavy-distorted trap drums, and saturated 808s. Their 2019 album, *1000 geecs*, displayed a "short, sharp shock of aggression and riotous silliness," an infectious and gloriously exuberant experience that is "silly and outrageous and obnoxious."³⁵ Their 2020 remix album, *1000 geecs and The Tree of Clues* took this already extreme sound even further, colliding it with numerous features from PC Music artists. Their 2023 follow-up album, *10000 geecs*, furthermore offered a wonderfully silly and endlessly ridiculous slice of genre-smashed punk, stadium-rock, hyperpop weirdness. As with PC Music, geecs confounded the corporate centers of the music industry. They were deemed "sillier than your favorite silly band" and a "tribute to irritation and invention," as Lucas Fagen writes; "100 geecs aren't irritating the way irritating bands are; they're irritating the way kids are, pursuing an ideal of irritation with glee and meticulous cunning."³⁶

In August 2019, to address the quandary of 100 geecs's unlikely popularity and unwieldy style, Lizza Szabo, an editor at Spotify, launched a new Spotify playlist designed to give their sound a home on the platform. It was called "hyperpop," renamed from a previous dance-music playlist called "neon party." Szabo, the playlist's lead curator, and her colleagues landed on the name after seeing it come up in metadata collected by Glenn McDonald, Spotify's "data alchemist," whose job was to find emerging sounds on the platform and to classify them into "microgenres" (Figure 2.2). With nearly half-a-million followers at the time of writing, the

³⁵ Dork, "Keep up, Grandad! Here's Everything You Need to Know about the Buzztastic 100 Geecs," *Dork*, March 27, 2020, <https://readdork.com/features/100-geecs-guide/>.

³⁶ Fagen, "The Pranksters of Pop."

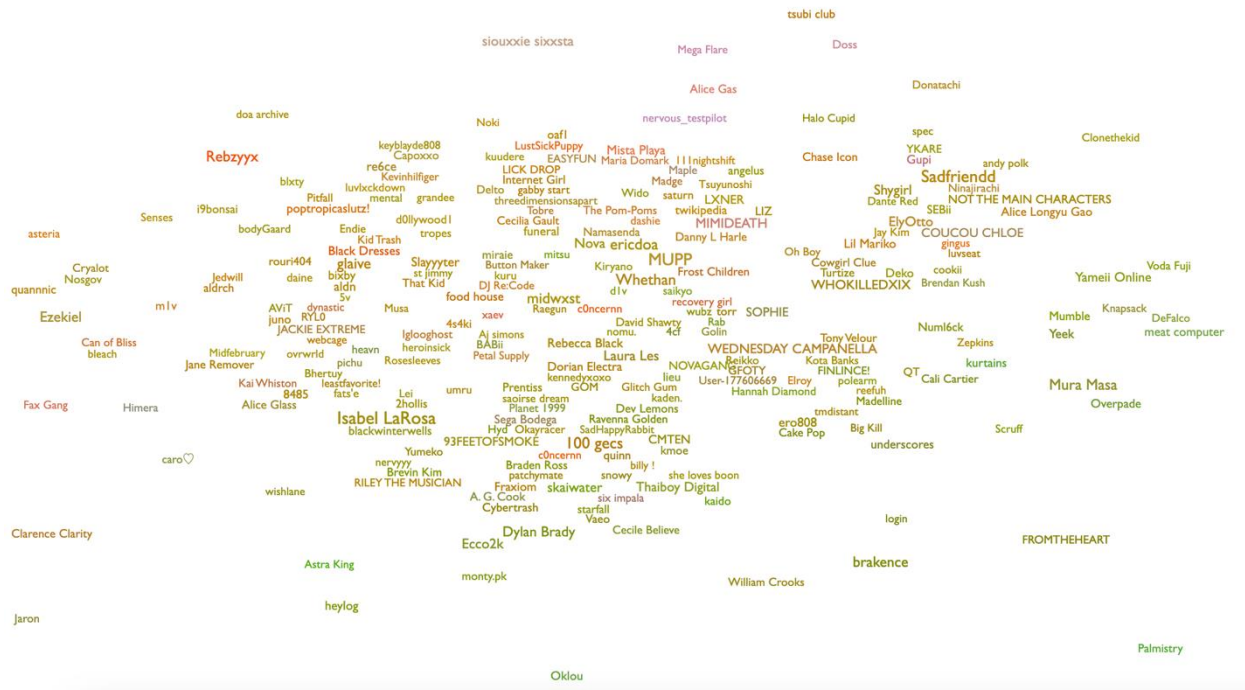


Figure 2.2. Map of Spotify's hyperpop music scene via everynoise.com.

hyperpop playlist serves many functions, as Carrie Battan writes—it is “a corporate branding exercise, a track list with an obsessive listener base, a constantly evolving document of a vital corner of music’s digital underground, and an object of resentment among some of the artists it promotes.”³⁷ Spotify’s interest in the microgenre quickly influenced other platforms like Apple Music to release their own version of the hyperpop playlist; they named it “Glitch.” Meanwhile, SoundCloud, the D.I.Y. streaming service where many hyperpop artists uploaded their earliest songs, published a short film and playlist about the scene, which they called “Digicore.”

Incoherence is evidently inherent to the “genre,” and the songs on each of these playlists vary widely in style. Hyperpop songs, one critic writes, “jump from sugar-sweet plasticity to ear-splitting distortion in less time than it takes to watch a TikTok video.”³⁸ Just as PC Music was

³⁷ Carrie Battan, “The Brash, Exuberant Sounds of Hyperpop,” *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/09/the-brash-exuberant-sounds-of-hyperpop>.

³⁸ Joe Lynch, “ElyOtto on What Hyperpop Means to LGBTQ Artists,” *Billboard*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/pro/elyotto-hyperpop-interview-lgbtq-community-pride-2021/>.

viewed by critics as “capable of absorbing virtually any influence and making it a part of its own warped pop totality,” the hyperpop aesthetic similarly glitches between, and aggressively mashes together, a multitude of influences: from the decommercialized DIY internet music scene that took shape around 2012 on Soundcloud and Bandcamp; vaporwave, the first totally online global music genre which takes previously recorded songs and slows them down; nightcore, an entirely online genre which takes previously recorded songs and speeds them up; chiptune and digital fusion, which takes influence from video game music; emo, nu-metal, and punk rock; drum and bass; Y2K pop; hip-hop; J-pop and kawaii (cute aesthetics); dance music including rave genres like happy hardcore, hardstyle, donk, and breakcore; club genres like jersey club and footwork; Eurodance; EDM genres like trance, dubstep, and future bass; digicore, a hyperdigital form of trap music founded in 2017 by black and POC artists on a Discord server; and much more.³⁹

Along with challenging traditional notions of genre, hyperpop’s Frankensteinian, collage-like approach serves to challenge presumptions around the stability of identity. For hyperpop and PC Music, the fluid embrace of sonic incoherence has been readily mapped onto the ambiguities of the performers’ gender identities. “If you’re feeling anxious because you’re unable to distinguish the genders and interpersonal dynamics of its cast of characters, that’s the point,” writes Max Pearl in a 2015 article: “By dwelling in a constantly shifting state of ambiguity, PC Music rejects the binarism of male/female gender constructs—while also blurring the line between real/virtual and self/other.”⁴⁰ The result, as Spencer Kornhaber explains, is “music that is nonbinary both in form and in content.”⁴¹ It is a scene dominated by LGBTQ+ artists, where

³⁹ Sherburne, “PC Music’s Twisted Electronic Pop.”

⁴⁰ Pearl, “PC Music Is Post-Internet Art.”

⁴¹ Spencer Kornhaber, “An Artist Who Makes Me Excited About the Future of Music,” *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/03/underscores-music/627592/>.

the “straight white normie is a hyperpop bogeyman.”⁴² It is fronted by trans and nonbinary femmes who “resist classification in much the same way that the genre itself has.”⁴³ Indeed, one of the “clearest qualities” of hyperpop is its commitment to “freely oscillating between genre and gender.”⁴⁴ The confluence of gender(lessness) and genre(lessness) speaks to the opacity tactics of hyperpop, obfuscating clear genre conventions and gender expectations. In this vein, hyperpop can be seen as a continuation of the legacy of countercultural transqueer punk pranksters, a “relatively broad scene of queer punks today, who perform a negative, irritating, self-destructive, aggressive and paradoxical aesthetic.”⁴⁵ Like punk, hyperpop adopts an irritational version of transqueerness with the political potential (but not promise) to resist neoliberal incorporation.

Spotify’s hyperpop playlist, however, effectively commercialized the scene, classifying a thing initially defined by its lack of classification. Or as Szabo notes, “The way the term has resisted classification—moving fluidly through digital spaces and pulling in new sounds and artists as it travels—might be its biggest strength.”⁴⁶ Yet, with “hyperpop” becoming the most convenient catch-all tag for the music, largely due to its commercialization by Spotify, artists quickly “deserted the label in droves,” furious that a streaming service had the power to dictate who was and was not included. In turn, as Press-Reynolds explains, hyperpop is a scene that “denies its own existence, perpetually locked in an identity crisis,” adding that “people have been calling hyperpop ‘dead’ since 2020, when the music was arguably at its creative peak” and it now, “if not outright dead, hyperpop feels like a distorted, feeble echo of what it once was.”⁴⁷

That the genre supposedly came and went in a flash became even clearer when, just over two

⁴² Kornhaber, “Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive.”

⁴³ Burditt, “Hyperpop: An Inherently Queer Genre.”

⁴⁴ Press-Reynolds, “The Lost Promises of Hyperpop.”

⁴⁵ Maria Katharina Wiedlack, *Queer-Feminist Punk: An Anti-Social History* (Zaglossus, 2015), 57.

⁴⁶ Ben Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew Into a Big Deal,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html>.

⁴⁷ Press-Reynolds, “The Lost Promises of Hyperpop.”

years after debuting their “hyperpop” playlist, Spotify released a “hyperpop classics” playlist in September 2021 with 100 geecs on the cover. This peculiar exercise in defining the vintage of the vanguard was immediately called out for its silliness, as one redditer puts it: “how can there be classics the genre is 47 minutes old.”⁴⁸ Spotify continued in their efforts to define the scene and distinguish its sounds, subgenres, and vibes. Typing “hyperpop mix” into the platform’s search field results in an odd array of “Made For You” playlists, like “Hyperpop Upbeat Mix,” “Calm Hyperpop Mix,” “Sad Hyperpop Mix,” “Angry Hyperpop Mix,” “Hyperpop Jazz Mix,” “80s Hyperpop Mix,” “90s Hyperpop Mix,” with other playlists thrown in, like “Harsh Noise Mix,” “Glitchcore Mix,” “Bubblegum Mix,” “Weirdcore Mix.” This eclectic collage of algorithmically curated affective modifiers highlights the silly incoherence of hyperpop moods; hyperpop is calm and upbeat, sad and angry, old and new. (In part to account for its confounding sound, Spotify briefly introduced a “silly” genre filter on their mobile app in late 2021 as a sorting device for users’ “Liked Songs,” baffling users as it clumped a seemingly incoherent collection of artists under the label.⁴⁹) Much like the “silly” itself, “hyperpop” is an overall vague term masquerading as a specific one. The “hyperpop” designation established a widely embraced name for a phenomenon without simultaneously establishing a unifying or canonical definition.

II. Hyperpop Sounds: Irritation and the Modulated Trans* Voice

Play this song until your ears bleed / You don't have a choice like force feed
- Frost Children, “Crunk Crisis”

How others make sense of a trans* voice, especially relative to one’s physical appearance, can provoke great anxiety. “Do I sound like a joke when I’m talking to you?”

⁴⁸ jakethebrick111, “Hyperpop Classics (That Just Sounds so Funny to Me),” Reddit Post, *R/100geecs*, January 12, 2022, www.reddit.com/r/100geecs/comments/s2e66x/hyperpop_classics_that_just_sounds_so_funny_to_me/.

⁴⁹ A-Bottomless-Pit, “So Spotify Added a ‘Silly’ Genre Filter And...,” Reddit Post, *R/Xiuxiu*, September 3, 2021, www.reddit.com/r/xiuxiu/comments/phgepj/so_spotify_added_a_silly_genre_filter_and/.

scream-sings Laura Les on 100 geecs's 2021 single "mememe," a breakup song about opting to conceal one's identity from others. In this opening line to the second verse, Les alludes to the barriers to "normative" relationality that arise with a gender nonconforming transfemme voice, often perceived as artificial, inauthentic, and/or "silly" sounding. Trans individuals have long been described as duplicitous and deceptive for "passing"—sentiments that regularly fuel anti-trans violence. Irritated with being perceived as a "joke" when speaking in her unaltered voice, Les nonetheless embraces the perceived silliness of her "incongruous" transfemme sound as she affirms: "I take it back quick and nod like 'true.'" True, she affirms, I do sound silly—and so?

Perhaps the feature of 100 geecs's music that jumps out, or grates upon, new listeners the most is the high-pitched, heavily autotuned vocals. Les often occupies a vocal range previously associated with the much-derided "nightcore" genre: pop and dance songs sped up to make the vocals squeak and contort into annoyingly cute hyperfeminine excess. Yet in "mememe," in an unusual move for a genre "defined" by extreme vocal effects, Les chooses not to obscure her natural voice with autotune. For the first time, her voice is presented with far less modulation, nearly unaltered, standing in contrast to bandmate Dylan Brady's maximally autotuned chorus, where he repeats: "No you'll never really know, know-know-know, know-know-know. Anything about me, me-me-me, me-me-me." Ironically, listeners to "mememe" seemingly do get to "know" more about Les via her "real" singing voice; yet, since hyperpop has always already embraced artifice as itself authentic, Les's refusal to adopt a synthetic autotuned voice in parts of "mememe" seem much less anchored in claims of "authenticity," of a more natural form of expression for the gender nonconforming voice. Les's minimally altered vocal performance instead irritates hegemonic assumptions about how gender ought to be "authentically" expressed and performed with as little artifice as possible, torquing perceptions around hyperpop's assumed

insincere fascination with artifice, irony, and silliness. Here, Les adopts a different kind of silly opacity tactic, one in which revealing one's natural unaltered voice is just as jarring as obscuring it. Les embraces the disorder and nonsovereignty of an aesthetic silliness in/as her "authentic" vocal performance—the fear and promise of sounding like a "joke" to her listeners.

As many have already noted about the genre, transfemme identity plays a significant role in the use of high-pitched distorted vocals, one of hyperpop's hallmark sounds. High-pitched hyperpop vocal performances emerge as part of a broader late-2010s trend of trans and non-binary (femme) artists in electronic popular music using digital modulation to reconfigure the voice and its gendered possibilities.⁵⁰ Modulating vocals in silly, disorienting, or excessive ways can function as a way to express gender nonconformity and explore changes, transformations, or distortions in one's own sound and image.⁵¹ Les has stated in the past that she uses 100 geecs's characteristic pitch-corrected, autotune-distorted, nightcore-style vocals as a way to alleviate the dysphoria produced by the tone of her unaltered singing voice: "It's the only way that I can record, I can't listen to my regular voice, usually."⁵² To loyal fans, her autotuned voice is, in a meaningful way, her "real" voice. Fraxiom, who identifies as nonbinary, has similarly suggested that "pitching up my vocals was helping me explore myself."⁵³ The hyperpop fascination with

⁵⁰ Importantly, hyperpop makes abundant use of the voice processing technology that trans musician Wendy Carlos helped popularize in music in the early 1970s.

⁵¹ While estrogen taken during transition (for those who opt to do so) does little to affect the voice, some transfeminine people undergo voice training to try and make their voices sound traditionally feminine, often out of personal discomfort and/or fear of their voice not "passing." In a 2021 Pitchfork interview, Laura Les revealed she had begun taking vocal lessons and recording new music with unpitched vocals, saying, "As I've been exploring my voice more, I'm like, 'I can do this.'" See: Steven J. Horowitz, "This Is Your Brain on 100 Geecs," *Pitchfork*, September 7, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/100-geecs-interview-new-album-10000-geecs/>.

⁵² Michelle Hyun Kim, "Meet 100 Geecs, the Absurdist Pop Duo Inspired By Everything on the Internet," *Them*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.them.us/story/100-geecs-interview-dylan-brady-laura-les>.

⁵³ Eli Enis, "This Is Hyperpop: A Genre Tag for Genre-Less Music," *Vice*, October 27, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvx85v/this-is-hyperpop-a-genre-tag-for-genre-less-music>.

altered vocals and fluid, amorphous, and modulated sounds (and images, as I later discuss) is complicated by the genre's prominence of trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming artists.

Many trans scholars argue for a necessary opacity to transness in its many forms, where reading transness requires a suspension of the demand for transparency. It is a persistent thought in trans studies that gender is not transparent, it is subject to change form in opaque modulations, transformations, or rearrangements. Culturally, as Steinbock describes, “trans has a privileged relation to an aesthetics of change.”⁵⁴ While some trans people nonetheless identify with the “always already” or “born this way” narratives of transness, and others affirm a “before/after” temporality in transitioning, trans scholars have consistently identified and explored a “persistent vision of trans as change” in/through its shimmering, oscillating, modulating, glitching, shifting, flickering, and plastic-like affective forms in and across (digital) media.⁵⁵ A 2018 writeup on transfemme artist SOPHIE, for instance, describes her frequent use of extreme voice modulation as a sort of “surgical operation” upon her “artistic flesh,” a mirrored transition occurring in her aesthetic and her physical being that “amplifies [the] transsexual spirit of self-engineering.”⁵⁶

In what follows, my use of “trans” takes on aesthetic and political meanings that move beyond stable categorization and discrete identity categories. Here, I follow scholars like Toby Beauchamp who engage “the transgender of transgender studies as a mode of critique” and “not as a predetermined category into which identities or bodies are slotted.”⁵⁷ Thinking through trans as a mode of critique allows us to read, as Steinbock does, the “similarities within the aesthetic forms of cinema,” or music videos in this case, “and transgender embodiment to understand their

⁵⁴ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, ix.

⁵⁵ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, ix.

⁵⁶ Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard, “How SOPHIE and Other Trans Musicians Are Using Vocal Modulation to Explore Gender,” *Pitchfork*, June 28, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/how-sophie-and-other-trans-musicians-are-using-vocal-modulation-to-explore-gender/>.

⁵⁷ Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Duke University Press, 2019), 12, 15.

force of expression.”⁵⁸ This helps me understand what hyperpop artists do with the frequent imposition on trans to “stand for” change, both representationally and politically. While I mostly focuses on hyperpop produced by trans artists, this approach helps to extend the import of trans critique to music videos by non-trans artists who also mobilize facial exhibition and modulation. All music videos can be subject to forms of trans critique, and all hyperpop might be said to have a component transness to it (as I later argue). I center transness in my study of hyperpop music and music videos in order to understand the specificity of the genre’s extreme style focused on silliness, and the aesthetic categories of irritation, opacity, and modulation it relies on in an era of increasing trans visibility. Specifically, I take up what Steinbock calls “the paratactical stickiness of the asterisk” in *trans** which “references the (im)possible holding together of multiplicity, foremost of embodied identities, but also of affective forms present in filmic structures,” or in “media” forms more broadly, as I would insist.⁵⁹ In this sense, *trans*forms* draw our attention to the often minor, nuanced, and opaque modulations that operate “across the cuts, gaps, fissures [that] take place in the normal course of cinematography” rather than being exceptions.⁶⁰

As many have already explored, the 2010s offered a particularly public and tangled platform for trans artists who witnessed a historic rise in pop culture visibility—a so-called “transgender tipping point,” as named by the now-infamous 2014 *Time Magazine* cover featuring actress Laverne Cox. Due to the prevailing “tipping point” optics, as Cael Keegan describes, trans people were “suddenly snapped into public visibility, pulled into rack focus as a newly perceptible type of difference.”⁶¹ In music, more and more trans and nonbinary voices have

⁵⁸ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 3.

⁵⁹ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 21.

⁶⁰ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 6.

⁶¹ Cael M. Keegan, Complicating Trans Representation, interview by Nick Ward, February 22, 2022, <https://carleton.ca/fass/story/complicating-trans-representation/>.

worked their way to the masses. Chart-topping musicians like Janelle Monae, Lil Uzi Vert, Demi Lovato, and Hikaru Utada have since come into view as nonbinary. Popular nonbinary musician Sam Smith and trans hyperpop artist Kim Petras notably won best pop duo/group performance at the 2023 Grammys for their viral hit “Unholy,” previously becoming a No. 1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100, marking the first time an openly trans or nonbinary artist has topped the chart.⁶²

“Voice,” used metaphorically, often signifies multiple meanings at once: it is “a sound that represents a person, the agency by which an opinion is expressed, and the expressed will of a people,” writes Andrew Anastasia.⁶³ These meanings circulate in online publications that want readers to know “How Experimental Pop Has Given Trans Individuals a Voice” and “How Hyperpop Gives Trans Artists a Voice.”⁶⁴ And yet, this proliferation of the trans “voice” has not always equaled progress. Trans scholars continue to question the value of being “seen” and “heard” and the demand for “authentic” or “realistic” representations. As Anastasia writes:

As transgender studies approaches its second iteration, claiming our discursive voice is less urgent. *Voice*, as a keyword for the next generation, demands that we listen, like musicians, to the voice qua voice—not merely as the message. [...] Trans* voices can fail to make sense in spectacular ways when our voices no longer provide adequate evidence for the bodies that emit them. In those spectacular failures, our ghostly utterances, we find the forms of resistance that beckon from the future of transgender studies.⁶⁵

While the popularity of hyperpop has added to the visibility of trans* voices-as-messages, it has also drawn attention to the irritational, spectacular failures of gender nonconforming utterances.

An exemplary case is trans teen EllyOtto’s viral hit “SugarCrash!” (2020), which spawned millions of video creations on TikTok and hundreds of millions of plays on Spotify.

⁶² While Petras was the first transgender woman to win in that category, the electronic music composer Wendy Carlos was the first transgender woman to win a Grammy in 1969, when she picked up three awards.

⁶³ Andrew Anastasia, “Voice,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 262.

⁶⁴ Alex Payne, “How Experimental Pop Has Given Trans Individuals a Voice,” *Quench*, September 8, 2020, <https://cardiffstudentmedia.co.uk/quench/music/how-experimental-pop-has-given-trans-individuals-a-voice/>; Nic Johnson, “How Hyperpop Gives Trans Artists a Voice,” *Ringtone Mag*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.ringtonemag.com/articles/how-hyperpop-gives-trans-artists-a-voice>.

⁶⁵ Anastasia, “Voice,” 263.

The song, however, become a lightning rod for criticism of hyperpop—that it’s blatantly made for TikTok, that it’s derivative of “better” music, or that it’s just plain annoying. “It irritates me,” one redditor claims: “it’s too noisy and weirdly high pitched...I hear it too much and it’s bad.”⁶⁶ But hyperpop songs like “SugarCrash!” enthusiastically indulge in such musical bad taste—an irritational silliness that demands “a return to the trans object,” as Keegan suggests, or “the ‘bad’ trans object that cannot fit within the aesthetic system being agreed upon to represent reality.”⁶⁷ In a less certain manner, hyperpop sounds and images by trans and nonbinary artist mobilize a formal silliness that negotiates the counter/politics of aesthetic transgression—an irritational re/distribution of the sensible that uses the silly to simultaneously move *with* and cut *against* the grain of “the” aesthetic system. With a fuller appreciation for its ambiguously destructive and creative capacities, hyperpop embraces the potential for silliness to ambivalently negotiate artificial, indulgent, irritating, ugly, weird, or otherwise goofy forms of trans “representation,” modulating visibility as it actively rubs against prevailing demands for “good” trans objects.

“Welcome to the Era of Unapologetic Bad Taste,” announces a 2022 article on hyperpop by *Time Magazine*.⁶⁸ And yet, this musical “bad taste” is evidently not all “bad.” As many have claimed, hyperpop’s formal silliness represents the “the sound of disruption and the future,” that is, the future of pop as well as the present and future of gender and aesthetic transgression—a silly confrontation with the “normative.”⁶⁹ One critic describes the “silly, brutal” sounds of hyperpop as the future of pop, the “sound of pop eating itself, throwing up into a bag and then

⁶⁶ FishThatLovesDogs, “Sugar Crash Is Plain Bad and Just Annoying to Hear,” Reddit Post, *r/unpopularopinion*, May 29, 2021,

www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/nmlz35/sugar_crash_is_plain_bad_and_just_annoying_to_hear/.

⁶⁷ Cael M. Keegan, “On the Necessity of Bad Trans Objects,” *Film Quarterly* 75, no. 3 (2022): 29.

⁶⁸ Judy Berman, “Welcome to the Era of Unapologetic Bad Taste,” *Time*, May 18, 2022, <https://time.com/6176272/bad-taste-pop-culture-summer-2022/>.

⁶⁹ Anna Cafolla, “What Does ‘Hyperpop’ Mean in 2022?,” *Rolling Stone UK*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.co.uk/music/features/what-does-hyperpop-mean-in-2022-23808/>.

getting a spoon and digging in. A mash-up of everything—largely very sickly EDM [...] Meticulous to the point of almost derangement, endlessly inventive [...] Sides splitting? That’s the other thing—the future also promises to be very irritating.”⁷⁰ As the hyperpop case makes clear, silliness irritates normativity (via its annoying modulations and gender nonconformity) as much as it highlights the pleasures of normativity (via its bouncy, ebullient pop music appeal). In other words, its irritations are pleasurable, and its pleasures are irritating, evoking Sara Ahmed’s claim that “‘inappropriate’ expressions of happiness” such as those found in the happy hardcore sounds of hyperpop “can cause irritation (as an irritation with happiness).”⁷¹ Hyperpop indulges in pop music’s often-inappropriately excessive expressions of happiness, positivity, and “good vibes”; and yet, its affects are equally characterized by more abrasive “bad vibes” (as I explore later)—the irritations of negativity, dysphoria, and passivity.⁷² Regardless, the silly remains key.

While hyperpop celebrates silly artifice and challenges “authentic” essentialized gender positions in/through the voice, mainstream discourses around trans representation often call for a reversal of hyperpop’s irritational force, claiming an ontological sense of gender as innate and demanding realness, authenticity, and inoffensive transparency in media representations. These demands for “achieved legitimacy, restored community, and a ‘coming home’ to the body” have come to typify the telos of the transgender narrative in media discourses; in effect, as Keegan adds, the “transgender figure is moved out of dysphoric affect and toward a place of authenticity that mimetically resolves the problem of trans difference in American society.”⁷³ While these

⁷⁰ Rod Liddle, “The Sound of Pop Eating Itself and Throwing up: A.G. Cook’s Apple Reviewed,” *The Spectator*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-sound-of-pop-eating-itself-and-throwing-up-a-g-cook-s-apple-reviewed/>.

⁷¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 220.

⁷² Or, as hyperpop artist underscores claims, “People want to hear stuff that is distorted. They want to hear stuff that is funny.” See: Kornhaber, “An Artist Who Makes Me Excited About the Future of Music.”

⁷³ Cael M. Keegan, “Moving Bodies: Sympathetic Migrations in Transgender Narrativity,” *Genders 1998-2013*, June 1, 2013, <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive1998-2013/2013/06/01/moving-bodies-sympathetic-migrations-transgender-narrativity>.

narratives of transition embrace the “chrononormativity” of progress and change, which distort the experiences of many gender-variant people, attending to the vagaries of trans experiences, on the other hand, necessitates “an attentiveness to nonchronological, nonprogressivist temporalities of gender variance,” as Kadji Amin notes.⁷⁴ While dominant cisgender identities generally have a continuous subjective sense of gender embodiment, scholars like Amin associate ambiguously gendered bodies and non-continuously gendered life narratives with the queer/ed experience of being out of sync, a sense of rupture between past, present, and future—of queer temporality.

Queering trans*forms, for Steinbock, helps to mark the “pure event-ness of the transformation; that is, we constantly miss the ‘happening’ of the event: it never occurs in one instant whatsoever.”⁷⁵ The queer temporalities and constantly mutating shapes of hyperpop speak to the ‘happening’-lessness of mutable digital forms. Trans* is “the very ‘moving mattering’ that constitutes being,” Amin adds; It denotes plasticity, “the excitations, intensifications, and movements through, within, and across matter.”⁷⁶ Following this strain of trans scholarship, I argue that the trans*forms of hyperpop frequently trouble (or queer) the search for a linear time of “before/after” in trans* un/becomings, instead dwelling in constant flux and silly, amorphous change. Trans*forms embrace the opaque and indeterminate as they capture “the affective modulations that structure the differentiations of transgender transitions and transformations of form,” evolving without a clear vision in advance of where the journey might lead.⁷⁷

As this chapter argues, hyperpop silliness returns us to the “dysphoric affect” of the transgender figure. Fittingly, Sianne Ngai designates “irritation” as itself a “dysphoric affect” because it is inevitably shadowed by the frustrated expectation of a stronger emotion (like

⁷⁴ Kadji Amin, “Temporality,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 221.

⁷⁵ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 112.

⁷⁶ Kadji Amin, “Trans* Plasticity and the Ontology of Race and Species,” *Social Text* 38, no. 2 (143) (2020): 50.

⁷⁷ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 111.

anger).⁷⁸ According to Ngai, irritation is “a minor, low-intensity negative affect,” that is, a negative affect “in its weakest, mildest, and most politically effete form.”⁷⁹ It is “a conspicuously weak or inadequate form of anger,” yet it is also a “strangely aggressive kind of weakness.”⁸⁰ In its weakness, irritation becomes an enduring state of mind rather than a sudden outpouring of emotion, aligned with the ‘happening’-lessness of mutable, gender nonconforming temporalities. As a result, the fragility and sensitivity of cis-heteronormativity often reduces trans subjects to silly objects of excitable irritation, through which trans* voices have sounded like the “confused ranting of a diseased mind.”⁸¹ As an “ugly feeling,” irritation offers noncathartic expressions of discontent and is importantly often engendered as weak, childish, feminine, and/or silly.

In an enduring irritational mode, hyperpop indulges in what Sara Ahmed terms “queer discomfort,” a form of “discomfort which is generative, rather than simply constraining.”⁸² For Ahmed, queerness is an inability to be comfortable in certain norms, and its aim is to make others feel discomfort with oppressive and essentializing standards. To feel uncomfortable is to (potentially) inhabit norms differently, to create new, queerer, even sillier ways of living with others. Said differently, (trans)queerness finds comfort in feeling discomfort, a kind of “comfort noise,” to quote PC-Music affiliate umru’s 2022 album of the same name. Hyperpop impresses upon its listeners as it bubbles, fizzes, pangs, moans, screeches; its transqueer irritations are constantly shifting and slithering toward new light—toward aesthetic overload, annoying simplicity, or even undramatic ambivalence. Forging pleasurably opaque soundscapes, the hyperpop scene and subgenre harnesses the silly as a stratagem of transqueer/ed irritation.

⁷⁸ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 181.

⁷⁹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 174, 181.

⁸⁰ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 190.

⁸¹ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 244.

⁸² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 155.

III. Hyperpop Visuals: Irritating Vision, Modulating Faces, Obfuscating Identity

What can a celebrity body be if not opaque?
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick⁸³

I'm the dumbest girl alive / I've got lightning in my veins
Walk around like Frankenstein / I did science on my face
- 100 geecs, "Dumbest Girl Alive"

Hyperpop irritates the ear. It also irritates vision, channeling artificiality to show the contrived nature of appearance, respectability, and embracing it as a valid mode of identity and bodily de/formation. Irritation modulates bodies as it rubs, itches, and inflames. As Ngai argues, irritation is "an affect that bears an unusually close relationship to the body's surfaces or skin."⁸⁴ It is also "the feeling of bodily change," such as the sensation of physical discomfort or pain.⁸⁵ The irritations of silliness accumulate and take shape in/through bodily change; expressions of silliness are thus commonly tied to deformations of the body—silly walks, silly dances, silly voices, silly faces, silly gestures—all of which contort and irritate the body in unique ways.

Descriptions of hyperpop aesthetics often draw upon irritations to the body. Tellingly, one of the more popular user-generated hyperpop playlists on Spotify is titled "hyperpop to scratch my little rat brain." And as one critic writes of 100 geecs, they "just wants to get under your skin."⁸⁶ Hyperpop's irritated aesthetics take on a body-centered approach to silliness, a pleasurable irritation to the body—an irritant that may in fact work to relieve other irritations (like gender dysphoria or transphobia). Hyperpop's silliness is a kind of counterirritant, where silly counterpolitical irritants combat other, more serious, systemic irritants, like those that target trans lives. What the silly's irritational aesthetics make possible, then, is the renegotiation of

⁸³ Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier A Performance Piece A Little-Understood Emotion," *Discourse* 13, no. 1 (1990): 25.

⁸⁴ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 35.

⁸⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 5.

⁸⁶ M.T. Richards, "Hyperpop Band 100 Geecs Just Wants to Get under Your Skin," *The Chicago Tribune*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/ct-ent-100-geecs-concert-chicago-20230418-itu3uyol4jcbzbmo2osqzymu5e-story.html>.

ways of seeing and being seen. Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann argue that “aesthetics of irritation” function as “modes of resistance in the capacity of *dissensus*, as Rancière puts it, that queer habitual ways of seeing in and through the distribution of the sensible.”⁸⁷ While irritation, like silliness, itself appears ill equipped to spur constructive political possibilities, Ngai draws attention to “irritation’s radical *inadequacy*,” calling attention to the underlying assumption that an appropriate emotional response to violence or injustice exists, and that the burden lies on the marginalized subject “to produce that appropriate response legibly, unambiguously, and immediately.”⁸⁸ Dwelling in more inappropriate responses, the politics and poetics of silliness and irritation imagine other ways of being and knowing, acting and reacting, to a deadly world.

More than just sonic noise, hyperpop’s aesthetics of silly irritation also extend to its music video visuals. In hyperpop music videos, modulation is a surface irritant that contorts the skin, face, and body in silly and strange ways. Hyperpop music videos regularly negotiate the relation between emotional and bodily connotations of irritation via audiovisual modulation. This is a defamiliarizing (and at times refamiliarizing) challenge, which as Jörg Metelmann and Scott Loren suggest, “demands on the viewer’s flexibility and willingness to take part in what might be called irritating processes of vision and revision that reposition the viewer not only in relation to what they see on the screen, but to conventions of seeing.”⁸⁹ The opaque, out-of-joint-ness of trans faces in these videos resists scrutiny, muddling trans interiorities through camouflage and abstraction. Troubling the visual “truth effect” of gender, hyperpop videos deploy modulation as a surface strategy, one continually and playfully employed to transform, modulate, and irritate exteriors, to render the gendered body pliable, multiple, ambivalent, and ultimately unknowable.

⁸⁷ Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, *Irritation of Life: The Subversive Melodrama of Michael Haneke, David Lynch and Lars von Trier* (Schüren Verlag, 2013), 184.

⁸⁸ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 188.

⁸⁹ Loren and Metelmann, *Irritation of Life*, 11.

Hyperpop music videos are typically characterized by their DIY lo-fi production and aggressive use of basic visual effects—compressing, glitching, layering, superimposing, filtering, animating, photoshopping, chroma-keying, and so on. Most of all, hyperpop visuals modulate and manipulate, taking to the extreme something that is common to contemporary music video production: the processing and modulation of digital signals. Mathias Bonde Korsgaard observes that “the images of music video often function more as signals to be modulated, distorted, or somehow digitally manipulated than as actual images in themselves.”⁹⁰ Korsgaard situates the digital music video in this “new audiovisual regime of signaletic affect,” a mode of making defined by extensive aesthetics of change.⁹¹ Some of the elemental functions of music, as Korsgaard writes, “such as modulation, repetition, and variation, can be seen to have spilled over into digital imaging processes, creating a visual flux in which the image often refuses to stay the same.”⁹² What is most arresting about music video visuals is not so much the image as a mere representation of lyrical content but rather the image as an affective, transforming materiality—the image as “the site of a permanent scratching,” as Nicolas Bourriaud also claims, again recalling the intersections of digital manipulation, irritational aesthetics, and bodily change.⁹³

This “new regime” finds expression in hyperpop’s sonic modulations that itch, scratch, and irritate. But hyperpop images are just as slippery as hyperpop sounds, twinning the genre’s affinity for vocal manipulation, for modulating the voice into annoyingly silly plastic femme forms, with equally irritational visual manipulations. Like the voice, the face (in music videos and in general) is associated with selfhood, subjectivity, and individual uniqueness, apparent, for

⁹⁰ Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, *Music Video after MTV: Audiovisual Studies, New Media and Popular Music* (Routledge, 2019), 51.

⁹¹ Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, “Creation and Erasure: Music Video as a Signaletic Form of Practice,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 4, no. 1 (2012): 1.

⁹² Korsgaard, *Music Video after MTV*, 53.

⁹³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, trans. Jeanine Herman (Sternberg Press, 2006), 17.

instance, in facial recognition technologies that collect and surveil our faces as data. Like the voice, facial expressivity is idealized as a site of authentic communication of the inner self, an assumption that underlies continuing anxieties around facial modifications, from plastic surgery to generative AI and digital image editing technologies. While techniques of surveillance and criminalization depend on the perception of the face, trans and nonbinary hyperpop artists have embraced the face as a space of improvisation, feeling, and even glamour. The persistence and tenacity of the trope of the modulated face in hyperpop music videos suggests that the face is not only a site of self-expression but a site for deception, a carefully constructed advertisement.

Examples abound of trans and nonbinary hyperpop artists who regularly toy with facial modulation in their artwork and music video output. Consider again “mememe” by 100 geecs. In the video, Laura Les and Dylan Brady film unsettling, close-ups of each other’s faces from inside their mouths, literally playing with identitarian and bodily forms of depth and surface (at times recalling Jesse Kanda’s 2015 video for Björk’s Arca-produced “Mouth Mantra”) (Figure 2.3). Zooming in and out of their mouths, the fish-eye camera lens heavily distorts their faces, cartoonishly stretching their physiognomy into near non-recognition. In the album art for *10,000 geecs* (2023), which includes “mememe,” Les and Brady are featured in a frontal shot with their faces entirely covered by their lifted shirts, further gesturing to their fondness for opacity tactics. (Their previous album featured the two turned away from the camera with their faces shoved into a large tree.⁹⁴) We might also briefly consider ElyOtto’s “SugarCrash!” video which features staticky morphing multiplications of the artist’s face and body. Or Frost Children’s video for “Lake of Love” (2022), which features the duo’s fragmented faces at the center of a spiraling 3D

⁹⁴ Other album art by trans and nonbinary hyperpop artists often depicts this as well: Frost Children’s Lulu and Angel Prost display their comically elongated faces on the album cover art for *Elixir Rejection* (2021) and Black Dresses feature a smeared melding of the two artists faces on the album cover art for *Forget Your Own Face* (2022).



Figure 2.3. Stills from the music video for “mememe” (2021) by 100 geecs.

environment. Or Mood Killer’s entire music video oeuvre, which regularly features the artist’s wild-eyed disembodied head frenetically banging, distorting, stretching, and thinning.

This fascination with facial exhibition is nothing new for the music video medium. Tomáš Jirsa suggests that no matter how contemporary music videos differ across genres, aesthetic styles, and production backgrounds, they inevitably tend to focus on the performer’s face, primarily through the formal technique of the facial close-up. Hyperpop is no exception. As Jirsa writes, “the face emerges in the majority of [music videos] as a peculiar object that can hardly be overlooked,” from the videos for David Bowie’s “Life on Mars?” (1973) to Peter Gabriel’s “Sledgehammer” (1986), Sinéad O’Connor’s “Nothing Compares 2U” (1990), Michael Jackson’s “Black or White” (1991), Grace Jones’s “Corporate Cannibal” (2008), Eminem’s “Rap God” (2013), Kendrick Lamar’s “The Heart Part 5” (2022), and countless others.⁹⁵

While Jirsa draws on this ubiquitous facial exhibition to argue for the opacity of the face in music videos, other music video scholars often draw on a long philosophical discourse around the transparency, recognition, and identification of faces, for which the face is seen as a window to the “soul.” For Carol Vernallis, for example, the facial close-up in music videos works to

⁹⁵ Tomáš Jirsa, “Faces without Interiority: Music Video’s Reinvention of the Portrait,” *World Literature Studies* 11, no. 4 (2019): 56.

exteriorize the performer's interior feelings, revealing "each wrinkle of the brow and blink of the eyelid as if to capture every emotion crossing the face."⁹⁶ She elaborates:

The close-up gives us something to commit to memory. The music seems to set certain faces in amber, preserved and just out of reach. [...] The moments of stability that close-ups provide become high points of the video. [...] At this moment, the performer crosses the limits of the screen and addresses me as a person, and I can no longer view this face and body as an object. Just as quickly, the head turns, the rhythm changes, the soul has gone, and again I am simply watching a blank human form.⁹⁷

Vernallis is referring here to theories of the close-up in early cinema and classic Hollywood film: the way a face fills the screen, establishing an emotional reference point, and creating a powerful bond of identification for the audience. These classic views, as Mary Ann Doane summarizes, consider that it is "the visualized body, the body of the actor that is the conduit to the unspoken, nonlinguistic interiority of a character. The visual surface, particularly that of the face in close-up, must be legible as an incarnation of depth."⁹⁸ Doane counters this, suggesting instead that the close-up foregrounds the opacity of expression, its refusal to index an interiority. Threatening proximity and improper scale, "the close-up poses the problem of the threshold, of the surface or screen as limit, as barrier."⁹⁹ Turning to music videos, Jirsa similarly prompts us to question "the agency of these overexposed, multiplied, and yet de-subjectifying faces."¹⁰⁰ He writes that "the more frequently a performer's face appears, the less it reveals about its owner," instead replacing the face as an expression of interiority and identity with "a media-affective *interface* whose main function is to amplify the video's work of audiovisual forms, performative mechanisms, and atmosphere."¹⁰¹ The face itself becomes a kind of formal affect, beyond simply exteriorizing a

⁹⁶ Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 48.

⁹⁷ Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video*, 48.

⁹⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *Bigger than Life: The Close-up and Scale in the Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2021), 71.

⁹⁹ Doane, *Bigger than Life*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Jirsa, "Faces without Interiority," 56.

¹⁰¹ Jirsa, "Faces without Interiority," 56.

subject's interiority. The flood of digital facial images in contemporary music video production—be they computer-generated, AI-created, or otherwise enhanced, morphed, modulated, photoshopped, etc.—indicates that there is, indeed, a problem of facial dissolution where the face as a guarantee of a recognizable emotionality and identity simply disappears.

In hyperpop music videos, one of the roles of silliness, in its very performative nature, is to further dispel notions of transparency in the digital—of thinking of the face as an authentic repository of inner states. This accords with Hans Belting's claim for a new era of digital faces which rejects any traditional claim of "true" resemblance and likeness of a real human being, marking a shift to a condition in which the relation between the face and the subject is more than ever before grounded in a radical disembodiment. "We find ourselves in an unprecedented situation," writes Belting; "new digital technology has dissolved the connection of the image to the face that it seeks to document."¹⁰² Instead of real, tangible, and verifiable human faces, we become at once surrounded by and a part of a "digital masquerade" crowded with artificially generated or biotechnically morphed cyberfaces that "are not faces but rather digital masks."¹⁰³ (The same can be said of the voice in the digital.) Hyperpop music videos toy with this "digital masquerade" by rendering the face as a digital, silly/silled, and hence opaque surface—a play with an embodied form of silliness, with perverse moments of the face misbehaving. Hyperpop videos by trans and nonbinary artists embrace the sensuous, slippery, and sticky performance work that such surface play enables, toying with the plasticity of the face. The following sections continue to explore hyperpop's silly and opaque irritations of bodily surfaces with/in two key music video works: SOPHIE's "Faceshopping" (2018) and Arca's "Mequetrefe" (2020).

¹⁰² Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, trans. Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen (Princeton University Press, 2017) 166.

¹⁰³ Belting, *Face and Mask*, 239.

IV. “Unstable Unseriousness”: Plasticity and Modulation in SOPHIE’s “Faceshopping”

The pop-music video is one of the most powerful communication tools we have.

- SOPHIE¹⁰⁴

For years prior to the so-called “tipping point,” trans hyperpop artist Sophie Xeon (1986-2021), stylized in her releases as SOPHIE, was said to have “no age, no gender, no face, no origin.”¹⁰⁵ The Scottish-born, L.A.-based electronic music producer was simply known as a name behind major-label acts like Charli XCX, Vince Staples, and Madonna.¹⁰⁶ Now widely considered to be the “mother of hyperpop,” SOPHIE’s name was then shrouded in mystery, attached anonymously to the noisy, inscrutable sounds of her 2015 quasi-LP “PRODUCT,” which featured hits like “BIPP,” “HARD” and “LEMONADE.”¹⁰⁷ SOPHIE notably synthesized every sound from scratch, building huge libraries of unique digital samples with a fundamental interest in materials, their properties, and their interactions.¹⁰⁸

Drawing inspiration from the sonic properties of materials like “latex, balloons, bubbles, metal, plastic, and elastic,” SOPHIE made a name for herself early on by challenging the bounds of listenability and danceability.¹⁰⁹ For SOPHIE, what glues together the “clashing influences” of hyperpop “isn’t just a sense of musicality...but a fascination with amusicality,” as Kornhaber argues: “The vocals are manipulated to achieve the whininess of SpongeBob SquarePants. The grooves fracture and reroute habitually. The harmonic textures evoke train cars on rusted

¹⁰⁴ Sasha Geffen, “Sophie Can Show You the World,” *Vulture*, January 30, 2021, <https://www.vulture.com/2021/01/profile-sophie.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Justin Moran, “SOPHIE’s Whole New World,” *PAPER*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.papermag.com/sophie-pride-2579165152.html#rebelltitem38>.

¹⁰⁶ For the first four years of her career, the only readily accessible photos of her were snapped by fans and journalists at the handful of sets she had played. Her website, decked out in a curly typeface designed by New York artist Eric Wrenn, declared in all caps, “HI MY NAME IS SOPHIE.” That was the extent of her public biography.

¹⁰⁷ Lucy March, “‘Wrap You Up in My Blue Hair’: Vocaloid, Hyperpop, and Identity in ‘Ashnikko Feat. Hatsune Miku – Daisy 2.0,’” *Television & New Media* 24, no. 8 (2022): 894–910.

¹⁰⁸ While mainly using an Elektron Monomachine and Apple Logic Pro, SOPHIE has also noted using an Akai AX60, Clavia Nord Rack, Yamaha Motif, Native Instruments Razor as well as Ableton Live and Ableton Push.

¹⁰⁹ Felicity Martin, “SOPHIE Was a Singular Talent,” *DMY*, March 2, 2021, <https://dmy.co/features/sophie-2>.

tracks.”¹¹⁰ The un-danceability of SOPHIE’s hyperpop took an active turn away from the prevailing moody techno scene of the time, embracing sonic vibes looked down upon by conventional club goers, dance music listeners, and critics. As Jon Pareles writes, SOPHIE was known for “scrambling distinctions between pleasure and irritation, commerciality and exploration.”¹¹¹ And as Philip Sherburne similarly notes, “SOPHIE seems fascinated by the juxtaposition of the cute and the grotesque—or, more precisely, in the point where one becomes the other.”¹¹² SOPHIE’s early tracks play off the contrast between bright, shiny melodic surfaces and tense, itching, squealing, squirming, fevered interiors full of timbral and textural intricacies.

From the outset of her career, SOPHIE was a frequent collaborator with A.G. Cook and a figurehead and progenitor of PC Music. SOPHIE’s music helped define the hallmarks of a classic PC Music track—slippery, rubbery, plasticky bounce-house beats with hyperkinetic femme vocals. She openly embraced the possibilities of silliness-as-style in hyperpop, a weird, irritational approach to producing “sounds which cartoonize and exaggerate naturally-occurring or organic sounds, phenomena, and materials that don’t currently exist.”¹¹³ Her music would imagine, for instance, “a piano that is mountain-size high,” asking “what the sound of the piano would be if the string were that large.”¹¹⁴ As a producer, SOPHIE celebrated the unbridled potential of electronic music to generate any texture or sound through digital synthesis.

Much of SOPHIE’s music has a central plasticity to it—bending and forming sound to create new sonic molds. Characterized by an “unstable unseriousness,” her music was drenched in a liquid plastic that readily embraced the silly side of pop—its squeaky, high-pitched, and

¹¹⁰ Kornhaber, “Noisy, Ugly, and Addictive.”

¹¹¹ Jon Pareles, “Sophie, Who Pushed the Boundaries of Pop Music, Dies at 34,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/30/arts/music/sophie-dead.html>.

¹¹² Sherburne, “PC Music’s Twisted Electronic Pop.”

¹¹³ “SOPHIE: the producer taking pop to the future,” interview by Nahuel Stoppa, posted October 26, 2018, by Arte TRACKS, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ifh0tDrwBA>.

¹¹⁴ “SOPHIE: the producer taking pop to the future.”

child-like forms.¹¹⁵ Designations of hyperpop's central plasticity came to be inseparable from its mutable gender forms; that is, the mutability of its sounds and images were directly entangled (by critics) with the plasticity of gender in the genre, the opaque rearrangements and oscillating forms of transqueerness in the digital. In hyperpop, plasticity "carries a queer particularity, one that...accepts its fate as at once desired and derided," as Heather Davis argues:

There is an uncanny resemblance between the modalities of queerness and plastic's expression [...] Queerness teaches us to love the surface, to play on it and with it. It is opaque; there is no secret to reveal. The objects of plastic obey a similar logic: they are plastic all the way through, proudly displaying their designed surfaces that conceal nothing, creating uniform and impenetrable entities while quietly leaching and breaking down, imperceptibly but irreversibly changing our environment.¹¹⁶

Expanding on Davis, I also suggest that plastic(ity) carries a trans* particularity, most visibly around the perceived ubiquity of gender-affirming plastic surgeries like Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS). While some have perceptively argued that "plasticity itself is too volatile a phenomenon to be enlisted in trans-affirmative politics," as Jules Gil-Peterson asserts, the manner in which "plasticity" is regularly deployed to define the genre's silly surfaces and/as transfeminist aesthetics requires careful attention.¹¹⁷ Rather than drawing us inward, hyperpop by queer, trans, and nonbinary artists dwells on the surface, the outermost boundary of an object.

In particular, hyperpop draws on the silly surfaces of the body, all its abject, grotesque, and unsettling features. Case in point, SOPHIE's music is regularly characterized by its surface play. As one reviewer notes, SOPHIE "glazes her music over with a tacky plastic surface while filtering in dinky bleeps, mechanized sighs, and squealing kiddie voices sillier than even the

¹¹⁵ Blake Montgomery, "SOPHIE's Beautiful Music Hoped for a World Freed From Gender," *The Daily Beast*, January 31, 2021, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/sophie-xeons-beautiful-music-hoped-for-a-world-freed-from-gender>.

¹¹⁶ Heather Davis, "Imperceptibility and Accumulation: Political Strategies of Plastic," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 (2016): 187-188.

¹¹⁷ Jules Gill-Peterson, "On Wanting Trans Women and Children (For Better or For Worse)," *The Rambling*, November 26, 2019, <https://the-rambling.com/2019/11/26/issue6-gill-peterson/>.

potential offspring of Alvin Chipmunk and Hello Kitty.”¹¹⁸ Others describe the “textbook SOPHIE” aesthetic as a “non-Newtonian fluid, a tactile but slippery surface, able to mold itself around a listeners’ perceptions.”¹¹⁹ And while traditionally scholars in the humanities have been trained to plumb objects of study for deeper meanings, that is, “to look beyond the mere surface and probe deeper in order to reveal what they *really* mean,” as Uri McMillan notes, the queer and trans surface aesthetics of SOPHIE’s hyperpop requires an opposite approach.¹²⁰

SOPHIE’s surface style to digital creation is unashamedly silly. Alongside her original synthesis of sounds, she often utilizes the voices of others as lead vocalists on her music, ranging from the whistling hyperfeminine to the androgynous industrial. Like other trans artists, SOPHIE has expressed feeling dysphoric of her own voice; “I was hearing the music with a voice that I don’t have,” she explains.¹²¹ Her first and unexpectedly final self-released album (due to her untimely death in 2021), *Oil of Every Pearl’s Un-Insides* (2018), marked a turning point in her approach.¹²² While it retained the pop aesthetics and detailed sound design of her earlier work, it also revealed her own singing voice (and her own image) to the public for the very first time. She “reveals” her voice, however, as mechanized and industrial, producing an opaque vocal style through the use of pitch-shifting, compression, distortion, and vocoder-like effects. Her intensely modulated vocals, as Sasha Geffen notes, “were really attention getting in the way that they pushed up into annoyingness—that sweet spot between feeling thrilled and feeling annoyed.”¹²³

¹¹⁸ Lucas Fagen, “Chirpy Cartoons from Ironyland: PC Music Volume 1,” *Hyperallergic*, May 31, 2015, <http://hyperallergic.com/210579/chirpy-cartoons-from-ironyland-pc-music-volume-1/>.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin Frisch, “SOPHIE’s Music Was Completely Artificial and Utterly Real,” *Slate*, January 30, 2021, <https://slate.com/culture/2021/01/sophie-dies-electronic-music-pop-legacy.html>.

¹²⁰ Uri McMillan, “Introduction: Skin, Surface, Sensorium,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28, no. 1 (2018): 1.

¹²¹ Ezra Marcus, “Pop Wunderkind SOPHIE Synthesizes Human and Machine Voices,” *Interview Magazine*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/sophie-its-okay-to-cry-interview>.

¹²² In late 2024, her second and final studio album, simply titled *SOPHIE*, was posthumously released, with her brother, Benny Long, taking the lead in finalizing its production after her death.

¹²³ Geffen, “Sophie Can Show You the World.”

This thrilling annoyance is characteristic of hyperpop in general. In a four-part YouTube series by Noah Simon on “Hyperpop Origins,” various interviewed artists and producers emphasize the strategically annoying and irritating forms of hyperpop silliness. One artist defines hyperpop as “maximalism,” an ethos that’s like “how do I make this sound a little worse,” and another suggests that hyperpop sounds are “on the verge of being something horrible and annoying.”¹²⁴ Another asks: “How far can you push electronic pop to the edge of being almost annoying?”¹²⁵ And yet another reviewer argues that in hyperpop’s “curated mess of noise and modulation, we see acts sort of ‘ruining’ music in the sense of actually claiming it as their own space,” thriving in the collision between disposable internet pop and DIY digital transness.¹²⁶

As an expression of gender nonconformity, hyperpop’s aggressive aesthetic irritations of the voice resonated strongly with queer and trans listeners while alienating much of the old guard in music journalism who claimed the music was too silly to be anything other than satire. Many critics floundered when reviewing SOPHIE’s early music, which refused easy entry into her interior emotional state. In fact, prior to her coming out, SOPHIE’s early tracks were criticized for what was perceived as a kind of inauthentic vocal drag performance, jokingly “appropriating” an impossibly girlish vocal while obscuring her own presumed male identity and power. On December 31st, 2014, *The FADER* published their (since-deleted) article entitled “Feminine Appropriation Was 2014’s Biggest Electronic Music Trend,” which sought to pinpoint the supposed space “male” hyperpop artists were taking from women artists by using feminine aesthetics in their music.¹²⁷ The article targets SOPHIE’s now-infamous DJ set at a Boiler Room

¹²⁴ Simon, “Hyperpop Origins.”

¹²⁵ Simon, “Hyperpop Origins.”

¹²⁶ Max Schaffer, “Modulation & the Chaos-Trans Voice,” December 9, 2019, <https://maxmadethat.com/publishing/transvocalmodulation>.

¹²⁷ Steph Kretowicz, “Feminine Appropriation Was 2014’s Biggest Electronic Music Trend,” *The FADER*, December 31, 2014, <https://www.thefader.com/2014/12/31/feminine-appropriation-2014-electronic-music-trend>.

event in LA earlier that year, what was supposed to be her first time on camera for a public performance. Except, SOPHIE decided to hire an impersonator to take her place behind the decks so she wouldn't have to be filmed (instead, she stood on the sidelines dressed as the DJ's security).¹²⁸ *The FADER* argues that SOPHIE "clumsily underlined his [sic] nominal gender play by employing a trans woman to stand in for him," further claiming that "PC Music and Sophie's high-pitched celebration of everything girly and cute represents a social leveling. [...] By appropriating and objectifying stereotypically feminine identities while obscuring their own, the men [sic] of PC Music and Sophie are literally colonizing the female body and using it as an instrument for projecting their own agenda."¹²⁹ This rhetoric was a clear insurrection against SOPHIE and the opacity tactics of trans and nonbinary hyperpop artists, forwarding a critique centered around a desire for legibility and visibility, for transparency through the gendered voice.

SOPHIE's mobilization of hyperpop silliness as an opacity tactic for transness was evidently a key source of irritation for reviewers. Specifically, these critics took issue with one of the defining aesthetic techniques of hyperpop music: hyper-femme vocal modulations that are often irritatingly squeaky, high-pitched, and child-like in their plasticity. SOPHIE was accused of using vocal modulation technology as "a gimmick" to draw attention to "a put-on act and an inhuman-sounding voice," an accusation which, as Amy Skjerseth notes, "often casts women's labor and artistry into doubt or erases it altogether."¹³⁰ Due to the technical possibilities of modern DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations), vocal modulation effects have become mainstays

¹²⁸ Setting the silly tone, SOPHIE's Boiler Room set was introduced via a screencast desktop Skype call with Eric Wareheim of Tim & Eric fame.

¹²⁹ Kretowicz, "Feminine Appropriation Was 2014's Biggest Electronic Music Trend."

¹³⁰ Amy Elizabeth Skjerseth, "Music's Visual Waves: Popular Music Technology and Audiovisual Aesthetics" (PhD Dissertation, The University of Chicago, 2022), 191, 194.

of pop production, but they can only push so far before a star's voice is no longer recognizable (or tolerable).¹³¹ The issue for SOPHIE is that her voice was never recognizable from the outset.

After all this, SOPHIE was forced to “join the conversation” and “out” herself as a trans woman.¹³² In 2017, with the release of SOPHIE's music video debut for her single “It's Okay to Cry,” the artist re/introduced herself, showing her unobstructed face on camera for the first time as an out/ted trans pop star. This track is also sung by SOPHIE herself, quietly and intimately, with background vocals by Cecile Believe. With her voice and face newly front and center, SOPHIE expressed frustration with some of the initial reactions to her music video debut: “I was quite disappointed in a lot of ways with the way it was received because it displayed a lot of the hang-ups that people have around needing, requiring image to be attached to music.”¹³³ In other words, SOPHIE expresses frustration with the need to be “seen” in order to be “heard.” SOPHIE elaborates: “It's about the emphasized idea that if you're showing more face, you're somehow being more real.”¹³⁴ Her music, however, does not simply exteriorize or give face to a more “authentic” interior experience; it is not an opportunity to “know” her, nor is it an attempt to obfuscate a “true” former self. Rather, it revels in its own artificiality, in spells of un/becoming.

Although she had been producing music for years before her Red Bull LA show in 2017, it was still dubbed a “live debut.” The graphic released for her live debut shows SOPHIE partly obscured by an amorphous plasticky blob, evocative of the slick cover art for the singles on her PRODUCT LP. In this image, she presents herself not only as enigmatic, but also as an analog-

¹³¹ Likewise, the internet is flooded with offshoots of modulation technology—not simply made for musicians. Audio filter and voice changing effects on social media platforms like TikTok, which enable users to deepen or raise the pitch of their voice, allow pitch-modulated sounds to become accessible to anyone with a smartphone.

¹³² Michelle Lhooq, “Pop Producer SOPHIE on Anonymity, Honesty, and Artifice,” *Teen Vogue*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/sophie-producer>.

¹³³ “SOPHIE: the producer taking pop to the future.”

¹³⁴ Kate Branch, “This Rihanna-Approved Musician Is Changing the Sound of Pop—And Its Impossible Beauty Standards,” *Vogue*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.vogue.com/article/sophie-face-shopping-album-british-producer-beauty-standards-red-hair>.

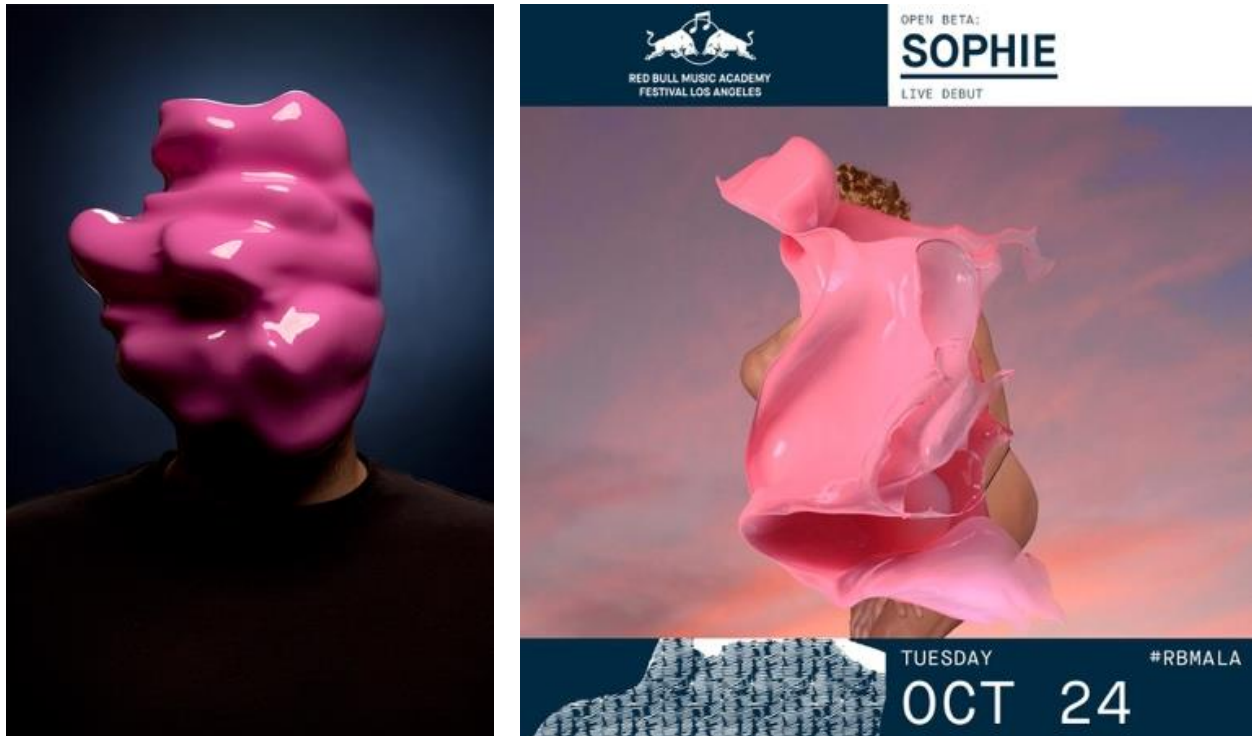


Figure 2.4. Art from Blas’s “Fag Face Mask” (left) and SOPHIE’s Live Debut (right).

digital hybrid, with visual representations of her own face and body a part of an amorphous, plastic whole. For, as Sessi Kuwabara Blanchard writes, SOPHIE’s high-pitched vocals are “just as slippery as the reality of SOPHIE’s face.”¹³⁵ In associating her music with her body, her modulated digital sound with her modulated digital appearance, SOPHIE seems to further a sense of digital hybridity and assemblage. And with its plasticky obfuscations of the face and body, the graphic echoes Zach Blas’s “Fag Face Mask” piece (2012), a key work on queer opacity tactics that offers a form of resistance to facial recognition technology, specifically subverting the new phrenology of the “gay face” in recent scientific studies (Figure 2.4).

Just around the time of her live debut, her first music video, for “It’s Okay to Cry,” was also released, described in the media as the “first” time she was “showing her face.”¹³⁶ With the

¹³⁵ Blanchard, “How SOPHIE and Other Trans Musicians Are Using Vocal Modulation to Explore Gender.”

¹³⁶ Exemplarily, one redditor writes: “I think essentially, SOPHIE was debuting a face to her music.” See: ribbiexcx, “Faceshopping Lyrics Meaning?,” Reddit Post, *R/Pcmusic*, February 6, 2018, www.reddit.com/r/pcmusic/comments/7vod83/faceshopping_lyrics_meaning/.

release of her music video debut, as one critic notes, the artist shows her “unobstructed face on camera for the first time as a trans pop star,” performing naked and singing intimately about embracing her emotions and flaws against a flatly-rendered, morphing backdrop.¹³⁷ Though much of the video’s critical reception focused on a perceived sense of intimacy and authenticity in her performance of realness, often overlooked is the fact that SOPHIE’s face is still partly obfuscated by her choice to wear extreme cheek prosthetics.¹³⁸ In 2018, she likewise appeared on the cover of *PAPER Magazine* sporting extremely sculpted cheekbones, exploring femininity by artificial means through prosthetics. Or as one redditor explains on r/pcmusic, SOPHIE is here “presenting herself as a construct,” debuting as “a pop figure, or a canvas, for a performance of femininity.”¹³⁹ While other musicians have also explored the use of prosthetics, perhaps most notably The Weeknd’s use of cheekbone prosthetics in the video for “Save Your Tears” (2021), it is striking that SOPHIE’s debut as an artist was itself defined by facial-obfuscating techniques.

SOPHIE’s debut was only the beginning of her interest in (facial) opacity tactics. Her 2018 video for “Faceshopping” is exemplary of her project of trans opacity, using the face as a theoretical mapping site. In “Faceshopping,” SOPHIE’s collaborator Cecile Believe sings a repeated chorus on her behalf: “My face is the front of shop / My face is the real shop front / My shop is the face I front / I’m real when I shop my face.” The face is the forward/outward thing, the data of the self that is read by others, the marketable, Photoshop-able, brandable shopfront of personhood. SOPHIE embraces that acts of manipulating one’s image are ubiquitous, especially in digital culture, questioning the stability of the “real” and “authentic” for gender expressivity.

¹³⁷ Stephen Daw, “SOPHIE on Being Trans: ‘Transness Is Taking Control,’” *Billboard*, June 20, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/culture/pride/sophie-paper-magazine-interview-trans-8461985/>.

¹³⁸ An extended version of the video served as the monumental backdrop of Louis Vuitton’s spring/summer 2020 show, blaring through the Louvre’s Cour Carrée. Creative Director Nicolas Ghesquière centered SOPHIE’s face as the backdrop to the runway; her face adorned the floor-to-ceiling video screen that spanned the entire stage.

¹³⁹ izzyeasol, “SOPHIE as Gender Performance,” Reddit Post, *R/Pcmusic*, February 3, 2018, www.reddit.com/r/pcmusic/comments/7uy23k/sophie_as_gender_performance/.

Gender's fugitive face is fraught; under the conditions of cis-heteronormativity, "trans" is illegible, reduced to nothing but a "face." The trans body is thus just a "front," and the cis gaze reduces it to nothing more than a surface, a countenance. And yet, for SOPHIE, as one writeup notes, "the surface isn't artificial; if you master it, it's the realest part of you."¹⁴⁰ SOPHIE has admitted to undergoing several physical transformations "as a way to access something that is more authentic than what I inherited or was born with."¹⁴¹ The album title itself, *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, cleverly hints at some of these themes: while "oil" evokes a smooth, viscous fluid, a thick surface lubricant, "pearl" suggests a hard shiny exterior, surface level in beauty and value, and "un-insides" returns us to what is not interior, to surfaces and exteriors. (Are these not the silly's incoherences?) While parts of the art world still "denigrate the explorations of surface, style, and fascination as trivial, frivolous, or irrelevant," and disdain queer and trans "glamour" as "dissonant, deceitful, monstrous, or contradictory," as Jeannine Tang notes, SOPHIE revels in the aesthetics of silly surfaces and plastic exteriorities as key opacity tactics for transness.¹⁴²

Like the shifting backdrops in the video for "It's Okay to Cry," the "Faceshopping" video modulates visibility with unsettling, surreal visuals. The video begins with alternating flashes of empty black and white screens, accompanied by a heavy wobbling bass. In what follows, the video occupies a space in between an aestheticized lyric video and a music video proper. As the lyrics begin, the video matches specific images to onscreen text, such as a digital rendering of SOPHIE's head for "face," moisture droplets on skin for "front," empty product containers for "shop," and the word "real" etched in a Coca-Cola font against a red background (Figure 2.5).

¹⁴⁰ Frisch, "SOPHIE's Music Was Completely Artificial and Utterly Real."

¹⁴¹ Branch, "This Rihanna-Approved Musician Is Changing the Sound of Pop."

¹⁴² Jeannine Tang, "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (The MIT Press, 2017), 381.

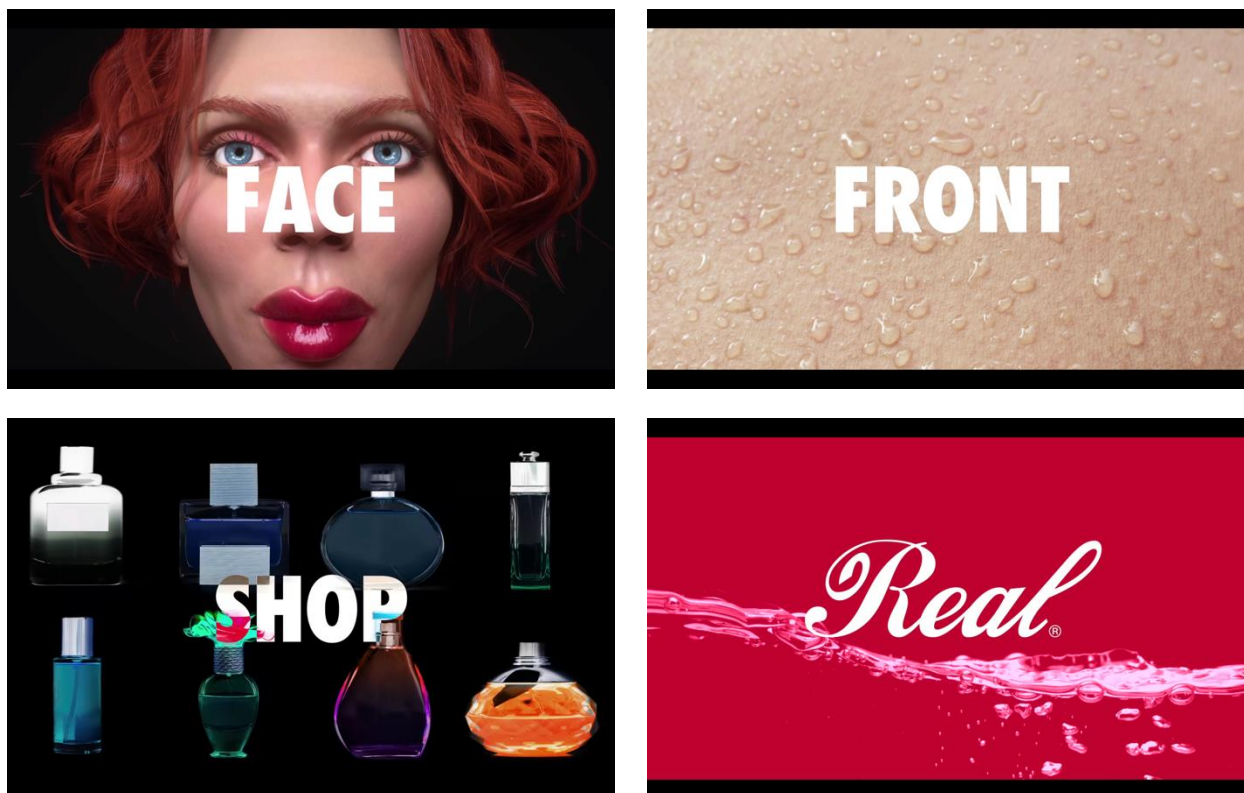


Figure 2.5. Stills from the music video for SOPHIE's "Faceshopping" (2018).

Once these associations are established, a strobe-like effect shifts and blurs their significations. These images act as a database with a set of parameters for algorithmic recombination; later in the video, for instance, the Coca-Cola writing is inscribed directly on the skin. The rest of the video features a strobing, mushy CG SOPHIE face contorting into horrific yet alluring textural abominations—as if to mold or sculpt her own face, endowing it with exaggerated plasticity. The face is here “externalized to the limits of its own plasticity,” as Noa Steimatsky suggests.¹⁴³ SOPHIE plays with “the reflective artifice of plastic form,” a dense “layering of surface that the spectator must confront as such: with no reassurance of expressive transparency and autonomous subjectivity.”¹⁴⁴ With no clear motivation, these ever-malleable digital models twist and turn, inflate and deflate, break apart and fracture, or even melt down like wax at the very end.

¹⁴³ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.

¹⁴⁴ Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, 142.

Oscillating between the white canvas and black mirror of a panoptic screen, SOPHIE's heavily distorted, cosmeticized face flickers in close-up across an empty non-location, evoking what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call "the screen with holes, the white wall/black hole, the abstract machine producing faciality."¹⁴⁵ While the blank white backdrop featured behind Laverne Cox on the cover of *Time Magazine*'s "transgender tipping point" issue works to reveal and produce the faciality of the central figure, the trans subject made visible, SOPHIE's video strategically deploys the same form of an undifferentiated blank backdrop to instead modulate and obfuscate our view of representational transness rather than to reveal it (Figure 2.6).

SOPHIE, here, embraces the nonrepresentational affective potential of the digital music video medium, echoing Steven Shaviro's argument about digital music videos, where he writes:

We respond to the bodies we see, as to the music we hear, but we cannot take what we see and hear as a represented action (or series of actions) in any particular location. We are rather presented with a mode of digital and electronic presence that cannot be translated or resolved into analogue, representational terms. The bodies [...] are not absented in favor of their signifying images, as would be the case in a movie (at least according to traditional film theory). Rather, these bodies impinge on the screen and thereby present themselves directly to us, precisely as forces and pulsations.¹⁴⁶

The mutable, impinging presence of bodies in digital music videos opens itself to transqueer possibilities. We are, as Shaviro adds, thrown into "a realm of different sexual practices," one that is "too irregular, too uncertain, and also too intimate to fit easily on either side of the conventional male/female binary."¹⁴⁷ The "Faceshopping" video dwells in this indeterminate space—the nonbinariness of the silly. Slowly deterritorialized, SOPHIE's face becomes plastic, substanceless, and collapses like shed skin. Mechanical percussion sounds clash against artificial

¹⁴⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 170.

¹⁴⁶ Steven Shaviro, *Digital Music Videos* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 62.

¹⁴⁷ Shaviro, *Digital Music Videos*, 67.

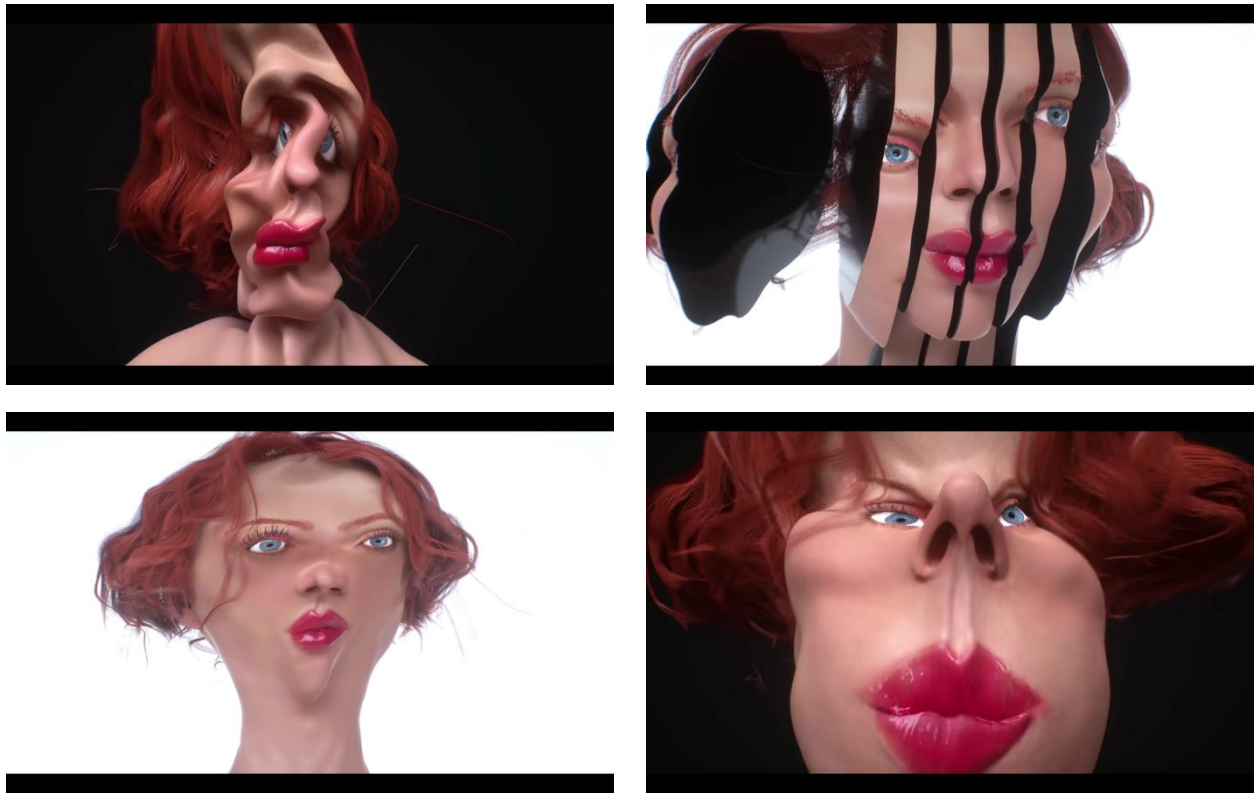


Figure 2.6. The Deleuzian white wall/black hole in “Faceshopping” (2018).

keyboard noises in a disjointed, uneven manner, creating a fractious sensorium that exacerbates the irregular, dehumanizing CG effects wreaking havoc on SOPHIE’s animated visage.

Countering the visual performance of (a supposed) “realness” in “It’s Okay to Cry,” “Faceshopping” challenges viewers’ desire for the content of SOPHIE’s hypervisible trans body, instead activating a different desire—a desire for form itself, for silly and sillier forms, that is, a not-quite-transqueer-enough longing for aesthetic silliness. After the intimacy performed through her topless appearance in “It’s Okay to Cry,” the “Faceshopping” video pushes SOPHIE’s image into a different kind of hyper-intimacy with/in the strange form/mask of the face—too amplified and too close in its grotesqueness. Our aesthetic closeness to her face ironically shuts us off from SOPHIE, producing instead (or at the same time) an opaque distance. Her face is rendered into a shimmering digital object, wrapping around itself like rubber, rippling like a water balloon, and splitting apart into shiny slices. Despite the image’s digitality and extremely unnatural

shapeshifting, its tactility is amplified as it takes different forms. Unusual feelings of closeness emerge while watching her face, the site of selfhood, become destroyed over and over, becoming more and more opaque and difficult to “grasp.” This, then, allows the viewer to “read for fleshiness, for surface, not depth” in order to “come toward thinking about the parameters of selfhood in the image,” as Amber Jamilla Musser argues.¹⁴⁸ SOPHIE’s body modulations push fetishizing desires for trans hypervisibility to uncomfortably silled extremes.

Both musically and visually, the video melds the organic with the machinic, offering an exploration of the human body as a site at which the “natural” and “synthetic” not only meet but collide, confusing boundaries.¹⁴⁹ Along these lines, Korsgaard writes that the “Faceshopping” video is “an audiovisual cyborg, perfectly suited for negotiating and de- and reconstructing gender identities.”¹⁵⁰ SOPHIE’s highly mediated and technologized voice also underscores lyrics in which bodily alteration is central, dwelling on the most outward-facing characteristics of the self. SOPHIE’s voice enters, listing present-day examples of forming the “real” self: “Artificial bloom / Hydroponic skin / Chemical release / Synthesize the real / Plastic surgery / Social dialect / Positive results / Documents of life.” Throughout, SOPHIE’s voice is technologized almost to the point of language’s dissolution, blurring between human and synthesized sounds. If her vocal presence in “It’s Okay to Cry” is striking to listeners in its intimate realness, SOPHIE’s voice in “Faceshopping” is so distorted that it might not strike the ear as a voice at all. (In fact, it took me numerous relistens, with quality headphones, to hear a voice at all.) The voice here works mostly as another electronic instrument, shifting and modulating in its garbled digitality. Contrasting

¹⁴⁸ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (New York University Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁴⁹ As SOPHIE herself notes: “That’s a running theme in this music—questioning preconceptions about what’s real and authentic, what’s natural and what’s unnatural and what’s artificial, in terms of music, in terms of gender, in terms of reality, I suppose.” See: Geffen, “Sophie Can Show You the World.”

¹⁵⁰ Mathias Bonde Korsgaard, “SOPHIE’s ‘Faceshopping’ as (Anti-)Lyric Video,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 13, no. 2 (2019): 224.

with Cecile Believe's clear, monotone, and repetitive chorus, SOPHIE's deep, heavily filtered, pitch-shifted voice is hard to distinguish from the growling beat's strobe-like effect. In effect, SOPHIE explores concepts of digital synthesis and curation of the self as a valid expression of one's "reality," embracing the potential for identity to be shaped entirely within a digital space.

Just before the bridge to "Faceshopping," SOPHIE's now off-center head deflates into a lumpy pile with a twitchy wink and an uneven smile. Just before disappearing, the silly face is overtaken by giant glittery lyrics, morphing fluidly from word to word. The intense industrial noise gives way to a moment of respite, transitioning into a pastiche of sweeping pop ballads and dreamy synths—a clever collision of heavy bass and airy treble versions of silliness. In a now dramatically high-pitched voice, barely intelligible, Cecile Believe sings: "Come on, touch me / Set my spirit free / Oh, test me / Do you feel what I feel? / Do you see what I see? / Oh, reduce me to nothingness." This "nothingness" is the face. We can see in this identity-obfuscating bridge that the face, just like the voice, operates under (or in the muddle of) a tension. On the one hand, the face provides superficiality, identifiability, legitimacy, and quantifiability that can operate in the neoliberal, computational ontology of cis-sexism and whiteness. On the other hand, the face is always in a state of slippage and leakage; the trans countenance wants to fail.

Fittingly, the bridge concludes with an explosion of neon glitter slowly shimmering over a black-filled frame (Figure 2.7). Accompanied by high-pitched moaning vocals, the twinkling plastic particles momentarily saturate the surface of the screen until a strobe-effect flings us back into SOPHIE's morphing, montaged body. Taking up the notion of "*glitter as plastic*," Nicole Seymour aptly proposes a "new plasticity to the understanding of what is and can be glitter."¹⁵¹ Crucially, Seymour does so by way of the category of the "silly." As a product of the Plasticene,

¹⁵¹ Nicole Seymour, *Glitter* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 123.

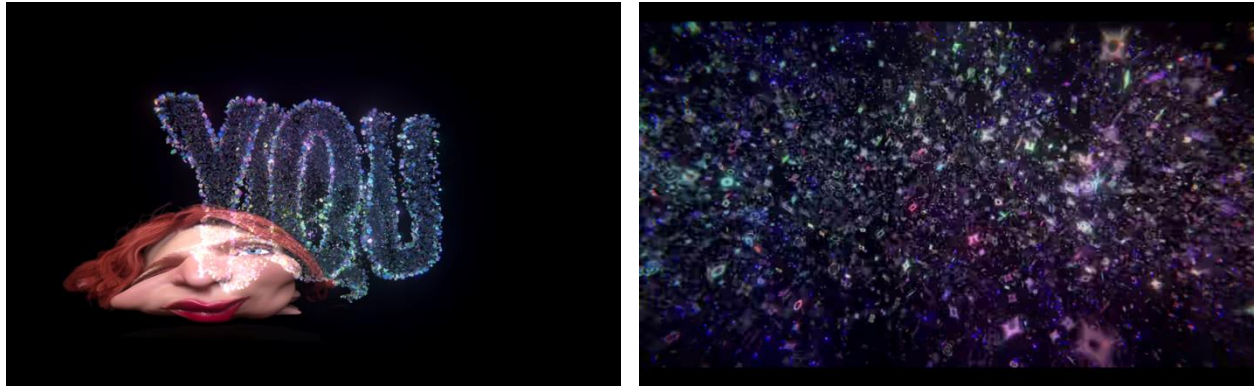


Figure 2.7. Glittery sequence in the music video for “Faceshopping” (2018).

a geological era of environmental crisis marked by the omnipresence of plastic, glitter is waste, excess, and trash. It is silly and puerile. And so, in her work on this sparkling object, Seymour argues that we must focus on glitter “in a silly way” in order to understand “what glitter *does*” and “how we *experience* it,” that is, how glitter both pleases and irritates.¹⁵² For Seymour, silly irritation is a unique quality assigned to glitter, along with stickiness, persistence, dispersibility, and visibility. As such, “glitterbomings” like those in SOPHIE’s video engage in what Seymour terms “strategic irritation” as it revels in “acts of queer and female messiness that disturb those in power.”¹⁵³ Here, SOPHIE dwells in hyperpop’s silly, glitter-dusted assault on the senses. The momentary saturation of glitter in the video serves a similar purpose to the intense strobing glitches throughout, which likewise dwell in aesthetics of irritational silliness and waste.

After the glitter showers glitch out of view, a digital rendering of SOPHIE’s entire body is added to the visual mix. Like the face, SOPHIE’s entire body now stretches, morphs, and glitches, its billowing form floating in an empty void. At the track’s end, the digital face takes its final form, melting like candlewax as its two eyeballs spill out of their sockets, revealing itself as a holey surface (Figure 2.8). “The face is a surface,” write Deleuze and Guattari, attesting to the

¹⁵² Seymour, *Glitter*, 120.

¹⁵³ Seymour, *Glitter*, 116.

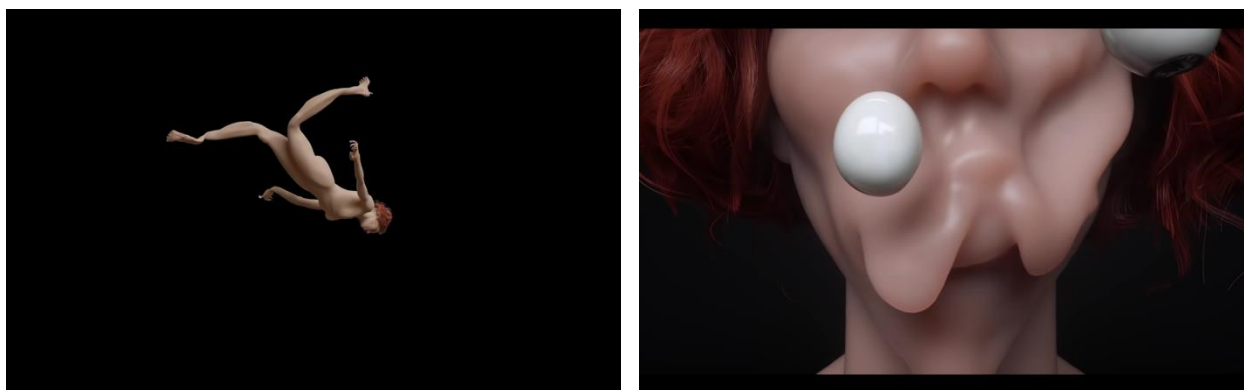


Figure 2.8. More stills from the music video for SOPHIE’s “Faceshopping” (2018).

abstract flatness of the face (as a socially constituted figure).¹⁵⁴ The face is not part of the head, it is an imaginary plasticky canvas stretched over it. The surface play and distortion of the close-up in “Faceshopping” doesn’t hide the face so much as convert it into pure faciality—the white wall and black holes of the face bleed together to form a seething, impenetrable surface, and the face in close-up shows itself for what it really is: “the face is a horror story.”¹⁵⁵ In a similar vein, SOPHIE later plays with surfaces and flatness through an entirely abstract use of glittery, 2D laser graphics in her 2020 livestream for “HEAV3N SUSPENDED,” this time embracing an even more ecstatic, extreme, and nonrepresentational escape from faciality.¹⁵⁶

For SOPHIE, the modulation of the trans face carries the baggage of computational thinking. In 2016, SOPHIE hosted a panel symposium entitled *Pupture* with dance duo FlucT, where pamphlets were distributed posing questions about what it means to make oneself a “body,” to become “the body underneath the skin.” The pamphlet prominently featured the face of queer computer pioneer Alan Turing, obfuscated by handwritten text, mathematical equations,

¹⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 170.

¹⁵⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 168.

¹⁵⁶ Lasers are often used for counter-optical purposes whether to overwhelm vision and the senses in queer raves or to obfuscate facial recognition tech in protests against the state around the world. In the final 10 seconds of the original livestream performance, SOPHIE does briefly reveal her face, accompanied by other near-nude femme performers, who all have laser graphics superimposed onto their dancing bodies. For unknown reasons, this portion of the performance has been removed from the YouTube upload.

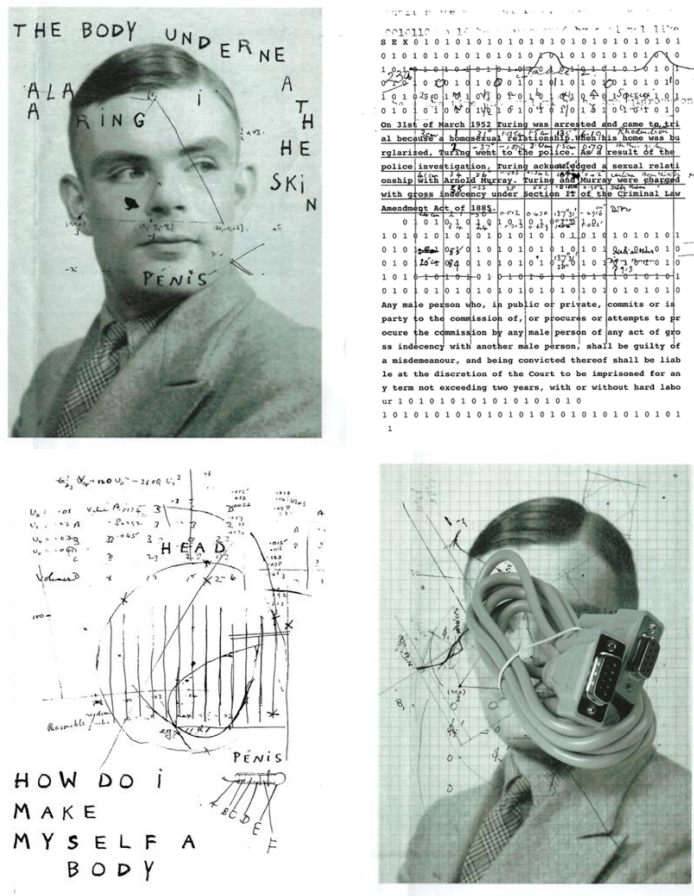


Figure 2.9. From SOPHIE's "Pupture Pamphlet" (2016).

queer positionality with the computational database "NULL marker," a special marker or keyword used in Structured Query Language (SQL) indicating that something has no value.¹⁵⁷ Like the NULL of queer identity, the trans*forms of opacity are neither true nor false (in the database), neither male nor female (in cis/het gender logics) but positioned somewhere in the unquantifiable, muddled "middle." Instructive here is Kara Keeling's reading of the opaque forms of "Grace Jones's electronic, morphing body" in Nick Hooker's video for "Corporate Cannibal" (2008), which features a frontal close-up shot of Jones' digitally distorted face and upper body; the video, as Keeling argues, draws on "the mutability of Jones's star image and is

and computer cables (Figure 2.9). The pamphlet's obfuscations of Turing's face accompany pages of typewritten binary code and text explaining that Turing was prosecuted in 1952 for homosexual acts under British gross indecency laws. Extending Turing's theoretical work on uncomputability, SOPHIE renders his aberrant face functionally illegible. Similarly, in his work on the opacity tactics of queer computation (which I expand open in Chapter 3), Jacob Gaboury equates

¹⁵⁷ Jacob Gaboury, "Becoming NULL: Queer Relations in the Excluded Middle," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 28, no. 2 (2018).

most precisely characterized by ‘modulation,’ a term with significance in computation.”¹⁵⁸ Just as “the inaccessibility of ‘Grace Jones’ and the opacity of her performances are themselves part of the allure,” SOPHIE plays with opaque rearrangements of her image that become part of the hyperpop star’s allure; and so, like Keeling, I consider the computational play and “modulated digital image” of SOPHIE’s face in the video for “Faceshopping” as “a mediation of social relations.”¹⁵⁹ Though to different ends than Grace Jones, SOPHIE “displays the modulation of control societies,” embracing an “errantry...a risky, but indispensable, mode of Relation,” as Keeling suggests, that experiments “within and through the various modulations designed to control what her stardom can do vis-à-vis race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.”¹⁶⁰ SOPHIE forces us to gaze at all the computational contortions and errant twists of her mutating features and silly surfaces as the viewing experience becomes increasingly uncomfortable and unsettling.

V. “Contortions Match Your Confusion”: Arca’s Mutant Modulations in “Mequetrefe”

Perhaps you have a feeling that’s so pure or overwhelming inside of you that your body disfigures to it—contortions match your confusion.

- Arca¹⁶¹

*Transformistas boten chispas las bujarras en la cara y más na’
(Transvestites throw sparks in the face and nothing more)*

- Arca, “Prada”

In this section, I briefly turn to another important figure in the hyperpop scene: trans and nonbinary Venezuelan electronic musician and producer Alejandra Gherzi Rodríguez, known professionally as Arca.¹⁶² After releasing her first two albums, *Xen* and *Mutant*, in 2014 and

¹⁵⁸ Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (New York University Press, 2019), 150, 147.

¹⁵⁹ Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 169, 157.

¹⁶⁰ Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*, 19.

¹⁶¹ Kate Hutchinson, “Arca: ‘Nothing Is off Limits Emotionally,’” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/oct/31/arca-bjork-kanye-west>.

¹⁶² The argument remains to be had whether Arca was an ancillary or mainstay figure in hyperpop. Though, she is, by some, considered a “hyper pop pioneer.” Regardless, given her hyper-digital pop productions and proximity to others in the scene, like SOPHIE, she is a significant player in hyperpop. See: Sage Mace, “Hyper Pop: The Digital Age’s ‘Genre’ Of Transgression,” *Analog Cases*, April 15, 2022, <https://analogcases.com/blogs/news/hyper-pop>.

2015 respectively, her eponymous third album, *Arca* (2017), became the first to prominently feature her own vocals, sung in her native language of Spanish and released to near-universal acclaim.¹⁶³ From the outset of that album, Arca forges a fascination with bodies and surfaces; in the opening track, “Piel” (“Skin”), she sings: “Take my skin from yesterday off me / A shadow of glimmers on your skin.” Like SOPHIE, Arca heavily modulates her voice using extreme digital processing, embracing “distressing and transcendental sonic experiments.”¹⁶⁴ Arca regularly toggles between vocals pitched-up to helium-femme highs and drop-tuned to growling depths, such as in her self-duet of low- and high-pitched voices in “Machote” (2020). Similar to the many criticisms of hyperpop, some have called Arca’s music “hyperactive and jittery to a generally irritating extent.”¹⁶⁵ The mutable electronic soundscapes of Arca’s music are often characterized by a “chaotic” blend of electronic dance music, hip-hop, avant-pop, and reggaeton.

Like SOPHIE, Arca was said to be “documenting her transition through music.”¹⁶⁶ Arca came out as nonbinary in 2018, later adding that she identifies as a trans Latina woman.¹⁶⁷ In this time, echoing SOPHIE’s career trajectory, Arca moved from a behind-the-scenes producer for major artists like Kanye West, Bjork, FKA twigs, Kelela, and Frank Ocean to a front and center artist herself, finally “ready to put a face to her wild work,” as one outlet notes.¹⁶⁸ In her transition into the public eye, Arca was interested in transforming typical trans optics. Arca’s

¹⁶³ Hyperpop has since grew a large international following in Spanish-speaking countries with artists like Rakky Ripper, eurosanto, PUTOCHINOMARICÓN, and Autotune Angel leading the scene.

¹⁶⁴ Rachel Aroesti, “Arca: Mutant Review – Distressing and Transcendental Sonic Experiments,” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/nov/19/arca-mutant-review-distressing-and-transcendental-sonic-experiments>.

¹⁶⁵ David Smyth, “Arca - KiCk ii/iii/iiii/iiiii Review: 47 Tracks of Wild Exploration,” *Evening Standard*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/music/arca-kick-ii-iii-iiii-iiiii-review-b969471.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Luke Stamps, “Arca: The Revolutionary Trans Artist Documenting Her Transition Through Music,” *Chapter Z Magazine*, June 29, 2022, <https://chapterzmagazine.com/2022/06/arca-the-revolutionary-trans-artist-documenting-her-transition-through-music/>.

¹⁶⁷ Frankie Dunn, “Arca: ‘We’re All Transitioning: From Birth to Death, It’s Inevitable,’” *i-D Magazine*, June 25, 2020, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/4ayayj/arca-were-all-transitioning-from-birth-to-death-its-inevitable>.

¹⁶⁸ Stamps, “Arca: The Revolutionary Trans Artist Documenting Her Transition Through Music.”

“KiCk i” (2020) was the first album to come in the wake of her self-identification as trans and nonbinary; as such, the lyrical and musical choices were inspired largely by the complexities surrounding Arca’s trans and nonbinary identity. Geffen, for instance, argues that the “fluidity of the music’s structures echoes the fluidity of [Arca’s] physicality. Arca explicitly closed the conceptual gap between trans bodies and trans sounds. Using a melting, detuned, chaotic musical vernacular, she articulated the queer embodiment that had run through the synthesizer’s history ever since Wendy Carlos first powered up her Moog.”¹⁶⁹ Geffen highlights the continuity between gender and genre, between transgender and electronic music in particular, connecting the fluidity of Arca’s music structures to the fluidity of her transforming body as a trans nonbinary artist, both mechanisms used to challenge traditional boundaries and binaries.¹⁷⁰

Many have thus drawn strong connections between SOPHIE and Arca as trans artists producing amorphous electronic pop music. One critic suggests that Arca and SOPHIE “are like bizarro versions of each other, using synthetic digital precision to illustrate the fluid and complex nature of sexuality and gender in pop music.”¹⁷¹ Their sounds collided in one song: “La Chíqui” off of Arca’s *KiCk i* (2020), the first in a pentalogy of albums—*KICK ii* (2021), *KicK iii* (2021), *kick iiiii* (2021), and *kiCK iiiii* (2021)—that take up the mantra: “iF iT FeElS oPpReSsiVe KiCk aGaiNsT iT.” Arca’s *KiCK* pentalogy, Ada Mehti suggests, “bears [SOPHIE’s] unmistakable influence,” that is, the “simultaneously minimal and maximal onslaught of metallic machinery,

¹⁶⁹ Geffen, *Glitter up the Dark*, 213.

¹⁷⁰ Arca herself echoes this, claiming that there was “a clear intention [on *KiCK i*] to allow every self to express itself. Not to decide how much air time each self would get, but to allow for modulation between them in a spontaneous way.” See: Felicity Martin, “Arca Shares Details on New Album, ‘KiCk i,’” *DJ Magazine*, March 9, 2020, <https://djmag.com/news/arca-shares-details-new-album-kick-i>.

¹⁷¹ “Silent Shout: The Cresting Waveform Wave Of Arca & SOPHIE, Plus New Music From Pop’s Fringes,” *idolator*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.idolator.com/7609939/sophie-arca-new-music-alt-pop?view-all>.

cartoon excess, and post-ironic posturing that defined Sophie's sound."¹⁷² SOPHIE and Arca both embrace the aesthetic-affective nexus of the *transqueer*, the *digital*, and the *silly*,

In what follows, I explore another key song off *KiCk i*: "Mequetrefe," where Arca embraces the trans*forms of opacity and modulation in her glitchy, distorted video for the song. A derogatory slang term used in her native Spanish for a silly or insignificant man, Arca uses "mequetrefe" as the song's title as a means of rearticulating its negative and transphobic connotations.¹⁷³ The song's lyrics follow a woman who, in defiance of the verbal abuse she suffers in the streets, refuses to be cowed into taking a taxi to the club. The woman in the song appears to be a proxy for Arca, and so it's important to note that the insult "mequetrefe," which deliberately uses a masculine word, has cruelly transphobic implications for a trans nonbinary woman of color like Arca. Indeed, the song appears to be inspired by a video posted to then-Twitter, where Arca is seen being followed and harassed on the streets of Barcelona.¹⁷⁴ The song appears to be narrated from the perspective of an onlooker watching Arca confidently walk like "she doesn't care"—"le da igual," she sings. Arca not only withstands the attack but belittles her abusers by embracing and rearticulating the oppressive irritations brought on by the slur.

Similar to SOPHIE's "Faceshopping," the video for "Mequetrefe" formally draws on the mutability of Arca's digital image through the variations of hyper-distorted data mosh that her form takes; her head and body become distorted along with the song's percussive hits, exploding

¹⁷² Adi Mehta, "Arca Morphs Into Four New Fractal Forms With Her Expanding 'Kick' Universe," *Entertainment Voice*, December 3, 2021, <https://entertainmentvoice.com/2021/12/03/arca-morphs-into-four-new-fractal-forms-with-her-expanding-kick-universe/>.

¹⁷³ While it is generally agreed upon that "mequetrefe" refers to a weak, second-class, or insignificant man, of little importance, either physically or intellectually, scholars do not agree on the etymology of the insult. For some, this term entered the Spanish language through the Portuguese *meço* (meaning "dissolute man"), from the Latin *moechus* (meaning "adulterer" or "fornicator") and *trefe* (meaning "mischievous" or "wayward"). Others suggest that the word borrows from the Arabic word *muḥaṭṭirif* مُخْطَرِف (meaning "raving" or "perverted"). See: Leo Spitzer, "A New Spanish Etymological Dictionary (Cont'd)," *Modern Language Notes* 74, no. 2 (1959): 127–49.

¹⁷⁴ Arca [@arca1000000], "Sigh," Tweet, *Twitter*, July 14, 2019, <https://x.com/arca1000000/status/1150245382284304384>.



Figure 2.10. Stills from the music video for Arca's "Mequetrefe" (2020).

out from the center of her being as the track's rhythmic pulse chugs along. Draped in percussive stuttering and pop melodicism, Arca's cut-up disembodied vocal chanting is heavily treated and filtered, shattered in fractal beauty. Like the opening to the "Faceshopping" video, the opening to the "Mequetrefe" video stutters between empty black and white-filled frames. After a very brief shot of Arca posed in a frontal medium close-up against an empty white background, unaltered in her appearance for just a second, the video rapidly flickers between shots of a black-filled frame before presenting Arca's first bodily modulation: a staticky blown out distortion of her heavily made-up face.¹⁷⁵ Another cut to black before we return to Arca wearing an ornate, matador jacket; "Mami quiere mequetrefe," she sings in a modulated coo as her body heavily contorts into silly deformations. Shoulders up, her isolated bust inflates and deflates (Figure 2.10). Arca's body modulations are not smooth or fluid like SOPHIE's in "Faceshopping" but rather harsh, jagged, and staticky, her face blown into hard-edged triangular distortions.

The video continues, cutting to morphing shots of Arca in different outfits. In a brief instrumental transition between verses, Arca's modulations take a different shape. Here, her face and body become totally abstract, a flat shiny surface effect, like liquid mercury, beading,

¹⁷⁵ Arca describes her music in a Tweet as "a posthuman celestial sparkle, psychosexual pulse-width modulation, queering the void, abyss alchemically transmuted into a deconstruction of what is beautiful." See: Arca [@arca1000000], "Kick 4 Is an Entry of Sensual Charge in the Cycle," Tweet, *Twitter*, November 18, 2021, <https://x.com/arca1000000/status/1461368222922412041>.

bending, and flowing smoothly between her different outfits. With a blink and a smirk, Arca's momentarily unaltered figure hiccups back into place. The remainder of the video returns to the same harsh staticky manipulations as before, occasionally highlighting Arca's "real" body in the mix, and finally ending with a strange, elongated eyeroll and a wink directly to camera.

Arca has explained that the song and video for "Mequetrefe" reflect the ways that "expression of gender-nonconforming self-states in a public space can often result in static within your environment."¹⁷⁶ Arca quite literally visualizes this "static" in the video, as her mutant modulations embrace what Nicole Archer terms the trans* tactics of "dynamic static," whereby "pattern-jamming necessarily obfuscates the neat ways that gender and other modes of identification are rendered into discrete bands within the patterns of everyday living."¹⁷⁷ For Archer as for Arca, the "fantastic production of visual noise...is a key strategy within the struggle for trans* liberation."¹⁷⁸ In fact, close to 10,000 frames of Arca were fed into a computer program to create the shifting, mutating face-to-face shots that make up the dynamic static of the two-minute video. On her Instagram, Arca called the production of the video "one of the most alchemical transformative processes I've ever experienced."¹⁷⁹ Indeed, the "ur-theme of all [Arca's] music," according to one review, is "transformation."¹⁸⁰ The video for "Mequetrefe" embraces such alchemical trans*forms. Arca goes on to describe that the video is based around the ever-morphing, "shifting and ripping of selfstates in constant permutation in transition

¹⁷⁶ James Rettig, "Arca Shares New Track 'Mequetrefe': Listen," *Stereogum*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.stereogum.com/2088038/arca-mequetrefe/music/>.

¹⁷⁷ Nicole Archer, "Dynamic Static," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (The MIT Press, 2017), 312.

¹⁷⁸ Archer, "Dynamic Static," 314.

¹⁷⁹ Arca [@arca1000000], "The Mequetrefe Video Is out Now!," Instagram Post, *Instagram*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CB4ADW111ZX/?hl=en>.

¹⁸⁰ Philip Sherburne, "Arca: KICK ii / KicK iii / Kick iiiii / KiCK iiiii," *Pitchfork*, December 7, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/arca-kick-ii-kick-iii-kick-iiii-kick-iiiii/>.

toward the unknown.”¹⁸¹ As such, Arca adopts the “mutable performativity of the self” as a conceptual starting point, drawing upon what Michael Waugh terms a “performative digital queering” where her abstract sound and fluid self-representations “embody the liminal ungraspability of queer identity.”¹⁸² Arca’s music is “fluid, slippery, intangible,” hyperbolizing the “plasticity of synthesized instrumentation.”¹⁸³ Echoing these features, Arca’s video work is an attempt to incorporate deliberate distortions and plastic forms into practices of identity de/formation, alluding to the infinite and not-yet-known permutations of what a body can be.

I understand the aesthetic of silliness in “Mequetrefe” as a particular surface irritant, a textural interest that destabilizes and defamiliarizes the object of public encounter (the face) through the close-up shot. Arca dwells in the intermediate space of silliness and/as irritation—a winkingly wacky irritation of the body’s surfaces. In “Mequetrefe,” Arca herself suggests: “I wanted to find an uncanny valley between a joyous celebration and a defiant transgression. It’s the song that I put on when I have to rile myself up to face the world, to just present as I am.”¹⁸⁴ Ironically, Arca “faces” the world by presenting herself opaquely in silly mutant forms, again turning to the authenticity of artificiality, embracing a silliness that slips, slides, and stumbles through the stifling rhythms of cis-heteronormativity. Aesthetics of silliness help Arca to both embrace the silly, disordered nonsovereignty of the self and at the same time to use the silly as a mocking gesture towards oppressive transmisogyny.¹⁸⁵ In the same vein, Kate Bornstein writes that in the trans struggle for the right to express genders freely, messily, and sillily, “there comes a point where the gender system reveals itself to be not only oppressive, but silly. When we see

¹⁸¹ Arca [@arca1000000], “The Mequetrefe Video Is out Now!.”

¹⁸² Michael Waugh, “Arca: Mute’s Mutant,” in *Mute Records: Artists, Business, History*, ed. Zuleika Beaven, Marcus O’Dair, and Richard Osborne (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 209.

¹⁸³ Waugh, “Arca: Mute’s Mutant,” 214.

¹⁸⁴ Arca, “KiCk i by Arca,” *Apple Music*, June 26, 2020, <https://music.apple.com/us/album/kick-i/1511122250>.

¹⁸⁵ In fact, Arca’s music videos can be so transgressive that YouTube asks you to sign in to verify that you are old enough to see them due to “inappropriate” content, as is the case with “Mequetrefe.”

how ridiculous it is, we can truly begin to dismantle it.”¹⁸⁶ The language of silliness is used here to call out the oppressive to see past its invisible operations, to make the seemingly un-silly silly.

Many of Arca’s other music videos feature silly and disturbing contortions of bodies and faces. Most notably, in her early collaborations with visual artist Jesse Kanda, body-horror CG visuals evoke a kind of visceral bodily plasticity; the overall effect is one of silly unease and anxiousness. In videos for “Xen” (2014), “Now You Know” (2014), “Fluid Silhouettes” (2014), “TRAUMA Scene 1” and “Scene 2” (2014), Jesse Kanda’s depiction of Arca’s face and body is intensely “tweaked, perturbed and perturbing,” as Wayne Marshall writes, proving to be the perfect complement to Arca’s musical exploration of mutable identities, gender plasticity, and the “technological imagination of the grotesque” (Figure 2.11).¹⁸⁷ In the same spirit, the cover art for the albums in her *KiCK* pentalogy depict Arca’s body transformed into various silly and grotesque mutant forms: a giant robot mermaid on scaffolding, a naked warrior straddling a mutant dog, a squatting spider-creature laying fiery eggs, a two-headed dominatrix holding five two-headed skeletons on leashes. Across these audiovisual works, Arca’s trans*forms affirm what artist Simon O’Sullivan, after Deleuze, has described as a “bastard community,” a “mutant community always in progress,” failing to “live up” to the capitalist models offered (or forced upon them).¹⁸⁸ As mutants do not fit comfortably into normative binary oppositions, for Arca, they carry the possibility to destabilize the apparent solidity of dominant representational norms.

In particular, Arca’s mutant forms draw attention to what Steinbock refers to as the trans*forms of the “shimmer,” or “change in its emergent, flickering form,” which are “difficult

¹⁸⁶ Kate Bornstein, “Gender Terror, Gender Rage,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (Routledge, 2006), 243.

¹⁸⁷ Wayne Marshall, “Contortions to Match Your Confusion: Digital Disfigurement and the Music of Arca,” *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 48, no. 1 (2015): 121.

¹⁸⁸ Simon O’Sullivan, “Notes Towards a Minor Art Practice,” *Drain* 2, no. 2 (2005), 8.



Figure 2.11. Mutable faces in “Fluid Silhouettes” (2014) and “TRAUMA Scene 1” (2014).

to grasp as knowable entities,” again gesturing to a fundamental opacity to trans*forms.¹⁸⁹ As Steinbock argues: “Attention to the oscillations in shimmering reveals how and when subjects come to be marked and unmarked, which forms of recognition produce being seen or what optics render viability.”¹⁹⁰ Evading (or at least attempting to evade) the “trap of visibility” is central to the trans*forms of the shimmer—the opaque modulations of visibility, of sound, image, and gender, which can form the basis for new, less-sovereign, and lovingly silly relationalities.

VI. Hyperpop Silliness and/as Trans* Opacity Tactics

Trans people [...] have always been here, singing from the shadows, glittering up the dark.

- Sasha Geffen¹⁹¹

For Martinican scholar Édouard Glissant, agreeing to the “right to opacity” is “the real foundation of Relation,” a form of solidarity without being fully grasped.¹⁹² Glissant has been especially useful to transqueer studies precisely because of his affirmation that “it does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it.”¹⁹³ Opacity tactics in recent transqueer studies affirm the indecipherability of identity to the self and to others as the basis for relationality. As Nicolas

¹⁸⁹ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 8.

¹⁹⁰ Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 18.

¹⁹¹ Sasha Geffen, *Glitter up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary* (University of Texas Press, 2020), 12.

¹⁹² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190.

¹⁹³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

de Villiers affirms, these are “not necessarily tactics of silence or invisibility,” but rather an opening to the possibility of “non-meaning and nonknowledge as ‘queer’ strategies.”¹⁹⁴ In this realm of nonknowledge, silliness takes shape as a key opacity tactic for playfully performing transqueerness, forming the basis for what Lauren Berlant terms an ethics of “nonsovereign relationality.”¹⁹⁵ Elusive and enigmatic, the aesthetics and politics of silliness offers communal forms of resistance, refusal, or reluctance against cis-heteronormative regimes of hypervisibility.

Yet, readings into the opacity tactics of transness in the hyperpop scene often remain committed to unveiling a deeper, truer, more authentic interiority to gender expressions. Writing on both Arca’s and SOPHIE’s music, for instance, Geffen writes: “I hear a refusal to force the body against its true shape.”¹⁹⁶ But for SOPHIE and Arca, the body has no “true shape” nor is it fundamentally an exteriorization of a more authentic interior state. Instead, these artists embrace the ambivalent plasticity of the face in their refusal or reluctance to be cogently seen and known via any stable interior “truth.” The exteriorities of surface play offer more critically silly ways of being, knowing, and feeling differently in a decidedly un-silly and often unbearably silly world.

As one form a “radical” trans politics might take, Eric Stanley clarifies that opacity is “useful not necessarily as a practice of ‘going stealth,’ residing below or beside the regimes of being seen but not known, although it might be.”¹⁹⁷ Instead, Stanley calls for “Opacity with representation: an irreconcilable tension that opens to something other than the pragmatism of the transparent and its visual economies of violence.”¹⁹⁸ Opacity *with* representation, then,

¹⁹⁴ Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 3, 15.

¹⁹⁵ Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times*,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 394.

¹⁹⁶ Geffen, *Glitter up the Dark*, 186.

¹⁹⁷ Eric A. Stanley, “Anti-Trans Optics: Recognition, Opacity, and the Image of Force,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 618.

¹⁹⁸ Stanley, “Anti-Trans Optics,” 618.

acknowledges that opacity is not all that evades representation. Rather, it represents otherwise; opacity is readable in as much as it strategically embraces certain encrypted, alternative, or ambiguous forms. For instance, the shifting speeds and intensities of modulation in hyperpop music videos generate opaque sensations in the body, in frissons of excitement, energy, irritation, discomfort, and, as I argue, silliness. Trans and nonbinary hyperpop artists utilize the exterior forms and opacity tactics of silliness to intentionally blur the lines of gender's "neat" shapes.

Yet, much of the work on opacity in queer and trans studies has and continues to misapprehend trans through a queer lens. For instance, Zach Blas cites the "contemporary struggles transgender people experience due to identification regulation" as an example of and a motivation for what he terms "queer opacity."¹⁹⁹ In contrast to Blas's theorization of transness in/through "queer opacity," then, Eric Stanley thinks of "opacity as prefigurative practice," proffering an "image of something yet to come" for trans lives.²⁰⁰ I suggest that this "something yet to come" is perhaps a more thorough accounting of the trans*forms of opacity, not as ancillary to queer opacity but as a critical complication and rearticulation of its terms of engagement. Perhaps, what we need is an account of "transqueer opacity,"—or even a transqueerying of opacity. I argue here that SOPHIE and Arca offer examples that do just that—specifically centering trans*forms in their queer/ed play with the opaque modulations of the face.

As SOPHIE and Arca suggest in their work, one avenue to complicate queer opacity with trans opacity is by focusing on trans struggles with and resistances to the forces of faciality, described by Deleuze and Guattari as a machine of subjection. For Deleuze and Guattari, the face is itself a politics; it is something quite ambivalent, operationalized as a regulating function

¹⁹⁹ Zach Blas and Jacob Gaboury, "Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation," *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 (2016): 157.

²⁰⁰ Stanley, "Anti-Trans Optics," 619.

whose origins lay in racism. The face is a surface of inscription: a superimposition of scripts and codes onto the human body, the place in which the body is made to signify according to the languages of power. Attached to the head but not integral to it, the face is a product of the abstract faciality machine that assigns meanings to bodies (happy, sad, white, black, man, woman, etc.). For SOPHIE and Arca, the facial object, which is constructed and sculptured rather than “naturally” given, voids its relation to interiority; instead, it is an “affective exteriority,” to borrow Eugenie Brinkema’s words, disclosing “a formal affectivity of shape, structure, duration, line, light”—of silly, opaque, and yet readable transqueer forms.²⁰¹

In a conversation on biometrics and opacity, Jacob Gaboury questions Zach Blas on the ways in which “access to the face through a kind of compulsory visibility is often a highly loaded and political demand” largely due to Western regimes of faciality. Blas responds by suggesting that “the face is now a form of governance, something to be controlled by [...] ‘governmentalities of the face,’ which we now live with on an everyday, global scale.”²⁰² Yet, these Western regimes of faciality make “escaping the face” an unequally distributed privilege. For Deleuze and Guattari, the face is not a universal; the face is an entirely specific idea—“it is White Man himself, with his broad white cheeks and the black hole of his eyes. The face is Christ. The face is the typical European.”²⁰³ Jesus Christ invented the face, or rather, a certain “despotic and authoritarian assemblage of power” triggered an “abstract machine of faciality” that socially produced a Christianized, European, White-Man face. Racism, in the Deleuzian case, operates by “the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face.”²⁰⁴ Against this machine of faciality, Deleuze and Guattari claim that “if human beings

²⁰¹ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Duke University Press, 2014), 23.

²⁰² Blas and Gaboury, “Biometrics and Opacity: A Conversation,” 158.

²⁰³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 176.

²⁰⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 178.

have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine.”²⁰⁵ To escape the face, then, is to dismantle the White Face itself. If the face is a politics, as Deleuze and Guattari further argue, “dismantling the face is also a politics involving real becomings, an entire becoming-clandestine.”²⁰⁶ Defacement does not strictly negate the “face” per se; it instead inverts, rearticulates, even makes silly its seeming transparency with/in the forms of negativity that constitute opacity as a trans* tactic. But can these “real becomings” involve, take on, or lead us into silliness? Can we escape the face by becoming silly—or become silly by escaping the face? Can we *silly* the face—or unmake the face, the *white* face, by making it silly? And what does a clandestine silliness look like?

At the center of my interest in the trans*forms of opacity in this chapter are tactics of silly defacements that see the face as an opaque, modulational, and anti-absorptive surface for play. Through these silly deterritorializations of the face, trans practices of “pattern-jamming,” as Archer suggests, revel in “the genealogical and aesthetic attachments” that carry the potential to “connect the fight for gender self-determination with other liberatory practices and histories, particularly those pitted against colonialism.”²⁰⁷ Thus, I suggest that not only do SOPHIE and Arca take up the silly forms of the glitching, morphing face to specifically challenge the machine of faciality that governs trans* countenance, they also embrace forms of pattern-jamming that work to critically unravel the stability and rationality of the white, cisgender female face as the generic reference for digital imagery (exemplified, for instance, by the “Lena” reference image used for the development of compression-algorithms, now responsible for the development of all digitally disturbed images). This is a line of thought I explore at length in the following chapter.

²⁰⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 171.

²⁰⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 178.

²⁰⁷ Archer, “Dynamic Static,” 312.

While Blas importantly draws attention to the Deleuzian and Guattarian “theory of faciality that invests in flight and deterritorialization,” I argue that a more explicit centering of the trans subject is necessary to continue to move this work on opacity forward.²⁰⁸ A corrective to a focus on queer opacity at the cost of trans opacity, SOPHIE and Arca offer a transqueer update to the account of opacity that arises in a sillied resistance to the abstract machine of faciality. Trans artists like SOPHIE and Arca challenge the face as a regulating function in their unique focus on aesthetics of silliness, irritation, surface play, and the trans*forms of opacity

VII. “On the Edge of Silly and Sad”: Drain Gang and Hyperpop’s Hypermelancholia

There is a soundtrack that plays quietly and constantly to the emergency in my head, the bloody impression left behind in my synapses and serotonin by the worlds claws on me since I was little. It sounds a lot like that SOPHIE song, ‘Pretending.’ I’ve been listening to it all week on repeat, inconsolable. Sometimes I just want to be allowed to laugh instead.

- Jules Gil-Peterson²⁰⁹

I’m just trying to touch the real but it’s plastic, fake / Plastic face, tragic on the way / Only way I make it through the day is, I can’t say

- Bladee, “Waster”

Against popular assumptions that hyperpop is just an aggressively happy, bubbly, and bright subgenre, brandishing a kind of “hyperpoptimism,” this concluding section suggests that hyperpop silliness (as with silliness itself) regularly involves extremely disordered thought and inappropriate emotions, from childlike joy to unpredictable agitation to moments of throbbing sadness.²¹⁰ As trans scholar Jules Gil-Peterson notes in the above epigraph, hyperpop songs like SOPHIE’s “Pretendeing” can feel “inconsolable.” Rather than comforting bad feelings, hyperpop sounds share their resonant frequency. While hyperpop is often written in a major key, giving it its signature energy and lively bounce, much of its lyrical content contrasts sharply in its often-

²⁰⁸ Zach Blas, “Escaping the Face: Biometric Facial Recognition and the Facial Weaponization Suite,” *Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus* 9, no. 2 (2013).

²⁰⁹ Jules Gill-Peterson, “Paranoia as a Trans Style,” *Sad Brown Girl* (blog), February 2, 2021, <https://sadbrowngirl.substack.com/p/paranoia-as-a-trans-style>.

²¹⁰ Press-Reynolds, “The Lost Promises of Hyperpoptimism.”

irritating negativity. “There’s a lot of sad songs, there’s a lot of uptempo songs, but none of them are super happy,” hyperpop musician glaive claims.²¹¹ Depression, dysfunction, dysphoria, and all sorts of other personal problems find their way into most hyperpop songs.

In an attempt to explain this incongruence, Edward Spencer suggests that the “web-based creativity” in hyperpop is “both hilarious and horrifying” as it is “symptomatic of the profound hopelessness and nihilistic demeanour shared by those currently in their late teens, twenties, and thirties.”²¹² This sentiment is captured pithily in trans hyperpop artist fraxiom’s “fly with ü,” where they muse: “I don’t know if I wanna die / Hyperpop playlist Spotify,” a rhyming couplet that conveys “both the despair and post-ironic coping mechanism at the heart of the younger generation’s collective psyche.”²¹³ Hyperpop reminds us of the close proximity of silliness to negativity and the depressive, where silliness does not necessarily exalt in positive excess, exaggeration, or exuberance. Oftentimes, it resides in more minor, recessive, or underperformed forms of emotional display. Hyperpop silliness is just as often expressed in formal simplicity and amusing recessiveness as it is in irritating excesses and defamiliarizing extremes.

One strain of hyperpop typifies this especially well: the music of Stockholm-based collective Drain Gang, known previously as Sad Boys, consisting of artists Bladee (Benjamin Reichwald), Ecco2k (Zak Arogundade Gaterud), Thaiboy Digital (Thanapat Thaothawong), and Yung Lean (Jonatan Aron Leandoer Håstad). Formed in 2013, Drain Gang has since had a massive influence on the post-PC Music hyperpop wave with their cloud rap inflected style, a subgenre of hip-hop known for its relaxed, reverb-heavy production style. Drain Gang is famous for producing dysphoric music with notoriously depressing lyrics rapped over melancholic lofi

²¹¹ Enis, “This Is Hyperpop.”

²¹² Edward Spencer, “On Internet Subcultures & PC Music (Part II): A Reappraisal,” *Birmingham Blogs* (blog), March 14, 2022, <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/digsocmus/2022/03/14/on-internet-subcultures-and-pc-music-part-2/>.

²¹³ Spencer, “On Internet Subcultures & PC Music (Part II): A Reappraisal.”

beats—a sort of hyper-melancholic hyperpop, plumbing myriad shades of sadness—from violent loneliness to ambient anhedonia. Bladee’s album *Spiderr* (2022), for instance, features tracks with such titles as “It’s OK to Not Be OK” and “I Am Slowly but Surely Losing Hope.” Sad, shy, and frequently silly, their songs express a “numb disorientation, but with flutey, fairy-like voices flitting about the mix.”²¹⁴ Echoing Spencer’s description of hyperpop, Kieran Press-Reynolds writes that Drain Gang “has mushroomed into a universe of experimental vocalists and producers who dance on the edge of silly and sad”—it is “a talisman for a strain of alt-pop aesthetics and internet-infused silliness that dominates youth culture nowadays.”²¹⁵ The collective’s conceptualization of “drain” vibes carries multiple valences. Speaking on the meaning of the group’s name, Bladee states: “Drain is about loss and gain; it could be good or bad—you could be drained of energy or you could drain something to gain energy.”²¹⁶

As with most hyperpop, the drain sound is Auto-Tune heavy. Yet, their brand of Auto-Tune distinctly embraces monotonously pitched, flatly affected, and often off-key vocals. As a result, the group’s sound is silly and irritating to many; it confuses as often as it delights, and its merits remain the subject of fierce debate. To outsiders, their music “often sounds like cacophony created by a suicidal robot,” and even Ecco2K has described his music as being akin to “throwing a car battery into a washing machine.”²¹⁷ Although each artist in the group has a distinct sound, their collective discography shares certain qualities, such as “hyper-artificial instrumentation influenced by video game culture and trap; atmospheric reverb that simulates a sensation of depth; vocals smothered in Auto-Tune, and often delivered in falsetto, mumbles,

²¹⁴ Jayson Greene, “The Rise of Dissociation Music,” *Pitchfork*, June 22, 2022, <https://pitchfork.com/features/overtone/the-rise-of-dissociation-music/>.

²¹⁵ Kieran Press-Reynolds, “How the Cult of Drain Gang Rose from Meme to Myth,” *No Bells* (blog), May 27, 2022, <https://nobells.blog/cult-of-drain-gang/>.

²¹⁶ Frankie Dunn, “10 Things You Need to Know about Bladee from Drain Gang,” *i-D Magazine*, May 15, 2018, <https://i-d.vice.com/en/article/xwmzgz/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-bladee>.

²¹⁷ Cassidy George, “Drain Gang,” *032c Magazine*, May 4, 2023, <https://032c.com/magazine/drain-gang>.

whispers, or shrieks; and lyrics that center on the suffering and elation of what it means to be alive and online in the modern world.”²¹⁸ In the best way, drainers are known to sing in a “burnt-out monotone” that “feels empty, even sickened” in its “bored vacancy.”²¹⁹

Draining hyperpop of its shimmering exuberance, Drain Gang music videos are typically visually depleted, dwelling in flat hues and monotone grays. In Anton Tammi’s music video for Ecco2k and Bladee’s “Amygdala” (2022), a foggy club rave is depicted with an extremely desaturated color palette, nearly appearing black-and-white. Bladee leads the song, moaning depressive lyrics like “Valhalla calling, fallin’ forever” in an unaffected tone as Ecco2k joyously bops along, intimately embracing Bladee in a seemingly incongruous display of euphoric vibes and buoyant silliness. Though their faces are often obscured by harsh backlighting, the two stand out against the video’s desaturated monotony in their glittering androgynous presentation, especially Ecco2k, who wears a blush pink dress, blonde wig, lip-gloss, and long acrylics (Figure 2.12). Other videos in the scene take up similar drain aesthetics, like Ecco2k’s “Peroxide” (2020), which depicts the world in a deeply desaturated blandness, and Bladee’s “Decay” (2018), which presents a rarefied rural scene flattened by monotonous overexposure.

The Drain Gang frequently deploy the opacity tactics of desaturation in their music and videos, furthering the hyperpop fascination with ambivalently obfuscating visibility. Faces are often made to be indecipherable. The video for Ecco2k’s “Mirage” (2014) is shot in the style of CCTV surveillance footage, where a facial-recognition target tracks his blurry countenance as he dances and evades its capture. Similarly, in the video for “GT-R” (2017), Ecco2k appears with his face heavily blurred in a foggy haze, drained of all affect (Figure 2.13). Jayson Greene aptly suggests that Drain Gang is driven by an impulse “to obscure meaning, to flatten affect, to don

²¹⁸ George, “Drain Gang.”

²¹⁹ Greene, “The Rise of Dissociation Music.”



Figure 2.12. Stills from the music video for Ecco2k and Bladee’s “Amygdala” (2022).



Figure 2.13. Stills from the videos for Ecco2k’s “Mirage” (2014) and “GT-R” (2017).

expressive masks,” explaining that their “blank detachment” and “dry, dispassionate singing asks you to notice the mask, to ponder that there will always be emotional truths that will be hidden from you.”²²⁰ Or as Bladee moans on a 2018 track: “No face, we use a mask.” With its hyper-melancholic hyperpop, Drain Gang can be said to embrace Mark Fisher’s “party hauntology,” a specific subset of Derridean hauntology in pop music in which uneasiness looms behind a facade of excess and pleasure—“a secret sadness” lurking behind the lush pop songs.²²¹ The underlying sadness that gently irritates and drains pop of its exuberance here dwells in “flatness” and chronic “ongoingness” as opposed to the suddenness of stronger, more major negative affects.²²²

Drain Gang is notable for their ability to articulate a strain of suffering that is ongoing, specific to the internet age, and experienced by many queer, trans, and non-binary netizens. The prevalence of their queer listenership is apparent online, and their trans and nonbinary fans often

²²⁰ Greene, “The Rise of Dissociation Music.”

²²¹ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Zero Books, 2013).

²²² Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3.

express the ways that Drain Gang has helped them to identify their dysphoria and embrace their bad feelings. One redditor asks, “Does anyone else here have gender dysphoria and am I the only one who is helped immensely by drain gang’s music in regards to it?”²²³ Another writes: “damn those ecco lyrics be tickling that gender dysphoria sometimes, s/o to all the trans drainers.”²²⁴ And as the title of one YouTube playlist jokingly claims: “drain gang made me trans.”²²⁵ Ecco2k has himself often alluded in his music to experiencing extreme dysphoria. In one song, singing in a high-pitched voice, he states: “Every time I look in the mirror I feel nauseous / Every time I look in the mirror I see monsters.” Bladee, Ecco2k, and others in the collective evidently remain “idols for a certain sort of queer or femme-leaning listener” who deal with dysphoric feelings.²²⁶

Much like the drain sound, trans* here (as an integral form to hyperpop music) can also be said to be a way of being and knowing that dances on the slippery edge of silly and sad. As Gil-Peterson suggests, “Trans studies is depressing, we all know it,” and trans structures of feeling are frequently coded as negative; yet, trans individuals are discouraged from displaying or admitting to despondency or despair.²²⁷ In recent years, scholars have explored the usefulness of bad feelings and negative affects to studies of transness. As Awkward Rich writes, “the depressed transsexual [is] a position from which to think through living with the lack of trans(masculine)feminist integration, even if it does not feel good.”²²⁸ Any value of a politicized

²²³ “Does Anyone Else Here Have Gender Dysphoria and Am I the Only One Who Is Helped Immensely by Drain Gang’s Music in Regards to It?,” Reddit Post, *R/Sadboys*, December 1, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/sadboys/comments/k4oyf8/does_anyone_else_here_have_gender_dysphoria_and/.

²²⁴ Sooft-And-Wet, “Damn Those Ecco Lyrics Be Tickling That Gender Dysphoria Sometimes, s/o to All the Trans Drainers Im Sure Everyone Can Relate Too,” Reddit Post, *R/Sadboys*, December 3, 2021, www.reddit.com/r/sadboys/comments/r7ufqt/damn_those_ecco_lyrics_be_tickling_that_gender/.

²²⁵ “Drain Gang Made Me Trans,” posted January 13, 2022, by geej pla, Youtube (playlist), <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2QCl-ooJnNPn0rSW6-QkJYZh-nG5ypYp>.

²²⁶ Press-Reynolds, “How the Cult of Drain Gang Rose from Meme to Myth.”

²²⁷ Gill-Peterson, “Paranoia as a Trans Style.”

²²⁸ Cameron Awkward-Rich, “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 4 (2017): 819.

depressive identity requires a different kind of orientation to bad feelings, “an interest in what one might learn or learn to do if the goal is not affirmation premised on feelings like hope and pride.”²²⁹ In order to map the intricate emotional terrain of trans survival, Hil Malatino similarly engages in discussions of trans experience that acknowledge the feelings of “fatigue, numbness, envy, rage, [and] burnout” amid the growing threat of casual and structural transphobia.²³⁰ For Malatino, “flat affect, recession, withdrawal, and numbness circulate as part of an affective commons that informs trans experiences [...] rooted in, and responsive to, the experience of persistent disorientation.”²³¹ Malatino explores how “the hierarchies of authenticity, of trans ‘goodness,’” that regularly circulate in discourses on transness frequently “produce annoyance” in trans subjects, a kind of “low-grade gnawing irritation” that accompanies negative trans affects.²³² Yet, Gil-Peterson also insists on the presencing of the silly feelings fundamental to these negative trans experiences: “What is a more absurdly comedic situation than being trans in the world?,” she asks.²³³ Gil-Peterson’s philosophy of trans silliness-in/as-sadness invites trans persons to dance with life’s weirdness, serving as a powerful tool for resilience and reluctance as it honors the complex, often-incoherent emotions that trans individuals regularly navigate.

Perhaps, then, the claim can be made that *all* hyperpop has a component transness in its investment in silly negativity, in the dysphoric affects of silliness. As these examples suggest, the forms and feelings of transness are deeply integral to the hyperpop music scene as a whole, regardless of the artists’ identifications. And while the drain sound has directly influenced popular hyperpop songs by trans artists, such as quinn and blackwinterwells’s “bad idea” (2020),

²²⁹ Awkward-Rich, “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” 825.

²³⁰ Hil Malatino, *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 13.

²³¹ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 56-7.

²³² Malatino, *Side Affects*, 164.

²³³ Gill-Peterson, “Paranoia as a Trans Style.”

which similarly plays with monotonous vocals and an unaffected tone to display bad feelings, transness has proven to be more universally and deeply integral to hyperpop's form and function.

As this chapter has argued through the case of hyperpop, a more nuanced and detailed attention to transfeminist forms of silliness is needed as the field of trans media studies continues to evolve. I have suggested that silliness arises not just in latent content, but in exterior forms, in surface aesthetics of irritating excess or monotonous flatness deployed as tactics to defamiliarize gendered normativity. In hyperpop songs and music videos, silliness strategically irritates as much as it pleases, oftentimes at the same time, and in intensely confounding, ambiguous ways. The counter-political possibilities of this aesthetic silliness are taken up in the hyperpop scene as an important (though ambivalent) opacity tactic for transness, torquing oppressive demands for hypervisibility and challenging faciality as a transparent window into trans interiorities.

CHAPTER 3

Silliness as Refamiliarization: Or, Forms of Queer Unmaking in Desktop Film and Media

[M]ake the audience scream, make it laugh, make it scream with laughter, make it laugh in terror....stir up the pleasure of pandemonium.

- William Paul¹

In 2008, Google entered the so-called “browser-wars,” launching Google Chrome with a promise to make browsers and the web better.² A year later, Google took its new browser to an unprecedented public level with a series of televised ads (the company’s first ever) that became known as its “search story” (or “search on”) project. In late 2009, Chrome produced its very first “search story” ad, “Parisian Love.” Rather than focus on Chrome’s superior speed, as its past Internet-only ads had done, this 60 second ad, which debuted on the Super Bowl in 2010, tells the story of an American exchange student who falls in love with a woman in Paris, tracking the development of the long-distance romance through the student’s Chrome searches: “study abroad paris france” and “impress a french girl” to “churches in paris” and “how to assemble a crib.” “Parisian Love” proved to be a national tearjerker and is still a major influence on Google’s style of storytelling.³ “If we don’t make you cry, we fail,” notes Lorraine Twohill, Google’s vice president for global marketing; “It’s about emotion, which is bizarre for a tech company.”⁴

Following the success of “Parisian Love,” Google launched a another campaign dubbed “the web is what you make of it,” an expanded version of the “search on” project, developed in cooperation with ad agency BBH (Bartle Bogle Hegarty) New York. Google released two ads in early May 2011 for this campaign (for the then 3-year-old browser). The first was another tear-

¹ William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 65.

² “The story behind Google Chrome,” posted August 26, 2008, by Google, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGmO7Oximw8>.

³ Ad Age called it “one of the best campaigns of the 21st century,” and Time Magazine put it on its list of the 19 Best Super Bowl Ads of All Time.”

⁴ Claire Cain Miller, “Google’s Ad Campaign Uses Emotions, Not Search Terms,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/02/technology/google-hones-its-advertising-message-playing-to-emotions.html>.

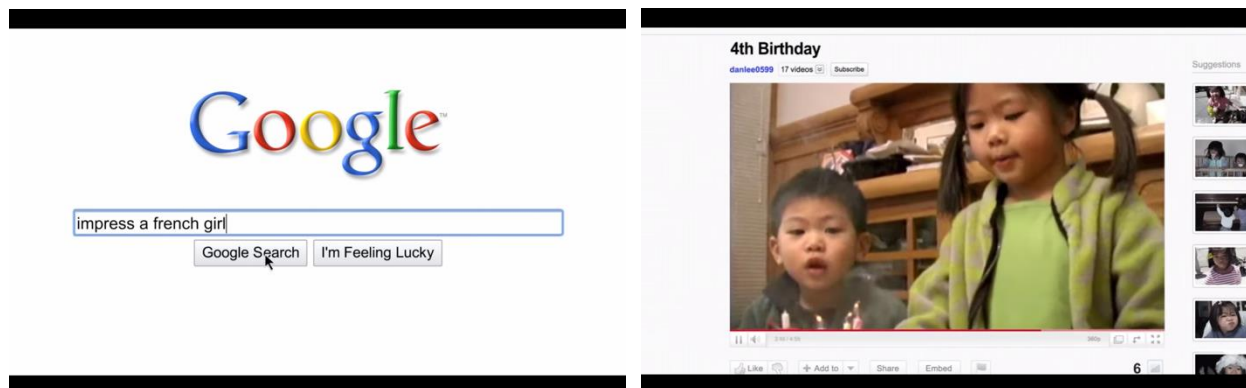


Figure 3.1. Stills from 2011 Google Chrome ads “Parisian Love” and “Dear Sophie.”

inducing “search story” titled “Dear Sophie.”⁵ This time, it was about a father’s love for his daughter, and the digital scrapbook he kept about her life using Gmail, YouTube, Picasa, Google Maps, and more, highlighting silly memories like “Giggles.mov” (Figure 3.1). “Dear Sophie” was a massive success and was named the “#1 Commercial Of The Year” by *Time Magazine*. At the same time, Chrome produced another televised commercial ad, which first ran during the Fox TV show *Glee*, for the nascent “It Gets Better” (IGB) campaign, author Dan Savage’s viral online project made in response to the increasing visibility of gay youth suicides in the 2010s. Adopting the same screen-based form as its hetero-lifeloggging predecessors, Chrome’s viral IGB ad uses the desktop and browser to tell yet another highly emotional, processual “search story,” one that reassures queers that there is in fact a “better future” instore—that the then-new browser could singularly make queer lives better, even save lives, by connecting queers online.

This chapter begins with a reading of the aesthetic and affective registers through which the IGB narrative of “it gets better” for queer lives and Chrome’s mission of “making the web better” were jointly disseminated in the “search story” format of the IGB Chrome ad, one of the

⁵ While the emails are addressed to “Sophie,” and the father-user refers to her in the 2nd person, it was actually against Google’s Terms of Service to create a Google account for your child, or anyone who is not over thirteen years old. See: Alexia Tsotsis, “Attention ‘Dear Sophie’-Inspired Parents, You Can’t Actually Create A Google Account For Your Kid,” *TechCrunch*, May 10, 2011, <https://techcrunch.com/2011/05/09/attention-dear-sophie-inspired-parents-you-cant-actually-create-a-google-account-for-your-kid/>.

then-most viewed and widely disseminated videos for both the IGB project and Chrome's early ad campaign.⁶ In this, I look at how Google Chrome's "search stories" popularized a new formal, computational, and, indeed, affective language in the digital media landscape, paving the way for the 2010s upsurge of so-called "screenlife cinema," also known as "desktop cinema," a mode of media-making that aims to continuously capture the hypermediated desktop interface through (often real-time) screen-captured performance.⁷ These films take place entirely on a computer screen, seamlessly streaming the protagonist-user's clicks, typing, and cursor movements.

Some key examples include early shorts like Adam Butcher's *Internet Story* (2010), Joe Swanberg's *The Sick Thing That Happened to Emily When She Was Younger* segment from *V/H/S* (2012), and Patrick Cederberg and Walter Woodman's *Noah* (2013). More well-known feature films include Zachary Donohue's *The Den* (2014), Nacho Vigalondo's *Open Windows* (2014), Levan Gabriadze's *Unfriended* (2014), Stephen Susco's sequel *Unfriended: Dark Web* (2018), Aneesh Chaganty's *Searching* (2018), Timur Bekmambetov's *Profile* (2018), Rob Savage Zoom-film *Host* (2020), Will Merrick and Nicholas D. Johnson's *Missing* (2023), and more. Other important examples include short video art works like Camille Henrot's *Grosse Fatigue* (2013), "desktop documentaries" like Kevin B. Lee's *Transformers: The Premake* (2014), and the "expanded cinema performance" of Zia Anger's *My First Film* (2018).

Taking a close look at this very specific historical moment, which saw the co-emergence of Google Chrome, IGB, and screenlife cinema, this chapter explores the unexpected queer history of desktop media in the 2010s. I turn to the very direct, and confrontationally silly, reworking of and response to Chrome's IGB "search story" ad in Levan Gabriadze's popular

⁶ On their website, BBH even boasts that the Chrome IGB ad was "the first openly LGBTQ spot to run on network TV." See: "Google Chrome: The Web Is What You Make Of It," Working Not Working, <https://workingnotworking.com/projects/6763-google-chrome-the-web-is-what-you-make-of-it>.

⁷ "Screenlife" is a term coined by Timur Bekmambetov specifically for *Unfriended*, which he produced.

desktop horror flick *Unfriended* (2014) and its own accompanying ad campaign, which both monetize on the then-novel desktop forms of Google Chrome in tandem with the affective discourses of youth sexuality, cyber-bullying, and the media-sensationalized gay youth suicides of the 2010s cultural moment. *Unfriended*, I argue, works to refamiliarize its audience with the homonormative silliness embedded in the neoliberal and techno-utopic promises of the Google Chrome and “It Gets Better” alliance. *Unfriended* concerns a group of high school classmates haunted by way of a mysterious, uninvited Skype presence, a ghost in the machine motivated, we come to understand, by a desire to exact vengeance on the kids for their role in shaming and bullying her into suicide. “When we started working on this movie [in 2012], cyberbullying was a huge problem,” claims *Unfriended* screenwriter Nelson Greaves; “Now, the problem’s only gotten worse, and people still have no idea what to do about it.”⁸ Written in 2012, the film premiered in 2014 and gained theatrical release in 2015, ultimately becoming a box office success (with over \$64 million in worldwide gross against a budget of less than \$1 million).

To date, the limited (but growing) scholarship on *Unfriended* (and other desktop films) not only ignores its deep embeddedness in this recent queer history but also tends to entirely disregard the integral and overwhelming silliness of the film, instead working hard to recuperate a “silly object” into serious discourse. As a result, the scholarship on desktop media (and desktop horror more specifically) has largely focused on these films’ use of digital interfaces in terms of their affect, particularly on the user as *anxious* digital subject, and its self-reflexive possibilities. Yet, anxiety is only one of the many (formal) affects—negative or otherwise—that the film employs. This chapter seeks to reintroduce silliness into the conversation—as another (if not more) central aesthetic and affect films like *Unfriended* exploit, produce, and induce.

⁸ Lauren Le Vine, “Unfriended Is Your Worst Digital Nightmare Come To Life,” *Refinery29*, April 17, 2015, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2015/04/85830/unfriended-movie-review>.

To do so, I look at a number of unanswered questions: What are we to make of the silliness of the desktop gimmick, that is, of watching the banalities of a laptop screen blown up to the grandeur of the big screen? Or what of the film's "silly histrionics and gore effects," as one critic writes?⁹ Of the goofy and grotesque ridiculousness of the scenes where the unlikable white teen characters die off in "increasingly silly, confounding ways," as another critic writes, compelled to violently commit suicide by a faceless Skype avatar—forcing one character's face into a salsa-filled blender, shoving a searing hot curling iron down another character's throat, making yet another overdose on bleach, and so on?¹⁰ As one review explains: "*Unfriended* may not sit well with audiences expecting a thoughtful, serious horror film. However, those up for loads of laughs and several gruelingly morbid moments will be genuinely pleased."¹¹ But why does the film produce as many giggles and laughs as it does fear and anxiety, and how does it get away with creating "a techno-ghost with a sense of humor," unintentionally allowing for some of the "movie's funniest scenes"?¹² This is a horror film about teen suicide that is viewed as being *so* "bafflingly silly," even at a time when cyberbullying and teen suicide was making national headlines.¹³ Countless other critical reactions to the film claim that "'Unfriended' is a very silly film. 'Unfriended' is also a very clever film. For a very silly film."¹⁴ How is it that, as another critic writes, "'Unfriended' may be the most cleverly made silly movie of all time"?¹⁵ That it is a

⁹ D. A. Zapata, "Movie Review: *Unfriended*," *HBO Watch*, January 16, 2016, <https://hbowatch.com/movie-review-unfriended/>.

¹⁰ Mark Dujsik, "Unfriended," *Roger Ebert*, April 17, 2015, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/unfriended-2015>.

¹¹ Zapata, "Movie Review: *Unfriended*."

¹² Dujsik, "Unfriended."

¹³ Tim Brayton, "Unfriended (2014) - Movie Review," *Alternate Ending*, April 22, 2015, <https://www.alternateending.com/2015/04/bully-pulpit.html>.

¹⁴ Drew McWeeny, "'Unfriended' Uses New Social Media Language for Familiar Ghost Story," *UPROXX*, April 13, 2015, <https://uproxx.com/hitfix/review-unfriended-uses-new-social-media-language-for-familiar-ghost-story/>.

¹⁵ Alison Willmore, "The First Movie To Get Cyberbullying Right," *BuzzFeed*, April 17, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonwillmore/it-took-a-horror-movie-to-get-cyberbullying-right-on-screen>.

“surprisingly clever film” with a “silly premise”? (And yet, for others, *Unfriended* is not silly nor scary *enough*—“neither as silly as it might look nor as terrifying as its...set-up promises.”¹⁶)

While worth unpacking, this chapter does not venture to answer all these questions. There has been much written about the relationship between horror and comedy, violence and pleasure. And while the relationship between horror and silliness specifically remains underexplored, the vast consensus is that *Unfriended* is, without a doubt, a very silly horror film. The problem that lingers, then, is why *Unfriended* is such a *cleverly* silly horror film, and what makes it “silly” in spite of (or perhaps because of) its “astounding” formal techniques.¹⁷ I further this, asking what makes such a “clever silliness” distinctly political, urgent, and of the moment, leading to another thought that is overlooked in this scholarship—namely, the role that questions of difference play in the discursive construction of screenlife’s technology narratives.

In this chapter, I query *Unfriended* as a film that deploys its silly forms and feelings to respond to the specific construction and performance of race, gender, and sexuality online in the early 2010s, asking what this renewed focus does to the reading of the screenlife format and the bodies that inhabit it. This chapter works toward formulating an address of the complex roles that racialized gender and sexuality play in and through the silliness of desktop, screenlife narratives of the 2010s (through the specific example of *Unfriended* and its response to the Google Chrome IGB “search story” ad campaign). If the IGB Chrome campaign sees “queerness as a useful technological apparatus,” such that “It Gets Better” makes the web better, *Unfriended* begins to alternatively mobilize it “as part of a critical practice of unmaking,” where queerness takes shape

¹⁶ Alonso Duralde, “‘Unfriended’ Review: Cyberbullying Teens Haunted by the Facebook of the Dead,” *TheWrap*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.thewrap.com/unfriended-review-cyberbullying-youtube-horror-timur-bekmambetov/>.

¹⁷ Mike D’Angelo, “‘Unfriended’ and the Shifting Definition of a Film Director,” *Oscilloscope*, October 14, 2015, https://assets.tumblr.com/analytics.html?_v=9f5febfd57a8a649c598d888f2d9e062#https://musings.oscilloscope.net.

as a *critically silly unmaking*—making the web sillier, not better.¹⁸ Thinking with forms of “making silly” instead of “making better,” a queer silliness that un-“makes better,” I read with queerness as a *refamiliarizing* force that exploits the silly glitches, failures, and misuses of technology in the 2010s archive of desktop horror media—particularly in *Unfriended*, which playfully cannibalizes and rearticulates the neoliberal forms and feelings of the IGB ad.

The potentialities of desktop media, however, are often mis/understood in terms of their purely “defamiliarizing” experiments. For “desktop documentarians” Chloé Galibert-Lainé and Kevin B. Lee, the desktop mode of making mines “the expressive potential of the desktop as both a canvas that presents online experiences and a camera that moves within it,” offering “strategies for [audiences] to distantiate themselves from the media they consume and produce every day” and thus “change the nature of their gazes on their screens.”¹⁹ To “creatively reinvent the space of the desktop,” they add, is to “disrupt the normative online interfaces designed to keep the user at ease.”²⁰ *Unfriended* screenwriter Nelson Greaves reiterates the defamiliarizing hopes of desktop media, suggesting that “the scariest moment happens two hours after the movie when you come home and you sign onto your computer [...] You look at your computer, and you say, ‘Wait a second, this thing is never going to be the same again.’”²¹

In my reading of *Unfriended*, however, I argue that silliness performs a different kind of queer technics, a method of making silly but not quite strange, playing with the all-too-familiar silliness, awkwardness, and discomfort of the desktop experience without pure alienation, estrangement, or distancing—a kind of oddly enchanting *sillyfication*, rendering silly our

¹⁸ Jacob Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities* (Routledge, 2018), 490.

¹⁹ Kevin B. Lee and Chloé Galibert-Lainé, “Troubling the Desktop,” *Filmmaker Magazine*, March 14, 2019, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107208-troubling-the-desktop/>.

²⁰ Lee and Galibert-Lainé, “Troubling the Desktop.”

²¹ Le Vine, “Unfriended Is Your Worst Digital Nightmare Come To Life.”

fantasies of having control over things in the digital world. In doing so, the film plays with the overly familiar ecologies of sensation that characterize our interactions with computational interfaces, where the uncanny magnifications of typing pauses, buffering videos, and glitching faces render this digital-ordinariness silly, a bit absurd, and uncomfortably familiar and relatable.

The (desktop) gimmick, to borrow Sianne Ngai's words, is then "not so much defamiliarization as a kind of funnily irritating refamiliarization, constantly surprising us with things we already roughly expect," significantly telling "a story about the *standardization*, not the innovation, of a capitalist technology."²² I argue that *Unfriended* uses its silliness as a "funnily irritating" tactic of refamiliarization tied to this new desktop mode of making, a kind of *silly refamiliarization*, or (in Miriam De Rosa's words) "a way of framing reality that is developed by way of continued re-contextualizations and re-semanticizations."²³ This is a process led by the familiar and made embarrassingly more and more familiar in and through its embrace of silliness and closeness over strangeness and distance. Silliness, in a sense, is the "*ambivalent judgment*" tied to the (desktop) gimmick's "*compromised form*," an "irritating yet strangely attractive" aesthetic category in which "the funnily unfunny, all-too contemporaneously noncontemporaneous"—i.e. the not-so-new "new" problem of young queer suicide—comes to serve as "an inadvertent mise en abyme."²⁴ Such silly refamiliarizations allow the viewer-user to see familiar, everyday interfaces as a playground, beyond simple functionality, precisely because of their familiarity—through their "sameness" and not their "strangeness."

²² Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 70.

²³ Miriam De Rosa, "Digital Premonitions: Curatorial Notes on Post-Internet Aesthetics," *Apoteka* (2017): 75.

²⁴ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 1.

If the desktop gimmick, as Ngai writes, is a “form we perceive, a way of seeing,” in *Unfriended* it also becomes “a way of speaking.”²⁵ Importantly for this chapter, the desktop format (as a processual mode of making) is regarded as “an exemplary site for viewing and reflecting upon the labor of producing thought,” as Kevin B. Lee and Ariel Avissar argue.²⁶ One way that this chapter understands the role of silliness in this format is as a rendering-visible of thought processes that often appear messy, trivial, and deeply human, refamiliarizing viewers with the small, silly, and nervous glitches of human thought online. I offer *Unfriended* as a critically queer counterexample to the neoliberal homonormativity of the IGB Chrome ad and its confident, euphoric exteriorizations of the interior mind of Dan Savage, a white Western (gay) male subject who makes history and decides to live the better life. I read with silliness as a kind of nervous nonsovereignty in *Unfriended*, a fidgety, jittery, and uncertain interiority, which often appears exteriorly foolish, lacking any clear motivation or common sense—a feeling of thoughtlessness driven by overthinking. While *Unfriended* also prominently orients the generic spectator’s haptic perception through its privileged white teen protagonist, the film gleefully moves away from the Chrome IGB ad’s unproblematic valorization of Savage’s self-assured interiority towards a much more anxious one—one driven by the silliness and glitchiness of human thought, exteriorized through pauses, lags, and long hesitations.

Still considered a trivial gimmick, the desktop mode has always been a bastion of the silly and trivial in digital media, with one of the earliest, popular proto-examples being the animated kids show *Dora the Explorer* (2000), which takes place on the imagined child-user’s computer screen. Before screenlife media, the desktop gimmick was associated with the triviality

²⁵ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 1.

²⁶ Kevin B. Lee and Ariel Avissar, “Desktop Documentary as Scholarly Subjectivity: Five Approaches,” *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (2023): 278.

of screen-capture and screen-casting practices like gameplay recordings, software tutorials, “how-to” videos, and PowerPoint presentations, the didactic childishness of shows like *Dora*, the innocuous cuteness of ads like “Parisian Love” and “Dear Sophie,” the cloying sentimentalism of ads like “It Gets Better,” and so on. As a pivotal and popular work of desktop media, *Unfriended* embraces its entanglement with these supposedly “artless” and “low” media forms.

While mediated silliness is pervasive in our digital cultures, media studies has largely glossed over the role of technology in the processes of “making” silliness and the role of silliness in “un/making” technology. Drawing a clear connection between the *digital*, the *queer*, and the *silly*, this chapter follows Jason Boyd and Bo Ruberg who argue that the work of the “queer digital humanities” is to provide “a mode of thinking that is intentionally audacious, strange, and even silly,” jibing with queerness by “making meaning messy” and valuing “the experimental, the playful, the failure, the glitch, the unfinishable, the breaching of disciplinary silos, and the disruption of reified standards of what counts as ‘real’ scholarship.”²⁷ Queer’s intervention into digital discourse rests on the nexus of the *silly* and the *glitch*—a mode of playfully thinking with and through (the familiarity of) breakdown and malfunction. Transqueerying the glitch beyond its associations with anxious affects or rebellious forms allows for the reintroduction of more ambiguous silly affects attached to the glitch as an intentional or accidental computational goof.

Working at these precarious intersections, this chapter’s argument moves in three parts. First, I track the development and convergence of the Google Chrome browser and the “It Gets Better” campaign, focusing on the specific cultural moment of the late 2000s and early 2010s, which saw the rise of the social media age and concerns about cyberbullying, teen sexuality, and youth suicide. I work within this key, transitional moment in the history of the internet, turning

²⁷ Jason Boyd and Bo Ruberg, “Queer Digital Humanities,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Digital Humanities*, ed. James O’Sullivan (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 64.

also to early (now problematized) theorizations of the “radical” possibilities of a “postracial” neutrality online that gained prominence prior to the Web 2.0 era of social media. I offer a close reading of the IGB ad and its racialized use of the desktop mode, which I argue valorizes the privileged interiority of its white Western male user, a “neutral” stand-in for all queers. In the next section, I draw connections between the forms and feelings of the IGB ad and *Unfriended*, arguing that the horror film deploys a queer computational practice of “critical unmaking” in its decidedly silly response to the born-digital “It Gets Better” cultural moment, which also saw the rise of Google’s browser-based, “search-story” desktop mode of making. Turning to theories of the nonsovereign in digital media, I then look at silliness via exteriorizations of the protagonist-user’s “glitchy” interior thoughts in the desktop format, one of the film’s key interventions into the prior ad’s focus on sovereign-style techno-savviness. The final section expands on the role of race and whiteness in the dialogue between the IGB ad and *Unfriended*. Playing with the stable whiteness of the blank Skype avatar in juxtaposition to the glitching faces of the white teens, *Unfriended* produces silly “glitches” in the white social body’s reproductive wholeness and the technologies that historically re/produce it. Overall, this chapter argues that desktop (horror) media like *Unfriended* carry the quiet potential to queerly exploit, refamiliarize, and centrally “make silly”—via glitches, gimmicks, and gore—our everyday encounters with the underlying structures, standards, and processes of computational media, refamiliarizing viewers with the complex technical and cultural mechanisms by which media are created, disseminated, and used.

I. “It Gets Better” Makes the Web Better?

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspects of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show; you wonder why he is alive.

- Albert Camus²⁸

²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Vintage Books, 2018 [1942]), 15.

In a YouTube video on the Chrome channel from late 2008 titled “The story behind Google Chrome,” the development team behind Chrome describes the thinking and features of the newly released web browser. One member of the team announces at the video’s outset that “browsers need to get better,” proceeding to explain why the improvement of “speed, stability, and security” are key to doing so, while another concludes the video, asserting that “we want to push browsers further, we want to make the capabilities better...as long as it makes the web better, we’ve achieved our goal.”²⁹ Chrome’s mission to ensuring a secure, stable, and fast digital future, “making the web better,” is presented through the company’s primary intervention into the so-called “browser-wars” of the late-aughts: providing a community-driven, “fully open-source browser” whereby “the code is yours.”³⁰ Chrome’s “search story” project integrates this community-centered mission to “make the web better” with its ads’ intentions to “make Google products more attractive, intuitive and integrated with one another.”³¹ Its first three major commercial ads epitomize its purported mission of making the web better by putting the code in our hands. The “It Gets Better” Chrome ad is a particularly salient example of the aesthetic and affective goals of the “web is what you make of it” project, which, as Twohill reiterates, was “essentially a brand campaign about people using the web to make their lives better.”³² The ad heeds this call by placing the “code” to “making better” squarely in the hands of queer lives.

This chapter turns to “silliness” as a queer tactic of “critical unmaking” by first looking at that which *Unfriended*’s silly tactics work to “unmake”—the debilitating politics and “search

²⁹ “The story behind Google Chrome.”; Some of Google’s earliest online-only ads emphasized a very trivial sense of “making better,” with titles like “Google helped me cut a pineapple” and “Google helped me remove a rattlesnake.”

³⁰ “The story behind Google Chrome.”; Chrome’s freeware was formed using the open-source browser Chromium. “The web is what you make of it. What would you make?” asked Chrome’s YouTube page at the time. Google even created a “Google Search Story Video Creator” that allowed users to create their own browser-based search story.

³¹ Claire Cain Miller, “Google Bases a Campaign on Emotions, Not Terms.”

³² Jeff Beer, “How ‘Scrappy’ Google Won Cannes Lions’ Creative Marketer of the Year,” *Fast Company*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40589271/how-scrappy-google-won-cannes-lions-creative-marketer-of-the-year/>.

story” form of the Chrome IGB ad. To do so, I offer a close and critical reading of the ad’s desktop *mise-en-scène* and techno-utopic investments in futural hope and success, which work in tandem to expose the underlying racial logics that the silly in *Unfriended* works to undermine. The horror film ultimately answers the question “what would you make of the web?” in the negative, suggesting that the web is (or ought to be) what you critically *un*-make of it.

The It Gets Better Project was first launched in September 2010 by author Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller, who posted a video on Google-owned YouTube to help inspire hope for young queers facing harassment.³³ The Chrome ad, which first ran during an episode of *Glee*, a Fox TV show known for its LGBT+ representations, spotlights IGB as an example of the power of the web and the capabilities of the browser to (supposedly) make life “better” for queers. It compiles some of the many videos of support recorded for gay and bullied youth, with a range of everyday people, celebrities like Anne Hathaway, political figures like Barack Obama, and even fictional characters like Woody from *Toy Story* lending their voice to the campaign.³⁴ The “brilliance of the project,” writes critic Chris Burns, “lies not in the fact that Dan Savage’s idea blossomed, but in that now Google appears to have helped in some great way.”³⁵

While some, like Jack Halberstam, have recognized the ad’s schmaltzy, gallant, and ineffectual ventures at repair, slamming its silly “self-indulgence” in “touchy-feely” affects and deployment of condescendingly “cute videos,” many others found it emotionally resonant.³⁶ As

³³ IGB was founded in response to the suicides of Billy Lucas, Justin Aaberg, and other gay teenagers bullied into committing suicide, such as with Raymond Chase, Tyler Clementi, Ryan Halligan, Asher Brown, and Seth Walsh.

³⁴ The ad was even awarded a 2011 GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Amplifier Award for “Outstanding TV Campaign—Mainstream Market.” And later in May 2011, Google continued demonstrating Chrome’s affinity for making queer lives better, releasing another “search story”-style ad showing musician Lady Gaga’s power as a worldwide phenomenon put to good use. It exhibits clips of YouTube videos and tweets of fans embracing their uniqueness and “inner monsters,” stressing her belief that each fan was “born this way.”

³⁵ Chris Burns, “Google Chrome Promoted With Dan Savage’s It Gets Better Project,” *SlashGear*, May 4, 2011, <https://www.slashgear.com/google-chrome-promoted-with-dan-savages-it-gets-better-project-04150018/>.

³⁶ Jack Halberstam, “It Gets Worse...,” *Social Text Online*, November 20, 2010, https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/it_gets_worse/.

media outlets continued to bring greater awareness of IGB to viewer-users worldwide, Savage and Miller faced several technical hurdles concerning storage capacity for their IGB YouTube channel. Within just two weeks of its launch, “the IGB YouTube channel exceeded the Google-defined storage capacity of 650 videos, and no more videos could be posted.”³⁷ For the first time in the company’s history, YouTube altered their database to allow Savage to add more videos to the channel without fully knowing what the consequences would be. Queer-identified YouTube engineer Carol Chen who was “personally supportive of the IGBP and believed it would save lives, had the ability to alter YouTube’s database to allow more videos in the IGBP channel.”³⁸ Chen wrote and tested new code specifically for the bottleneck IGB was experiencing, allotting them more storage capacity by “backdating” Savage’s YouTube channel from 2010 to 2004.

In her attempt to decode the underlying prescription of the IGB Chrome campaign, Jasbir Puar claims that “Google Chrome manages to transact a savvy linkage to political activism without doing anything but more of what it does.”³⁹ While Puar notes that “[It Gets Better] has also become the mantra for Google’s own advertising of its media platforms” and that the Chrome IGB commercial “marshals IGB to exhibit the utility of Google Chrome,” Puar’s analysis neglects to consider the YouTube databases that were in fact altered (i.e. “made better”) to improve the capacity for IGB to counter messages of queer debility online using Google properties (while nonetheless trafficking in debilitating discourses for those who cannot and do not share Savage and Miller’s racial and cultural privileges).⁴⁰ Google-owned YouTube risked altering its systems to make the web “better” for “It Gets Better,” quite literally increasing its

³⁷ Laurie Honda, “‘It Was A Matter of Life and Death’: A YouTube Engineer’s Decision to Alter Data in the ‘It Gets Better Project’,” *Data&Society* (2016): 6.

³⁸ Honda, “‘It Was A Matter of Life and Death,’” 1.

³⁹ For example, in late 2013, Queerty.com noticed that Google’s autocomplete came up with very disturbing suggestions, such as “Gays should—be killed, die, not adopt” and “Gays need to—be put to death, stop whining, and shut up.” See; Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

⁴⁰ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 10.

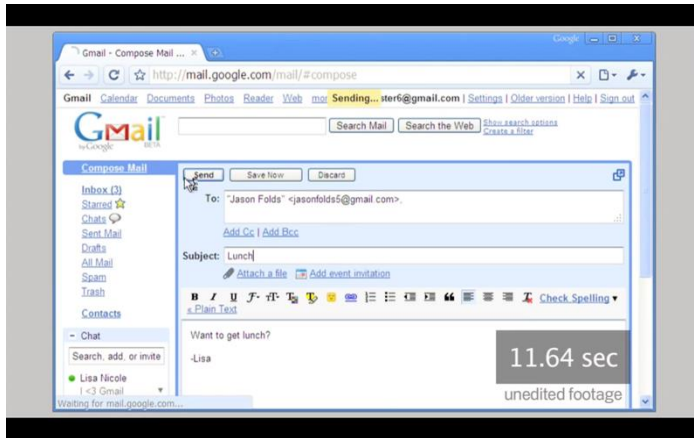


Figure 3.2. “Gmail in 30 seconds,” one of Google’s internet-only ads.

capacity to exist online. Chrome’s IGB ad is implicated in this discourse of techno-triumphalist activism. While I agree with Puar’s broader understanding of the ad’s message as a “mandate to fold oneself into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves” and “a call to upward

mobility,” what is missing in Puar’s reading of the “It Gets Better” Chrome campaign is a more nuanced reading with the formal, haptic, and computational registers of the “search story” format as a new commercial medium through which Savage’s narrative of “it gets better” for queer lives and Google’s mission of “mak[ing] the web better” (for queer lives) were jointly disseminated.⁴¹

In response, I focus specifically on the form of the IGB ad for the Chrome browser, one of the most viewed and widely disseminated videos for both IGB and Google’s ad campaigns. Unlike Google’s past Internet-only ads that unfold in a continuous view of one computer screen (to highlight its superior speed in real-time), the new “search story” ad format is edited to resemble media not bound to computer screens, cutting to closeups of cursor movements, tab selections, and open windows (Figure 3.2). In particular, the IGB Chrome “search story” shows the traces of a user (Dan Savage) using Chrome’s toolbar and YouTube to record and upload videos for the “It Gets Better Project” to help gay teenagers who fear bullying.⁴²

Consider, for instance, the opening of the Chrome IGB ad, which focalizes the haptic point-of-view of Savage and (a reenactment of) his first IGB video upload to YouTube (Figure

⁴¹ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 7.

⁴² “Gmail in 30 seconds,” posted February 24, 2009, by Google Chrome, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol3EI10ZiUc>.

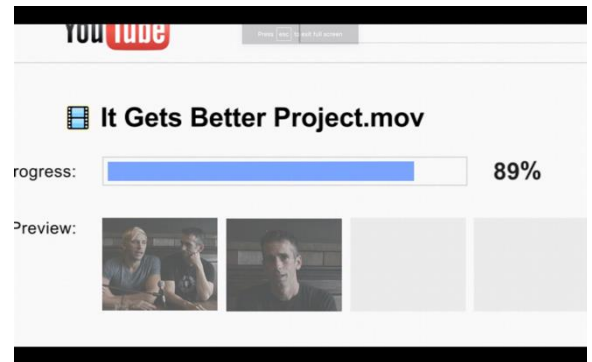
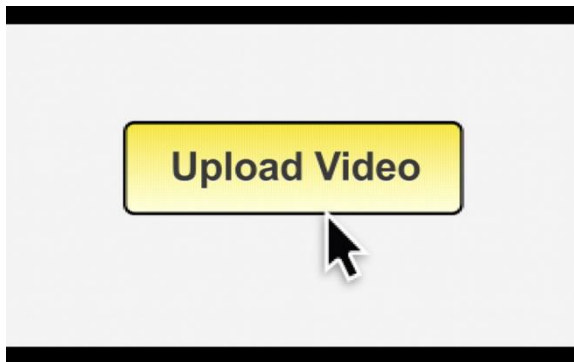
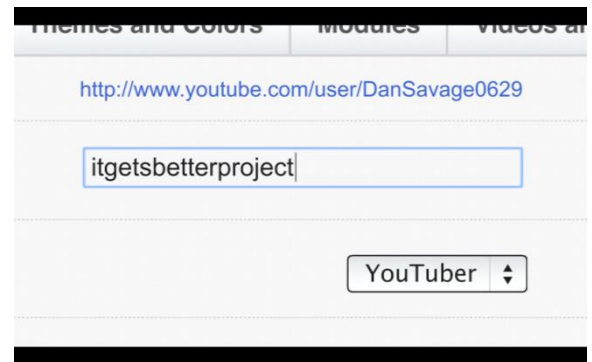
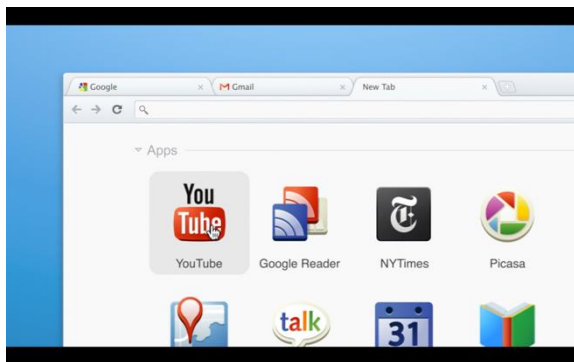
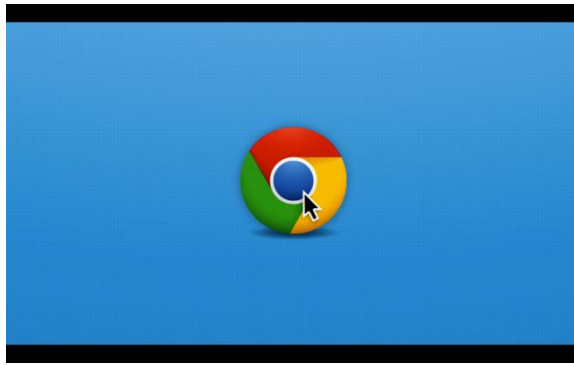


Figure 3.3. Stills from Google Chrome’s “It Gets Better” search story ad.

3.3). The ad first opens with a moving cursor that clicks on the Chrome icon in an extreme close-up, then cutting to close-ups of a number of online articles about the “epidemic” of gay youth suicides, staged here as a direct “inspiration” for Savage’s first video. The ad proceeds to a clip from Savage’s first video. As the audio from the video continues, the ad cuts to a shot of a moving cursor opening a new tab in Chrome and then tracking over and clicking on the YouTube icon. The cursor movements are swift and confident, moving and clicking without hesitation or much thought. A close-up shot now shows YouTube user “DanSavage0629” naming his channel,

“itgetsbetterproject,” and uploading his first video, as the following shot shows a close-up of the upload icon clicked on by his cursor. The next shot sees the progress bar fill as the video is uploaded, and finally the ad cuts to the uploaded video playing on YouTube. In this short (roughly 20 second) montage from the opening of the Chrome IGB ad, the viewer is focalized through the haptic point-of-view of Savage’s first video upload to YouTube.

Savage’s haptic perception in the Chrome IGB ad evokes media theorist Mark Hansen’s claim, only two years prior, that new media art “renders perspective as process and maps it onto the body as a site of a variant haptic point of view...[N]ew media art configures the body as a haptic field.”⁴³ Vision, for Hansen, is a figuration of embodied process, rather than an abstract power that informs it: vision is a technological extension of the medium of embodiment. In this view, Hansen works against philosophers who mistakenly collapse “radical material exteriority into a merely relative exteriority paradoxically situated *within* the domain of thought,” as Tim Lenoir explains.⁴⁴ Instead, “technicity,” or the human-technology relationship, is understood by Hansen to be “a relation to exteriority, as exteriorization.”⁴⁵ Hansen elaborates:

For if vision does mark a massive expansion of exteriorization, we must remember that it does so not by breaking with touch, but rather by extending touch beyond the boundary of the skin. [...] [T]he human is, from its origin, embodied *and* technical; the proto-origin of tactility and vision is the *écart*, the hinge or gap in which embodiment is conjoined with technicity, interiority with exteriorization.⁴⁶

Hansen’s posthuman perspective recognizes both the radical exteriority of technology and the centrality of embodiment, conceptualizing contemporary technologies as extensions of the skin.⁴⁷

This involves a shift in human experience from a predominantly visual mode of perception to a

⁴³ Mark Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (The MIT Press, 2004), 121-122.

⁴⁴ Tim Lenoir, “Foreword: Haptic Vision: Computation, Media, and Embodiment in Mark Hansen’s *New Phenomenology*,” in *New Philosophy for New Media*, by Mark Hansen (The MIT Press, 2004), xix.

⁴⁵ Mark Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (Routledge, 2006), ix.

⁴⁶ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 79.

⁴⁷ This is, what David Cecchetto calls, an “affective topology of the senses.” See: David Cecchetto, “Deconstructing Affect: Posthumanism and Mark Hansen’s Media Theory,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 5 (2011): 3.

“properly bodily register of affectivity” where vision is no longer dominant but functions as a trigger for “a nonvisual haptic apprehension.”⁴⁸ Digital media art manifests this radically exterior domain of sensibility, where visuality is reconfigured through more visceral, bodily elements.

For instance, in desktop media art, thought processes become visible through the (hidden) user’s movement of the cursor, an extension of their touch and vision. Expanding on this view, existing scholarship on desktop media art bears a recurring interest in what Lee and Galibert-Lainé have called “desktop subjectivity,” or the unique form of first-person point-of-view that results from suturing the spectator’s gaze to the protagonist-user’s desktop.⁴⁹ (Camille Henrot, for example, calls her performance in her 2013 desktop video work *Grosse fatigue* an “intuitive unfolding of knowledge.”⁵⁰) Elaborating on this idea that the desktop genre allows for a “causally (and also casually) unfolding performance of a train of thought on the desktop screen,” Miklós Kiss proposes different modes of desktop subjectivity that mobilize such qualities as “transparency,” “credibility,” “effortlessness,” and “performativity” native to desktop-based interactions (and their presumably direct presentation of the user’s screen).⁵¹

Unfriended producer Timur Bekmambetov emphasizes that the “screenlife” movie (his term for the genre) uniquely allows for the exploration of a character’s “psyche” online, noting:

Screenlife works because [...] [w]e instinctively understand the meaning of everything on screen, and not just in terms of icons and terminology. A computer screen represents a character’s subjective point of view, as well as their inner thoughts. The manner in which people move a mouse, or type, or arrange their desktop, or use apps, speaks volumes to a person’s psyche. When somebody’s typing, we’re literally seeing them form thoughts in real-time—including editing or even censoring themselves. As a result, Screenlife films can be extraordinarily intimate experiences.⁵²

⁴⁸ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 209.

⁴⁹ Lee and Galibert-Lainé, “Troubling the Desktop.”

⁵⁰ “Camille Henrot. *Grosse Fatigue*. 2013.,” *The Museum of Modern Art*, 2013, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/175938>.

⁵¹ Miklós Kiss, “Desktop Documentary: From Artefact to Artist(Ic) Emotions,” *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 10, no. 1 (2021), 108.

⁵² Andrew Todd, “Why The Time Is Right For ‘Screenlife’ Movies Like ‘Searching’ And ‘Unfriended,’” *SlashFilm*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.slashfilm.com/560609/screenlife-movies-and-the-future/>.

Bekmambetov describes the screen as a body onto which the identity and interiority of the user is ascribed, enacted through the (hesitant) performative gestures (e.g. clicking, typing, dragging) of navigating websites and applications on a computer interface. Desktop films, then, can be read in terms of how they draw attention to the relationship between the body and the interface, evincing (for Hansen) an “‘originary’ coupling of the human and the technical” that grounds experience as such.⁵³ This is a technicity that the viewer intuitively understands as typical and familiar.

In the Chrome IGB ad, technology’s exteriorizations give rise to the valorization of Savage’s privileged interiority. The exteriority of haptic perception in the ad works to orient the viewer into the “interior” mind of Savage, a white Western male subject who is believed to be transparent, figured as a subject in control of his interiority and temporality, a subject determined by himself and not by exteriority, who makes history and decides to live the better life. Working through this problematic, Denise Ferreira da Silva explains that eighteenth and nineteenth century “sciences of man” produced the human body as the exteriorization of the mind (in terms of its intellectual and moral attributes), establishing the “transparent I” of post-Enlightenment Europe, “the kind of mind that is able to know, emulate, and control powers of universal reason,” in contrast to the “affectable I,” situated in other global regions, as “the kind of mind subjected to both the exterior determination of the ‘laws of nature’ and the superior force of European minds.”⁵⁴ Troubling this distinction, Da Silva argues that the modern subject, far from being self-determined, is “an effect of exterior determination,” deriving its particularity and self-knowing from its recognition of its difference from (the face of) an other—from the “others of man.”⁵⁵ Having an interiority, a transparent, self-determined “I,” then requires a certain conceptualization

⁵³ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 9.

⁵⁴ Denise Ferreira Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minneapolis Press, 2007), 117.

⁵⁵ Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, xxxvii.

of (linear) time. Da Silva generates a mistrust in time (and its unfolding) as a sense-making device. Since the IGB ad does not use the camera to imitate the frozen gaze of one user, the viewer is sutured into the swift temporal unfolding of Savage's confident interiority through the deliberate cutting to closeups of cursor movements, tab selections, and video windows. Despite the visual abundance of "soft montage," a step-by-step, uninterrupted, and clear argumentative causality is ensured through analytical cut-ins, zoom-ins, and other techniques which highlight the unfolding reasoning by leading the eye of the viewer. This creates a sense of effortlessness that is, of course, "only make-believe," according to Kiss, achieved through "a variety of clever techniques (such as speedy typing, swift clicking, and smooth opening of applications) as if there is no thinking involved, as if no waiting time is needed for loading software, or as if no buffering delay exists on the internet."⁵⁶ In the IGB ad, we are forcefully implicated into Savage's self-determined point-of-view as he selects and filters what is important to see, hear, and feel for us.

As it quickly unfolds in time, the ad shows the efficiency of "progress" narratives, literally demonstrating the speed of Chrome as a new tool for queer uplift through our haptic perception of Savage's video upload, while, as Puar suggests, nonetheless circulating "a projection of bodily capacity that ultimately partakes in slow death, even as it reforms the valence of debility—homosexual identity—through a white/liberal/male assemblage: a recapacitation machine."⁵⁷ In this context of "slow death mediated by technocultural ecologies of sensation," the Chrome IGB search story's valorization of interiority through the temporal unfolding of Savage's haptic viscosity allows for the proliferation of messages of hopeful futurity, linked to "it gets better" and "making the web better" (for queers).⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kiss, "Desktop Documentary: From Artefact to Artist(Ic) Emotions," 107.

⁵⁷ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 10.

⁵⁸ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 12.

At the same time, Google also saw itself as an engine for postracial progress. Shortly after the birth of Chrome in late 2008, President Barack Obama took office in the White House, becoming the first black president and, as Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White claim, the “first digital Commander in Chief.”⁵⁹ In 2016, critic David Dayen noted that, “Over the past seven years, Google has created a remarkable partnership with the Obama White House.”⁶⁰ Former Senior Vice President of Products at Google, Jonathan Rosenberg, affirms this, noting in an internal address to the company following Obama’s 2009 inauguration that Google is a “new instrument” that “the President and the world can count on” in the struggle for (postracial) progress that marks the moment. He adds: “Ours is much more than a passing role in this next phase of history, rather we have the responsibility and duty to make the Internet as great as it can possibly be.”⁶¹ Resituating *Unfriended* within this cultural moment, the final days of the Big Tech and Democrat alliance, refamiliarizes us with its key racial discourses. I also re/situate the film within the racial discourses of early new media theories (and their later reevaluations), returning to influential scholarship on the interiority-exteriority of the human-technology relation (of a conscious interiority in relation to an inorganic material exteriority) to more adequately account for the play between race, gender, sexuality, and the composition of the sensorium.

I claim that *Unfriended* works to loosely unsettle, undo, and unmake the dichotomies of interiority/exteriority, self-determination/affectability, temporality/spatiality that are so central to the delimiting of man’s (the human’s) privilege by rendering them “silly.” In *Unfriended*, the small, silly, and nervous tics of digital interaction—moments of mistyped messages, hesitations,

⁵⁹ Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White, *Race after the Internet* (Routledge, 2012), 1.

⁶⁰ David Dayen, “Google’s Remarkably Close Relationship With the Obama White House, in Two Charts,” *The Intercept*, April 22, 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/04/22/googles-remarkably-close-relationship-with-the-obama-white-house-in-two-charts/>.

⁶¹ Jonathan Rosenberg, “From the Height of This Place,” *Official Google Blog* (blog), February 16, 2009, <https://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/02/from-height-of-this-place.html>.

or misjudged emojis—expose the fragmented, nonlinear, and often awkward ways that humans process and perform thought and emotion as they navigate relationality in a digital landscape. This is, after all, how I define “silliness” in this chapter. While the desktop (seemingly) becomes a space for clearly exteriorizing interiorities, such that every digital fumble and eccentricity becomes a visible trace of interior thought, the performative aspect of silliness in this context invites a reflection on how digital interfaces construct and mediate expression online, revealing a disorderly nonsovereignty that underlies our desire for control in digital environments.

Instead of focusing on qualities of “realism” or on tactics of “defamiliarization,” I turn to the concept of “refamiliarization” to understand how “silliness” can be deployed to make the familiar (irritatingly) *more* familiar—a kind of “silly refamiliarization” that makes the ordinary, goofy nonsovereignty of our online lives, with all its errors, failures, and malfunctions, even more familiarly silly. Introduced over a century ago, Viktor Shklovsky’s influential concept of “defamiliarization” has become the textbook method for interpreting art’s revolutionary potential. Invoking Marx, and facing a world beset by habitualization, automatism, and alienation, the Russian critic proclaims that art “exists so that one may recover the sensation of life,” that is, by distancing, dislocating, and “making strange”—transforming everyday life into something “new.”⁶² Defamiliarization proposed a “slap-in-the-face shock effect, a momentary surprise meant to transform habitual thought into awareness.”⁶³ However, at a time when the most quotidian habits have become strange, in part due to the technologies that mediate everyday life in the 21st century, I find it more compelling to think about how art objects (like *Unfriended*) can work to refamiliarize us with/in the contemporary moment and historical present.

⁶² Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 2008[1917]), 16.

⁶³ Johanna Drucker, “Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State,” *Cultural Politics* 4, no. 1 (2008): 30.

As Johanna Drucker aptly argues, there is little if anything to be gained from further estrangement or denunciatory critique. “We are far from the era of the early twentieth-century avantgarde,” writes Drucker; “In place of the act of making strange, or de-familiarization, so banalized as shock-effect tactics in the last century,” Drucker emphasizes “the need for refamiliarization” as an “act of connection and association.”⁶⁴ She elaborates on this “end to belief in the de-familiarizing effect that was a tenet of the historical avant-garde,” claiming that the aesthetic capacity for making strange now has, in “our current, profoundly disturbed, cultural condition,” no effect upon our “numbed and brutalized sensibility.”⁶⁵ As Drucker claims:

The “real” and the “symbolic” are both so traumatically disjunctive that no act of making strange can make them stranger. In this extreme condition, a critical shift might need to occur—or be recognized. The role of aesthetic images could be redefined as a task of refamiliarization [...] [which] shows us what we know but have forgotten about the dynamic processes by which value and meaning are made. [...] [Refamiliarization] is fundamentally an act of recovery and connection, not innovation, novelty, or shock exposure. [...] [It] provoke[s] insights based on association and connections within symbolic systems, rather than focusing on disruption and alienation, as if from outside.⁶⁶

Written in 2008, Drucker’s argument has only become more relevant. In Trump’s America, the shockingly absurd has become uncomfortably ordinary, and the post COVID-19 pandemic moment has moreover affected a thoroughgoing sense of defamiliarization, making the most quotidian habits feel strange. It has awakened a reflexivity in our relations to the bodies and objects of everyday life, making us more aware of the surfaces we touch, the air we breathe, the clothes we wear. The domestic sphere has simultaneously become the site for further habituation to technologies that imperceptibly extract value from our every utterance and gesture.

Refamiliarization, then, works to unsettle our expectations of what is or could be considered “familiar,” including the “silly.” As with defamiliarization, refamiliarization’s goal is

⁶⁴ Drucker, “Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State,” 43.

⁶⁵ Drucker, “Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State,” 27.

⁶⁶ Drucker, “Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State,” 27.

to undo the articulations of perception and cognition that use surface effects and simulacra to “blind” us. And yet, as Drucker notes, surfaces are also material, and we need to understand how they are produced and how they work. The point for her is to reconnect people with “what we already know”—that we are always already embedded in silly and strange systems. Rather than “making strange,” refamiliarization is a practice of “making *un*-strange,” drawing us closer to the material surfaces of media (that work to veil their own workings) rather than distancing us. The contemporary computing industry, which continually drives to achieve perfect immediacy, desires nothing more than to efface the interface altogether and so also efface our ability to read it. The more user-friendly an interface is touted to be, the more invisible it is as it attempts to erase every trace of its own functioning. The goal, then, is to refamiliarize the media interfaces we use every day so we can look, once again, *at* our interfaces rather than *through* them.

Although as users of media objects we all encounter the interface until we learn to forget it, to see past it, we don’t all necessarily know how the interface functions. Refamiliarization is perhaps a misleading term as it implies a viewer who already has knowledge of media interfaces *as* interfaces—which necessarily means a knowledge of what the interface conceals as well as reveals. Is refamiliarization then inadequate for confronting that which remains unfamiliar? Perhaps, but films like *Unfriended* begin with the viewer-user as passive audience, serving a kind of pedagogical function by teaching us to see digital surfaces (as surfaces) in ways that are both overly familiar and somewhat different. A silly refamiliarization is then a turn to re/focus our attention to the silly, awkward, and nonsovereign exteriorities and exteriorizations of digital media. This chapter favors the language of refamiliarization because it is also “always flawed, unfinished, and partial,” much like the silly objects I study and the ambivalent modes of analysis

I employ; and, for Drucker, this literally introduces “room for play in a bureaucratically managed universe”—a space of silly possibility where before there had been no alternative.⁶⁷

While defamiliarization may produce feelings of silliness from forms of strangeness and distanciation (where, for instance, the strange out-of-placeness of a toilet in a museum feels disruptively silly, as is the case with Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 “Fountain”), refamiliarization works to extract the silliness of what is *as* it is (asking why a toilet *in* a bathroom might suddenly feel so silly). Without relying on tactics of disruption, dislocation, or alienation, refamiliarization exploits feelings of (over)familiarity, often in the guise of “realism” or “documentation” (as in *Unfriended* and other desktop media), to show that the silly is always already there in our everyday relations and encounters. Silliness here is that “funnily irritating” sense of familiarity that Ngai describes of the gimmick. We recognize *what is* as both hyper-realistic and hyper-ridiculous—a familiar “reality” inflected with all its familiar and recognizable silliness.

As this familiar reality is made (irritatingly) more familiar, its standardization (and not its innovation) is felt. The tension between innovation and standardization is key for *Unfriended*, especially as it negotiates its assemblage of computation and/as cinema, working at the nexus of both media’s specificities and realisms. While *Unfriended* can be said to innovate by creating a “a new language of horror,” as A.A. Dowd suggests, it is nonetheless “one steeped in an assumed familiarity with the hiccups of computers.”⁶⁸ Or, as another reviewer describes, *Unfriended* uses a “new social media language” to tell its “familiar ghost story.”⁶⁹ And as yet another critic writes: “The problem is that *Unfriended*, aside from inventing a new language, is shit,”

⁶⁷ Drucker, “Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State,” 42.

⁶⁸ A.A. Dowd, “Unfriended Is the Quintessential Movie about the Internet Age,” *Digital Trends*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.digitaltrends.com/movies/unfriended-horror-movie-internet-culture/>.

⁶⁹ McWeeny, “Review: ‘Unfriended’ Uses New Social Media Language for Familiar Ghost Story.”

emphasizing the gimmick as an irritating “innovation”—clever, silly, and shitty.⁷⁰ This chapter deepens the connection between screenlife and silliness by considering how desktop media uniquely aestheticize these familiar hiccups—the “silly” moments and movements of glitchy thoughts—resituating them within broader networks of digital affect and cultural dynamics.

By embracing the familiarly silly awkwardness of digital communication, *Unfriended* foregrounds silliness as a mode of affective resonance and critique, where the seemingly trivial becomes central to the affective and political stakes of mediated human connection—forcefully and uncomfortably dwelling in making the silly tics of ordinary human thought visible. The film, however, does not merely assume or affirm the ordinary, universal, and essentially “human” quality of these silly thought processes. By seeing the film as a refamiliarizing response to the racial logics of the 2010s cultural moment and the rise of Google Chrome—an audiovisual retort to the Chrome IGB ad in particular—I argue that the forms of silliness in *Unfriended* obfuscate the “transparent” link between interiority and exteriority that the Chrome IGB ad works so hard to maintain. In the following section, I turn to *Unfriended* to consider how it critically and sillily implicates itself in the IGB search story, its forms and discourses. If the IGB Chrome campaign sees “queerness as a useful technological apparatus,” *Unfriended* begins to alternatively mobilize it “as part of a critical practice of unmaking,” imagining the horrors of getting or making better.

II. It Never Gets Better in Screenlife Cinema

Ill-suited to theatrical exhibition, where the desktop framing jarringly contrasts with the scale and noninteractivity of the big screen [...], [Unfriended] begs to be viewed on the small screen of a computer for full effect; it therefore insinuates itself fully into the post-cinematic networked ecology that it thematizes, including the networks of online piracy...which the movie courts by virtue of these ideal viewing conditions. [...] [Its] sense of “realism” is especially heightened when you watch it on your own laptop—when you close the loop, so to speak, and align the movie’s frame materially with your own computer screen.

- Shane Denson⁷¹

⁷⁰ Brayton, “Unfriended (2014) - Movie Review.”

⁷¹ Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images* (Duke University Press, 2020), 155.

The familiar brass fanfare of the “Universal Studios” title sequence commences as the illuminated globe of the production company’s logo emerges on screen. We anticipate the familiar “UNIVERSAL” phrasing to come smoothly across the screen. As it begins to appear, the emblematic word unexpectedly jumps and glitches, becoming distorted and data moshed. The audio track mechanically gurgles as the picture continues to blur, though never to the point of complete indecipherability. The final garbled logo twitches and swirls before fading to black.

The eerie hum of a computer booting up now echoes in the background of the blank, black-filled frame. The black screen gives way to a MacBook desktop display, scattered with pictures, files, and open windows. The scene is silent, aside from the computer’s continued ominous hum. At the top right corner of the desktop, the username reads “Blair Lily,” who is presumed (though not yet confirmed) to be the current user. The user is running Google Chrome with a single tab opened up to the Live Leak website. A warning reads: “Laura Barns suicide might contain content not suitable for all ages.” A cursor suddenly moves across the screen, hesitantly hovering over the “CONTINUE” button underneath the warning. The user clicks, taking us to the video titled “Laura Barns suicide.” The blurry video plays automatically, and the user enlarges it to full screen. Filmed at a distance, the heavily distorted video depicts a young girl, Laura, on a baseball field holding a gun pointed directly at her face. The garbled voices of onlookers scream out at her to drop the gun. Suddenly, she shoots herself. Everyone screams.

The video is paused and taken out of full screen. The cursor hovers over the video description which includes a YouTube link to the “video that forced Luran to kill herself.” Again, the cursor hesitates over the link. After a long silent pause, the link is clicked and the video titled “LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF” automatically begins to play. We see Laura at a

party, visibly drunk, lying on a table with a guy on top of her. The video is suddenly interrupted by an incoming Skype call from “Mitch Roussel,” soon revealed to be user Blaire’s boyfriend.

This is the opening scene of *Unfriended*, a 2014 film and pivotal entry in the desktop horror movie genre. In this and other key twenty-first century digital horror media, there is a promiscuous fluidity in which style is defined across and between media—film, television, video games, music videos, and an ever-expanding field of streaming, social media, and short-form content. *Unfriended* is symptomatic of this messily inclusive pursuit, as it does not just refer to Facebook, iMessage, or Google, it adopts an aesthetic more closely aligned with browsing than the “cinematic,” as the film’s opening scene demonstrates. Without traditional “cinematography” or “editing,” desktop films push the “cinematic” toward a kind of broadly digital aesthetics. In fact, *Unfriended* has become an avatar for what Steven Shaviro has dubbed “post-cinema.”⁷² In part, this is because the “desktop film is no longer dependent on the film medium,” as Gregory Dolgoplov argues.⁷³ Many desktop films do not even use a camera; the camera is the computer itself.⁷⁴ In this new horror ecology, the computer is simultaneously the screen, the camera, the narrator, the editor, and the cast, competing voices in constantly moving and layering windows.

These desktop films, however, pre-suppose a cinema audience—most still premiere in film festivals or movie theaters and many are released by large Hollywood studios. This, ironically, still foregrounds issues of medium specificity. Does it belong on the big screen? Or does it belong on a computer screen? For Shane Denson, *Unfriended* “begs to be seen on a computer’s small screen for full effect,” because in theatrical settings “the desktop framing

⁷² Steven Shaviro, *Post Cinematic Affect* (O-Books, 2010).

⁷³ Gregory Dolgoplov, “Creating Digitally: Computer Films/ Screenlife/Zoom,” in *Creating Digitally: Shifting Boundaries: Arts and Technologies—Contemporary Applications and Concepts*, ed. Anthony L. Brooks (Springer International Publishing, 2023), 167.

⁷⁴ *Unfriended* does however use multiple cameras. The film was shot in a single long take using GoPros attached on top of each actor’s laptop computer, emulating the perspective of the built-in web camera.

jarringly contrasts with the scale and non-interactivity of the big screen and therefore detracts from the spectator's involvement."⁷⁵ Denson posits that the film, which begins with a glitching logo for Universal Pictures, is best experienced on a laptop screen, perhaps seen on a pirated copy, where the glitches and digital artifacts of the film (and its opening credits) mimic those that might be caused by a computer error, streaming lag, or corrupted file. On a laptop screen, such glitches activate a different kind of anxiety, mediated not just through the technology itself but through the ways in which we phenomenologically experience and engage with the broader range of technology and the mundane rhythms of online interaction on a daily basis.

Denson's view is an inversion of typical discourses of the cinematic in which the big screen experience is celebrated as the most immersive, authentic, or suitable. It's uncontroversial to claim that many film directors, scholars, critics, and cinephiles feel a sense of loss when they reflect on the way that analog film has given way to digital film and that movies have largely moved from the "big screen" to a plethora of small ones. While cinephilia is bound up with ideas of ideal technical conditions for screenings, it is of course almost inevitable that, whatever the film, it will be seen far more extensively on other screens than those of the cinema (if it ever gets a cinema release at all). As Charles R. Acland puts it, mainstream texts today are often a kind of "Silly Putty"—"produced with paths of media migration in mind, [they are] designed to be stretched and squeezed, giffed and guillotined."⁷⁶ So, while film purists believe it's quite silly to watch a movie intended for the big screen on a small screen—one need only look at all the "watching the way Nolan intended" memes, which humorously shrink movies like *Tenet* (2020) and *Oppenheimer* (2023) onto tiny or dated devices like old iPods, Apple Watches, Game Boys, PSPs, and Shrek-themed TV sets—I wonder: is it just as "silly" to watch what was intended for

⁷⁵ Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, 155.

⁷⁶ Charles R. Acland, *American Blockbuster: Movies, Technology, and Wonder* (Duke University Press, 2020), 274.

the small screen on the big screen? As we get more and more accustomed to watching films on smaller screens, when does it become just *too* “silly” to watch a “movie” (like *Unfriended*) in an actual movie theater? How do our judgements transform when we consider how “small screens” fare when re-integrated (either partially or fully) into traditional cinematic viewing contexts? What happens when the most private, ordinary, and unremarkable surface of our digital lives, the laptop screen, suddenly demands the grandeur of a big screen and movie theater?

Surprisingly, as Dolgoplov describes, “it is the experience of watching a desktop film in a cinema that is so compelling as the encounter feels to be one of dislocation.”⁷⁷ Watching *Unfriended* on the big screen is indeed a bizarre act of magnification. The modest, familiar world of a laptop screen swells into something grotesque and theatrical, made up of (now-dated) OS-X Maverick display programs and interfaces. Critic Peter Bradshaw summarizes this perspective:

There are some films you can’t watch on your phone or your tablet, films you absolutely need to see on the big screen—like *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Metropolis*. Weirdly, *Unfriended* is one of them. [...] [Y]ou can’t watch it on a titchy computer screen yourself without losing its essential flavour, and missing out on the eerie ‘blow-up’ effect. You have to see those browsers, with all their irritating little features and insidious ads and prompts, all those designs that have become embedded in your subconscious mind, magnified to the size of Stonehenge. Part of the creepy effect of this movie [...] is just showing there’s something uncanny and strange about living your life online.⁷⁸

In the movie theater context, as Bradshaw claims, the desktop film carries a defamiliarizing potential, simultaneously rendering the big screen strange via the small screen interface and the small screen strange via the big screen projection. Here, it is not realism (as for Denson) but a kind of surreal hyperrealism, the absurd and extreme of the “blow-up effect,” that generates horror—as much as it does silliness. What feels mundane on a 13-inch screen becomes an odd spectacle, exaggerated uncomfortably to the point of silliness, and exposed on a stage too big for

⁷⁷ Dolgoplov, “Creating Digitally: Computer Films/ Screenlife/Zoom,” 167.

⁷⁸ Peter Bradshaw, “Unfriended Review—Cyberbullying Skype Tale Rings Too True,” *The Guardian*, April 30, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/apr/30/unfriended-review-chilling-cyberbullying-tale-skype>.

them to inhabit. Cursors drift like aimless insects across a sprawling digital landscape, while notifications hum and grainy video calls warp and stutter, faces dissolving into ghostly smudges, uncanny and fragile. The banal act of typing is imbued with an absurd dramatic weight, with every silence and hesitation weighing heavy. In the case of *Unfriended*, as critic Jason Shawhan writes, the “adolescent mind” becomes a kind of “grand opera” exteriorized by the small, secret forms and gestures of digital life—a typing pause, a mistimed emoji, a glitching call, a blinking cursor, a buffering video, a cluttered desktop, an unwanted pop-up, an unexpected troll. etc.⁷⁹

Comparatively, on the small screen, the heightened “realism” of “clos[ing] the loop” seemingly takes hold. Luka Bešliagić goes so far as to claim desktop films like *Unfriended* “could be considered genuinely hyper-realistic” when viewed on a laptop “since they induce cognitive and perceptual confusion similar to the one famously experienced at the first screenings of the Lumière brothers’ iconic film *The Arrival of a Train* (1896),” a story which is of apocryphal origins in itself, one which considered that movie-going audiences were mere dupes.⁸⁰ The role of “realism” here is then misunderstood. The mistake that scholars like Denson, Bešliagić, and others make is assuming that it is only by heightening the film’s native sense of computational “realism” that the viewer can experience its familiar “horror” to its fullest (and truest) potential. Even (re)watching the film on one’s own laptop at home, it is the peculiarity of seeing a cursor float around by itself, with no interactivity on our parts, that makes the “horror,” appearing, in Galibert-Lainé’s words, as if one’s “device is suddenly possessed by someone else—it’s like a ghost who is moving the mouse around.”⁸¹ Such an experience generates a feeling that one’s

⁷⁹ Jason Shawhan, “*Unfriended*: A Sly Horror Movie for the Social-Media Minefield That Is Modern Life,” *Nashville Scene*, April 16, 2015, https://www.nashvillescene.com/arts_culture/film_tv/i-unfriended-i-a-sly-horror-movie-for-the-social-media-minefield-that-is-modern/article_2d2c5f02-4638-5d2e-9387-4a9c16eaf7d1.html.

⁸⁰ Luka Bešliagić, “Computer Interface as Film: Post-Media Aesthetics of Desktop Documentary,” *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 20 (2019): 52.

⁸¹ Kiss, “Desktop Documentary: From Artefact to Artist(Ic) Emotions,” 100.

personal laptop is “hijacked by the film, much as a ghost hijacks elements of Blaire’s GUI in the film,” writes Nick Jones.⁸² This is the uncanniness of inhabiting someone’s haptic POV—of seeing visual feedback with no input on our parts. Though, of course, the viewer here is (first and foremost) a viewer. Like early movie audiences, we are not mere dupes—that is, we know that we are not allowed or able to control any of the pro-filmic happenings. So, even beyond size, it is our interpellation that produces an experiential difference. That is, it is our interpellation into (and out of) this complex assemblage of computational “realism” laced with computational “ridiculousness” that generates a kind of silly refamiliarization, continually re-contextualizing and re-semanticizing what feels familiarly “real” and also what feels familiarly “ridiculous.”

Unfriended creates a not-so-subtle refamiliarization with/in the very specific moment in the historical present that gave rise to its forms and feelings. Greaves explains that *Unfriended* is “a specific story about a specific time” told through its specific media landscape, acknowledging that this specificity is “going to change and evolve rapidly”—the reality is, “any story from now until the human race meets its destruction,” he adds.⁸³ Watching *Unfriended* over a decade after its release, it becomes clear that the datedness of the computer’s user interface—and some of its now obsolescent features, sites, and apps—adds another layer of silliness via the simultaneity of its distance/dissonance and closeness/familiarity for present viewers. The film’s desktop *mise-en-scène* can evoke such a strong familiarity to some that, as one of my prior students noted, *Unfriended* and its now dated GUI evokes a kind of “nostalgia” for when they were a younger user. For the filmmakers, this is very much the point. For director Gabriadze, “Everything dates

⁸² Nick Jones, *Goey Media: Screen Entertainment and the Graphic User Interface* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 46.

⁸³ Nigel M. Smith, “How the Team Behind ‘Unfriended’ Pulled Off the Most Ingenious Horror Film in Years,” *IndieWire*, April 24, 2015, <https://www.indiewire.com/features/craft/how-the-team-behind-unfriended-pulled-off-the-most-ingenious-horror-film-in-years-62671/>.

in this world; computers do too. This will be a testament of this year; it will be attached to this period.”⁸⁴ And as critic Alan Scherstuhl humorously writes: “*Unfriended* is the one movie from 2015 you’ll always be able to look back at and feel something of what life was like back when, even if you’re not a cyberbullying white teen.”⁸⁵ (Though, as I argue, it is the very specificity of the film’s teen whiteness that further and uniquely emplaces it in the 2010s cultural milieu.)

Unfriended exposes and refamiliarizes viewers to the strange silliness lurking within the seemingly mundane of this very specific moment in time. This silliness stems, in part, from the gimmick of the film itself: *Unfriended* is, at its core, a spectacle of “new” media technologies, a self-conscious flaunting of its digital premise—or, as one reviewer writes, it is “diabolical avoid-at-all-costs horror drivel with a silly gimmick at its core.”⁸⁶ *Unfriended* foregrounds the silly gimmick’s “compromised aesthetic,” a “temporally sensitive and fundamentally unstable form” that works within the capitalist paradox of “planned obsolescence and routinized innovation.”⁸⁷ Yet, what makes a gimmick silly? Are all gimmicks silly? Ngai asks, “why are gimmicks almost comically irritating?,” interrogating the silliness regularly attached to the idea of the “gimmick,” which feels silly in its inherent paradoxes. Provoking impatience in its “reliance on the surprising absence of surprise,” a gimmick is a “magical trick we dismiss out of overfamiliarity with its deployment” and exaggerated claims to novelty as just another “endlessly repeated” device.⁸⁸

Further questioning the affects behind claims to novelty, Aaron Kerner and Julian Hoxter explain that the “silly,” or more specifically, the “stupid,” often manifests at the forefront of media “innovations,” in “experiments in narrative form, certain corporate/creative wagers on the

⁸⁴ Smith, “How the Team Behind ‘Unfriended’ Pulled Off the Most Ingenious Horror Film in Years.”

⁸⁵ Alan Scherstuhl, “Thriller *Unfriended* Is the Rare Good Film About the Internet,” *The Village Voice*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.villagevoice.com/thriller-unfriended-is-the-rare-good-film-about-the-internet/>.

⁸⁶ Liam Heffernan, “Review: *Friend Request* (2016),” *La La Film*, April 24, 2016, <https://lalafilmtd.wordpress.com/2016/04/24/review-friend-request-2016/>.

⁸⁷ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 6.

⁸⁸ Sianne Ngai, “Theory of the Gimmick,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 485, 501.

future evolution of a genre or medium, certain innovations in technology that afford new modes of storytelling, or enable new modes of consumption which then potentially misalign with established paradigms of narrative comprehension and/or assessment.”⁸⁹ *Unfriended* “innovates” in its novel (re: stupid) twist on the so-called “found footage” cycle that had, by 2015, become an overly familiar gimmick, more or less running its course. Moving “beyond the usual gimmicks of faux-amateur handheld camerawork or fixed-camera surveillance views,” Nick Pinkerton writes that “Gabriadze’s movie appeared at a moment when the found-footage horror film, by its very nature a form whose self-imposed limitations lend it a certain austerity, had grown fatally moribund.”⁹⁰ *Unfriended* pushes the found footage cycle, which we tend to associate with the likes of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or the *Paranormal Activity* series (2009–2021), from the “cinematic” toward medium blurring or convergence. *Unfriended* is a new found-footage gimmick that “moves beyond” past found-footage gimmicks to further the kinds of silly capitalist enchantments possible in and beyond the genre’s already established gimmicks.

While *Unfriended* is aggressively of the moment, its use of the desktop format (as critic Mark Harris notes) is “a gimmick that probably felt more potentially frightening before it was used a few weeks ago for laughs in an entire episode of *Modern Family*,” set on its matriarch’s iPad screen—adding another layer of silliness in its poorly timed “innovation” of a supposedly “new” formal language.⁹¹ In her formulation, Ngai argues that the gimmick has a reputation of “bad timing—being too old or too new.”⁹² She claims, it is “*only* an aesthetic of fundamentally

⁸⁹ Aaron Kerner and Julian Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media: De-Naturalizing Story Structures in the Cinematic, Televisual, and Videogames* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 8.

⁹⁰ Nick Pinkerton, “Unfriended: Dark Web,” *Reverse Shot*, July 24, 2018, https://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/2452/unfriended_dark_web.

⁹¹ Mark Harris, “Scared Senseless: The Indie Horror Boom and What Frightens Us Now,” *Grantland*, March 25, 2015, <https://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/scared-senseless-the-indie-horror-boom-and-what-frightens-us-now/>.

⁹² Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 2.

bad timing” that “seems capable of countering the image of perfectly synchronized exchange. Only a form arousing contempt for the ease with which we instantly and totally grasp it seems suited to oppose an aesthetic defined by its defeat of our cognitive powers.”⁹³ *Unfriended*’s “horror drivel” with a “silly gimmick” presents us with a kind of didactic foolishness—teaching us a “new” cinematic language by presenting us with a computational language that is already all-too-familiar to us, a capitalist aesthetic that is instantly and totally graspable as such.

It is also a gimmick which finds one of its earliest popular uses in the children’s cartoon *Dora the Explorer*, a show which debuted on Nickelodeon in 2000 featuring a young Latina girl and her friends traveling through various landscapes in search of missing objects. Each show follows a similar format, based around the narrative style and strategies of a computer game. In the original title sequence for the show, the camera—acting in/through a presumed child’s point-of-view—navigates through double swinging doors that automatically open into a child’s play room, where everything appears in live-action. The camera aimlessly floats into the room, zooming up to a chunky, bright green computer on a desk, slowly pushing into the computer until the entire desktop screen fills the frame. On the screen is what appears to be a computer game featuring Dora and friends navigating obstacles and moving horizontally on and off-screen; it’s animated in bold mid-90s Flash-style and made to resemble a side-scrolling platformer.⁹⁴

In each episode, a large blue cursor clicks on Dora’s name to transition from the title to the main part of the program. Just like in current desktop media, the (blue) cursor becomes the audience’s avatar, allowing the viewer to access (“click on”) objects and elements in the Dora’s world. Once “clicked,” objects activate—flying around, appearing on Dora, or performing some

⁹³ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 263.

⁹⁴ The title, *Dora the Explorer*, is also a clever play on words. In Spanish, the word “computer” [*computadora*] and the word “explorer” [*exploradora*] both end in *-dora*. “Explorer” is a reference to Internet Explorer, and Dora’s antagonist Swiper the Fox, who regularly attempts to steal items that Dora needs, is a reference to Mozilla Firefox.

useful action. Dora's technology maps onto "notions of technological rituals as discipline," Drew Chappell writes, preparing the child viewer-user to interact with machines in "a specific, linear, binary fashion," much like Google Chrome would do a decade later.⁹⁵ Though, of course, Dora's viewers can't really control the cursor; but, as Lisa Nakamura elaborates, they can witness:

the cursor's movements and implied user control [...] emphasiz[ing] the ways in which race is marketed as a 'cool' way to help children learn language skills, one that hails Latino and other viewers of color in ambivalent, largely apolitical, and 'postracial' ways. [...] the Latina *Dora* is an object rather than a subject of interactivity, just as Nickelodeon posits the show's audience as primarily white, middle-class, and able to afford cable, rather than as viewers who 'look like' Dora herself.⁹⁶

Examining the history of desktop media through its proto-origins in a silly object like *Dora the Explorer* further, and importantly, adds another layer of postracial techno-socialization to early understandings of the so-called Age of the Internet and the emergence of the screenlife gimmick.

Though *Dora* originally aired in 2000, the desktop mode did not grow in popularity until over a decade later with the introduction of Chrome's popular "search story" campaign. Building off of their success, the format gained unusual resonance in the early and mid-2010s with the upsurge of so-called "screenlife" films. Gabriadze's *Unfriended* soon became the emblem of desktop cinema's success. Using the Google Chrome browser along with YouTube, Facebook, iMessage, Instagram, LiveLeak, Spotify, and Skype, Gabriadze's *Unfriended* opts for the inclusion of real-world program branding in order to present a more authentic realization of the screen (circa 2014) in contrast to previous iterations of the screenlife film that opt for imitation, likely explaining why *Unfriended* quickly became the most commercially successful of its ilk.

The idea behind *Unfriended* came from producer Timur Bekmambetov because of his own global cyber business practices, which compel him to network and Skype day and night.

⁹⁵ Drew Chappell, "'Better Multiculturalism' Through Technology: Dora the Explorer and the Training of the Preschool Viewer(s)," *Red Feather: An International Journal of Children's Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2010), 20.

⁹⁶ Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, 23 (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 26-27.

Bekmambetov's production company boasts on their web site that "Bazelevs has been integrating brands into films, taking full advantage of product placement, cross promotion and merchandizing, effectively combining filmmaking and advertising."⁹⁷ Peculiarly, however, *Unfriended*, an ostensible independent film, which is both part of this branding and represents new forms of merchandizing, regularly foregrounds the failure and misuse of its product-placed technologies without their recuperation into a techno-triumphalist narrative. Skype glitches. Chrome lags. Facebook is hacked. Even Spotify is haunted. And the film ends with all its users dead, even the "final girl," leaving no room for these technologies' redemption. (There is also no indication that the use of any of the hardware, software, brands, or applications was authorized or licensed by any of these companies.) Against its extensive product placement, *Unfriended* strangely refuses to imagine a useful future for the technologies it exploits and promotes, rendering them silly and defunct, and discouraging the viewer-user from ever logging on again.

Appropriating and aestheticizing capitalist icons and images, *Unfriended* plays with what Drucker terms "radical refamiliarization," or "an associative reading that resituates images within networks and scenes of knowledge."⁹⁸ In this way, the film takes *Dora*'s clear pro-tech socialization and turns it on its head. *Unfriended*, I argue, engages in what Jacob Gaboury terms a queer computational practice of "critical unmaking." This method, for Gaboury, "foreground[s] queer techniques of refusal, misuse, and disruption that must nonetheless work with and through contemporary digital technologies."⁹⁹ Gaboury is not suggesting that "critical unmaking" invents radically new technologies in order to carry out a utopic queer computational practice. Rather, critical unmaking happens *with* and *through* existing technologies. More specifically, critical

⁹⁷ "About," Bazelevs, 2024, <http://bazelevs.com/about/>.

⁹⁸ Drucker, "Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State," 31.

⁹⁹ Gaboury, "Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation," 484.

unmaking happens when technologies are misused in particularly silly ways that demonstrate their underlying neoliberal logics and values. In effect, critical unmaking *sillies* technology.

Critical unmaking toward queer computation foregrounds a politics of failure in order to lay bare, question, and ultimately reframe the familiar ways we think about technology and the ways we think technology is “productive.” In this way, the project of silly refamiliarization aligns with Gaboury’s queer computational project of critical unmaking; its task is to see how aesthetic objects work within (computational) systems, not outside of them, asking images “to show the contingent relations of complex systems, to expose vectors and forces of interests, desires, and power.”¹⁰⁰ Put differently, silly refamiliarization is a way of “staying with the trouble,” to borrow Donna Haraway’s phrase; Haraway argues that “in the face of such touching silliness about technofixes (or techno-apocalypses), sometimes it is hard to remember that it remains important to embrace situated technical projects and their people.”¹⁰¹ This idea of “staying with the trouble” is especially impatient with those that have, as Haraway writes, a “comic faith in technofixes,” thinking that “technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children.”¹⁰² Haraway’s turn to “staying with the trouble” becomes a queer/ed response to those who have narrowly “bumptious” relations with techno-futurities.

Staying with the trouble of silliness, *Unfriended* thinks about computational form as it “decays, morphs, and improvises against and ahead of disciplinary programatics,” which for Kyla Tompkins produces a queer aesthetic that “allows for ‘haptic’ encounters with form in the process of formation and deformation.”¹⁰³ *Unfriended* is a clever example of working with software with and against its intended uses, exploiting its digital affordances, and practicing what

¹⁰⁰ Drucker, “Making Space: Image Events in an Extreme State,” 30.

¹⁰¹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

¹⁰² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3.

¹⁰³ Kyla Tompkins, “Crude Matter, Queer Form,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 266.

Lisa Samuels and Jerry McGann refer to as a kind of “deformance,” or “deformative criticism,” a variety of methods that reveal new insights into media texts by ‘breaking’ them in controlled, chaotic, or silly ways.¹⁰⁴ In identifying the ways it implicates itself in the formal and discursive investments of the IGB Chrome campaign, that is, in staying with the trouble of silliness in the moment, I suggest *Unfriended* works to unravel haptic visuality’s valorization of a subject of technoculture in control of its interiority and temporality, who makes history and decides to live the better life. *Unfriended* proposes, instead, that it may never get better. It may only get sillier.

In this way, commercial advertising for *Unfriended* bears an uncanny resemblance in form and tone to the Chrome “It Gets Better” search story ad, parodically torqued into silliness and horror. The official trailer to *Unfriended* is itself a direct parody of Chrome’s popular search story ad campaign, using a visual language that many internet-savvy viewers in 2014-2015 would have been familiar with. The opening to the official trailer parodies the affect of “religious ecstasy and rapture,” as Puar identifies, that the Chrome IGB search story ad draws on (and I would add its predecessors “Parisian Love” and “Dear Sophie,” which draw on the same archive of online memories and the ecstasies of chrononormative lifelogging).¹⁰⁵ After a cursor clicks to start a video lagging on the Universal Pictures studio logo, the trailer commences as it traverses through a video archive of normative online memories—a graduation, a child learning to ride a bike, a first pregnancy, a high school football game, a wedding—presented like the Chrome IGB ad through closeups of particular tabs and video windows (Figure 3.4). This dull archive of hetero-lifelogging is accompanied by upbeat piano music with repetitive arpeggiations that build on the ecstatic tone of the ad, a very convincing parody of the similarly optimistic piano music in the Chrome IGB ad (which features the 2009 song “Sort Of” by Ingrid Michaelson.)

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann, “Deformance and Interpretation,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 1 (1999): 28.

¹⁰⁵ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 10.

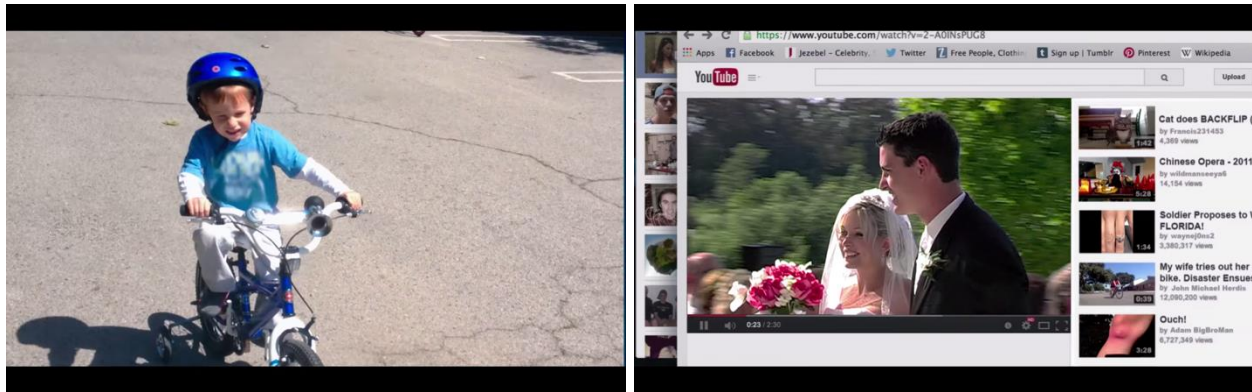


Figure 3.4. Parody of Chrome IGB ad in the official trailer for *Unfriended* (2014).

In its parodic implication with the IGB ad, *Unfriended* pitches itself within contemporary discourses and emerging forms from the early 2010s to construct a particular, familiar experience of horror against the ecstasies of a normative online archive. The trailer continues and abruptly glitches; switching tones, it warns the viewer that, like our memories, our mistakes also live online, proceeding to advertise the film's "cybernatural" horror tale of cyberbullying and teen suicide.¹⁰⁶ Despite its clear supernatural elements, the trailer felt very familiar to viewers. On January 12, 2015, MTV published the trailer for *Unfriended* to YouTube; MTV's high ratio of reality programming, including its two hour-long "It Gets Better" specials on gay teen suicide from 2012, led to uncertainty over the nature of the film's connection to real-life events. Greaves notes: "A lot of people reacting to the trailer have been like, 'Oh, it's based on this true story,' and it's like a lot these stories they're mentioning are stories that have happened since we wrote and made the film. The problem isn't getting better; it's getting worse."¹⁰⁷ The film's trailer is a key example of *Unfriended*'s play with silly refamiliarizations, exploiting our (over)familiarity with the popular desktop aesthetics and cloyingly sentimental neoliberal affects of the Chrome IGB "search story" ad, torqued through the lens of a generic "found-footage" horror movie of the

¹⁰⁶ The original title of *Unfriended* was *Cybernatural*.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Roffman, "Cyberbullying and Digital Ghosts: The Horror of Unfriended," *Consequence*, April 16, 2015, <https://consequence.net/2015/04/cyberbullying-and-digital-ghosts-the-horror-of-unfriended/>.

2010s—specifically via the “unremitting *whiteness* of teen horror’s on-screen representations of American youth”—to the point of uncomfortable, almost embarrassing silliness.¹⁰⁸

In *Unfriended*, a teen bullied into suicide, Laura Barns, returns to cyberspace as a faceless avatar, billie227, to haunt the “friends” responsible for her mortal humiliation, getting revenge on her callow tormentors by killing them off one by one—but not without mobilizing their cyber sensorium to first torment them in a goofily unserious, drawn-out game of “Never Have I Ever.” Like the search story ads, the film’s *mise-en-scène* is entirely online, focalized through the screen of Laura’s former frenemy, Blaire Lily. After the film’s opening moments, we meet Blaire Skyping with her boyfriend Mitch in a playfully sexual mood, planning prom night “activities.” Their friends Adam, Ken, Jess, and Val eventually join the Skype call, making up the film’s stock white teen horror characters: the virgin, her boyfriend, the athlete, the fool, the mean girl, and the “whore.” And then there’s the mysterious other, the ghost of Laura Barns, threatening to reveal the groups dirty secrets and inflict serious emotional and physical harm.

As with the film’s trailer, *Unfriended* formally and discursively implicates itself in the Chrome IGB campaign, using the newly popularized language of the “search story” and monetizing affective discourses of youth cyberbullying and teen suicide. It also carefully recreates video aesthetics common to the time of the film’s release, such as the (decidedly un-silly) bystander footage in shaming and suicide videos as well as viral videos made by victims of bullying uploaded to YouTube. One of the film’s most “serious” referential scenes appears shortly after the attacks begin, when Blaire watches a YouTube video made by Laura just prior to her suicide. Filmed entirely in black and white, the video depicts Laura holding cue cards that

¹⁰⁸ Pamela Craig and Martin Fradley, “Teenage Traumata: Youth, Affective Politics, and the Contemporary American Horror Film,” in *American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium*, ed. Steffen Hantke (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 93.

express her anger and resentment at her online attackers for the ways in which they harassed her. The imagery of the video, including the black and white images, handwritten cards, and folksy music, directly mirrors a similar YouTube video produced by teenager Amanda Todd prior to her suicide in 2012, where she detailed being harassed for years after a sex tape was posted of her online. The same video aesthetic was later used by cyberbullied gay teen Jonah Mowry.

Consider, also, the pivotal scene near the beginning of the film where, after receiving a message from Laura's haunted Facebook account on the anniversary of her death, Blaire attempts and fails to memorialize the account, leading to the titular scene of "unfriending." In the scene, Blaire searches the Chrome toolbar for "report dead person facebook hacked" and is led to a Facebook Help Center post that prompts her to "memorialize the account to stop changes." Blaire clicks the attached link to do so and is navigated to the "Memorializing an Account" page. When Blaire is prompted to enter "proof of passing," she navigates Chrome to an article from *The Fresno Star* titled "Cyberbullying: Suicide of Laura Barns linked to anonymous online attacks" (a headline in direct discourse with the online articles in the IGB Chrome ad that figure Savage's "inspiration" to launch his campaign, and themselves quote "cyberbullying and depression" as a primary cause of "The Suicides of Gay Teenagers"). Copying and pasting the link into the page, Blaire clicks to submit Laura's account for memorialization. The scene that has till now only been filled with the ominous hum of the computer fan is suddenly interrupted by the jarring bleep of a Facebook error message; all the text on the form has been eerily glitched into reading "I GOT HER I GOT HER I GOT HER I GOT HER," a message later revealed to be Blaire's words to Laura as she records the humiliating video that leaked online (Figure 3.5).

Here, *Unfriended* underscores the dangers in IGB's promise of online memorialization and the project's narrative of ever-expanding liberties and endless possibilities. Jack Halberstam

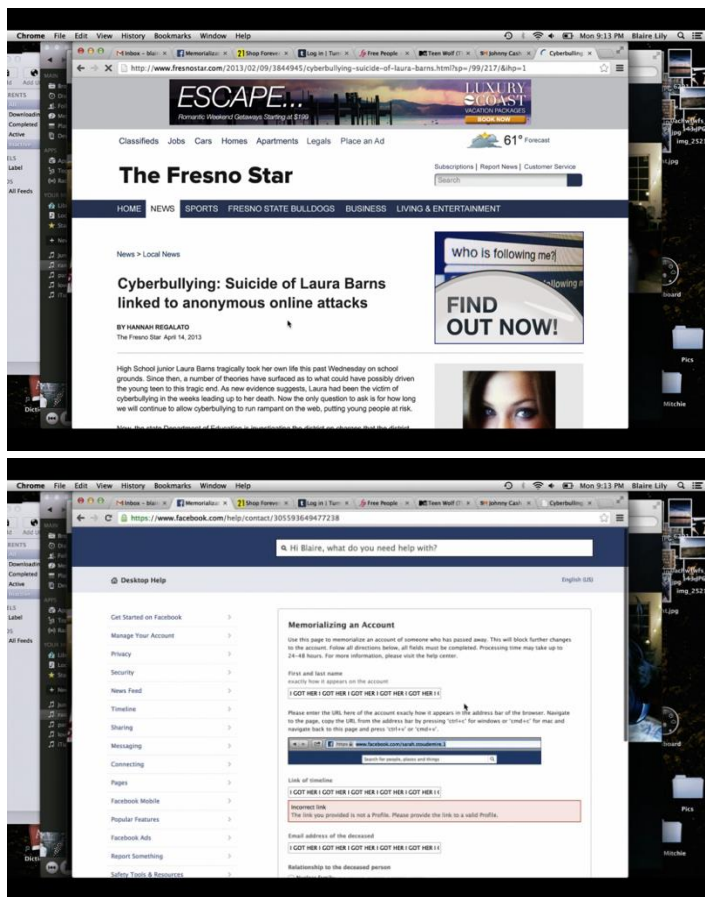


Figure 3.5. Failing to memorialize the dead in *Unfriended* (2014).

further explains the dangers in the promise of progress writing such that, “memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories [...] it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions.”¹⁰⁹ In creating a “tidy” narrative where one does not exist, the Chrome IGB ad presents the immanent future as a techno-triumphalist site of equal access and postracial progress for all queers without accounting for how things may get better for some (white gay men) and

likely not get better at all for others. After she fails to memorialize Laura’s account, Blaire unfriends her (a process that glitches at first, but after a refresh seems to work just fine).

In *Unfriended*, actual death becomes a way to allegorize social death, as we see the friends’ technological savvy, cool detachment, and attractive self-branding disintegrate at the whim of this new form of “the other,” the unfriended. Laura, the unfriended other, appears throughout the film as a ghostly, faceless avatar without a body (though we do see in the footage that led up to her death that she indeed has a body). Well into the plot, the video partially shown at the outset of the film titled “LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF” is further revealed, clarifying why Laura committed suicide. The footage shows Laura passed out, the camera scanning down

¹⁰⁹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2017), 15.

between her legs to show a large puddle of what appears to be menstrual blood (or liquified feces). This is captioned “LEAKY LAURA KILL URSELF,” becoming clear that this publicized humiliation drove her to suicide. Like Tyler Clementi, it appears to be the dissemination of a video that prompted Barns’ suicide. Here, we see this film linked with its classic predecessor, *Carrie* (1976), in which a young girl is mercilessly taunted for her ignorance about menstruation, and by association, excessive female embodiment. This continuity argues against another myth of techno-triumphalism, that it is an era of post-feminism, when technical development has evened the playing field across genders. Carol Clover argues that *Carrie* signifies both the power and failures of second-wave feminism, and that spectatorial dis/identification marks the ways that cis-men both fear and identify with that figure of power and failure.¹¹⁰

Unfriended’s construction of the monster is feminized, born out of menstruation, and yet at the same time ambiguously gendered, “passing” online as billie227 using a generic Skype avatar.¹¹¹ For the bulk of the film, the characters call billie227 “it,” “he,” “they,” or “this guy,” and *never* “she,” even after identifying billie227 with Laura’s account, effectively misgendering or ungendering Laura’s avatar. While the teens all represent themselves with flattering pictures that emphasize their gendered attractiveness (boyfriend Mitch, for example, has an avatar that features himself in a bodybuilder’s pose), billie227 haunts the screen with a generic avatar and an ambiguous name. (As Bradshaw writes of his experience watching this Skype avatar in *Unfriended* in a movie theater: “there is something obscene in simply seeing this familiar ‘egg’

¹¹⁰ *Unfriended*, which is also all about looking and optics, moreover, adheres to Clover’s clever notion that “horror privileges eyes because, more crucially than any other kind of cinema, it is about eyes.” See: Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton University Press, 1992), 167.

¹¹¹ Laura’s malevolent skype account entitled billie227 and the unseen entity of Laura killing the teenage protagonists one by one is heavily inspired by the classic Creepypasta TribeTwelve story “The Observer,” in which a ghostly male apparition by that name donning glasses and a faceless webchat account terrorizes a teenage male Noah, being revealed to have a close connection to him and killing his friends one by one as well as exposing their darkest secrets over the internet, and pitting them against one another.

motif at movie-screen size in all its implacable deadness and inertness.”¹¹² Bradshaw’s claim is reminiscent of Wendy Chun’s apt description of new media as “wonderfully creepy...endlessly fascinating yet boring, addictive yet revolting, banal yet revolutionary”—that is, a never-ending stream of silly, weird, glitchy, creepy, and unnecessary network-embedded things.¹¹³)

The faceless billie227 infiltrates the teens’ computers and changes the contours and functions of various interfaces, embracing their identification as the “glitch” and interfering with the group’s self-image as technically savvy, rendering them scared silly. Knowing the extent of this manipulation requires an audience who knows how these apps function, therefore knowing what constitutes as “weird” in this digital landscape. Recognition in this framing is a process of meaning-making that maps onto things (moments, experiences, behavior, ideas, ways of being, knowing, and feeling) that one can already make sense of, which is to say that it is always already a kind of process of refamiliarization, rather than defamiliarization. *Unfriended* makes good use of turning completely normal, recognizable computer behavior sinister; A large part of what makes *Unfriended* delightfully stressful is how it uses the glitches of familiar apps, sites, and interfaces to build discomfort within viewers. Every “...” on iMessage is stressful, every Facebook notification eerie, and everyone’s terrified to download attachments.

Without the traditional mood enhancers that define horror—like a soundtrack or cinematography—*Unfriended* works the discomfort of its players into seemingly innocuous everyday computer software. (If, as comedian and horror director Jordan Peele argues, “The difference between comedy and horror is the music,” then *Unfriended*, with its complete absence of extradiegetic music, arguably neutralizes the difference between the two genres.¹¹⁴ Its horror

¹¹² Bradshaw, “Unfriended Review—Cyberbullying Skype Tale Rings Too True.”

¹¹³ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (The MIT Press, 2016), ix.

¹¹⁴ Dani Bethea, “Dying of Laughter: The Intersections of Horror and Comedy,” *Dread Central*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.dreadcentral.com/editorials/447382/dying-of-laughter-the-intersections-of-horror-and-comedy/>.

is silly, and its silliness is horrifying.) The film feeds into a lot of the ubiquitous fears around the Internet: nude pictures being leaked, a hacker trying to make aggressive contact with you, suicide-inducing cyberbullying, etc. *Unfriended* works because, as Adam Charles Hart writes, “it knows what is ghostly and uncanny about the boring everyday anxieties that burrow into the back of our brains each time we open up our laptops or unlock our phones.”¹¹⁵

But as reviewer Hazel Cills writes: “this is also a movie about watching a computer simply fuck up over and over.”¹¹⁶ And, perhaps even more so, the film is about watching the human mind repeatedly fuck up and fumble online. The desktop format of the film, which plays as a static recording of Blaire’s computer screen, following her cursor movements, her typing and retyping, and all the kinks in her browsing, operates as a fertile ground for exploring the inherently silly “glitchiness” of human interiorities, rendering visible the various pauses, errors, and hesitations that characterize the messy exteriorizations of human cognition. We are privy to all of Blaire’s typing, including messages that she deletes or revises in order to present herself in the best light (both to Laura and to her other friends). As Greaves addresses in an interview: “It’s funny watching the movie with audiences cause every time that first thing comes up where she types something out and then she’s like ‘ah no no no no no’ and there’s always a laugh.”¹¹⁷ But why is there *always* a laugh? Greaves acknowledges the silly familiarity of such an act, and the silliness of familiarity itself, of the reflective embarrassment of #relatable content online. The film nonetheless finds riveting dramatic tension in the silly ways that we reprocess and re-edit

¹¹⁵ Adam Charles Hart, *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror across Media* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

¹¹⁶ Hazel Cills, “The Call Is Coming From Inside of Skype: The Tech Terror of ‘Unfriended,’” *Grantland*, April 17, 2015, <https://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/the-call-is-coming-from-inside-of-skype-the-tech-terror-of-unfriended/>.

¹¹⁷ “Director Levan Gabriadze and Nelson Greaves Talk ‘Unfriended’ at SXSW,” posted March 23, 2015, by Collider Ladies Night, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faZSX35yRsI>.

what we “say” in text-based speech. (Text is also the vehicle for all of Laura’s faceless threats, registered in the fearful expressions and facial glitches that plague the other characters.)

These moments of “silliness” are not just incidental but crucial, as they expose the nervous and unpredictable rhythms of thought that are often smoothed over or concealed (in other cinematic modes or computational formats) into a singularly sovereign subjectivity. *Unfriended* exemplifies this potential by amplifying these “glitches” of human thought into its formal and affective language of silliness. Unlike the Chrome ad’s celebratory portrayal of Savage’s polished and self-assured digital subjectivity, a transparent, self-determined “I,” *Unfriended* substitutes a confident interiority with a nervous, fragmented, and opaque one, foregrounding the stutters and breakdowns of thought via the nonsovereignty of networks—glitches that manifest as slow, hesitant, and indecisive actions. These silly in/actions, from prolonged pauses to jittery cursor movements, extend the notion of a computational glitch to the cognitive and affective realms, transqueerying our expectations of seamless digital engagement. The film’s use of such glitchy silliness serves to refamiliarize our everyday interactions with computational media, suggesting that our encounters with the digital are always-already glitchy and uncontrollably silly—and that these moments of failure hold the potential to refamiliarize and perhaps reimagine how we inhabit and think through computational spaces.

In his discussion of Frank Capra’s romantic comedy *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), Stanley Cavell quotes the protagonist of the film who says, “Everyone does silly things when they think,” and goes on to suggest the essentially human connection between “thinking and silliness,” what he also calls the “universal fidgetiness of thinking,” that “the human being, is inherently and inveterately nervous.”¹¹⁸ In a courtroom scene, Deeds mounts his defense against

¹¹⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 200.

the charge that he does outlandish, incomprehensible things, like playing a tuba as he lies in bed, or feeding doughnuts to a horse. Cavell elaborates on this scene in the film:

Taking its cue from Deeds the camera goes on to illustrate his examples as he picks out characters in the courtroom who are doodling, cracking their knuckles, drumming their fingers on a table, twitching their noses, and so forth. What we witness are human beings in various states of nervousness or restlessness, as if the human body and the human mind are not wholly at one with each other. [...] Descartes defines the human as a thing that thinks, and film retorts that it is an essentially restless body that thinks. [...] [I]n directing the camera to provide this proof by way of the body, Deeds is simultaneously showing that film is thinking about thinking, that is, about what it is to be human.¹¹⁹

For Cavell, the integrity of thought is conceived, or proved, through such stimulating bodily silliness—through the “presence of the body’s apparently least intelligent property, its fidgetiness, its metaphysical restlessness.”¹²⁰ One of the primary roles of cinema, then, is to reveal this silly and anxious side of human thought. In her reading of Cavell, Jennifer Fay cleverly furthers this view, claiming that the cinema itself “has taught us to see signs of the mind principally through the previously imperceptible or simply silly, embarrassed movements of the body,” uncomfortably dwelling in making the silly tics of ordinary human thought visible.¹²¹

While Cavell and Fay are referring to cinema in its analog era, digital media has its own methods of teaching us to see the silly signs of the mind and body, maybe more so than ever before. The idealized personality in this digital culture of friendship is cyber-literate, popular, and laid-back. Every-teen Blaire begins as the ideal subject of cyberspace sociality. Popular and pretty, she is contentedly and flexibly friended. She seems to always be in touch with her friends, but not particularly close to them. She sexts with her boyfriend but (ostensibly, at first) is a

¹¹⁹ Stanley Cavell and Andrew Klevan, “‘What Becomes of Thinking on Film?’ Stanley Cavell in Conversation with Andrew Klevan,” in *Film as Philosophy: Essays on Cinema after Wittgenstein and Cavell*, ed. Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2005), 187.

¹²⁰ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 204.

¹²¹ Jennifer Fay, “Thinking on Film with Arendt and Cavell,” *Critical Inquiry* 49, no. 2 (2023): 250.

virgin. She navigates techno-sociality with skill and innovation, but also with an air of casual enjoyment and laid-back cool, attentive yet detached. This image slowly begins to unravel.

Early in the film, as the tension begins to build, Blaire constantly hesitates before typing, deleting multiple messages in the chat window. She repeatedly backspaces to rephrase sentences, removing bits and pieces of what she originally types, telling us how she's thinking and feeling without voicing any of it. In one sequence, shortly after the anonymous Skype profile invades the chat, Blaire iMessages her boyfriend Mitch: "who the eff is THIS GUY???" A long pause passes with no answer from Mitch. Blaire urgently types and sends: "why aren't you answering me/???" The "..." notification appears next to Mitch's name as Blaire's cursor circles over it. Mitch finally replies: "sorry—got a weird message..." Blaire asks, "from who?" and Mitch replies "laura barns." Moments later, we hear the ping of a Facebook notification, popping up in the screen's top right corner. It reads: "Laura: hey blaire...what are you watching?" Blaire's cursor hesitantly moves to click the notification, taking her to her Facebook messages in Google Chrome. A long pause. Blaire's cursor doesn't move. Eventually, her cursor slowly creeps down to the message, hovering hesitantly over the name "Laura Barns" (her presumed dead friend) and the message underneath. Suddenly and swiftly, Blaire moves her cursor down to the "Write a reply..." box, quickly typing "who is this???" She moves her cursor down to the "Reply" button but hesitates to send the message. Her cursor awkwardly returns to the message she typed, hovering over it for a moment before clicking over to another window, returning to the YouTube video titled "LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF." Blaire navigates to the Chrome drop-down menu in the top right of the window, scrolling down and clicking on "History." We see Blaire's search history, featuring the "LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF" video along with webpages for "Teen Wolf (TV series) | Season 4 Episodes | MTV," google searches for "song meanings

johnny cash spiritual,” sign in pages for sites like Tumblr, and shopping pages for FreePeople and Forever21. Blaire selects the “LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF” YouTube video, clicks “Remove selected items,” and confirms “Remove.” She X’s out of the window, returning to her Facebook conversation with Laura, highlighting and deleting her unsent “who is this???” message. Blaire types: “who’s doing this—this is super messed up.” Again, the cursor hesitantly hovers over the unsent message before moving down to the “Reply” button. Hovering over “Reply,” Blaire’s cursor slowly drifts away from the button and back to her unsent message. Again, she double-clicks, highlights, and deletes the unsent text. Now, she simply types: “who’s doing this?,” moving her cursor back over the “Reply” button, hesitating once more, before finally sending the message. Under the sent message, we see the ominous “Laura is typing...” notification. After a pregnant pause, the notification is replaced with “✓ Seen 9:09pm.” No answer. Blaire’s cursor wanders momentarily before returning to her iMessage conversation with Mitch, replying “yea I think someone hacked her account.” Mitch replies “maybe.” Then, a very long quiet pause passes before the ring of a new Skype call from the friend group.

In such sequences, the film’s drawn-out use of silences—moments when no one speaks but the interface is alive with quiet clicks, flickers, hums, and pings—emphasize the hesitations and pauses of human thought as critical narrative elements. When Blaire’s boyfriend stops answering, the film’s silences turns sinister, more so than any of the actual content or dialogue that follows; but Blaire’s increasingly frantic typing also becomes quite silly (as she constantly expects immediate responses from her texting partner). The film asks us to endure long silences, whether in spookiness or in silliness, holding our attention through the characters (improvised) cursor movements and in moments of slowly reading typed text. (All the while, our attention also wanders across the screen, catching incidental glimpses of the various hypermediated elements

of the desktop screen.) In *Unfriended*, human behaviors become readable as forms of systematic error akin to the ones we observe in the computers that digitally augment our experience of the world—our everyday experience with the irrationality of rational systems, the nonsovereignty of networks. Even the brief (or prolonged) boredom that may accompany the silences in these scenes allows viewers to closely feel and viscerally recognize the uncanny familiarity of the ways that Blaire—frantically, boringly, and sillily—navigates her multiple media platforms. This is, in other words, a kind of silliness-as-“realism” rarely seen on the big screen.

In these sequences, the film creates “horror” not from the glitch as a technical error but from the silly glitches—the “brain farts”—of human thought and their exteriorizations in the desktop mode. It is precisely the film’s openness to dwell in the boring silliness of thinking with, in, and through computers that creates a unique sense of digital horror. The simple act of typing and retyping externalizes the protagonist-user’s anxious cognitive process, rendering visible the nervous hesitations that underpin decision-making as a form of suspense.

Such sequences, however, may also produce a familiar kind of silliness via “stuplimity,” a term that Ngai uses to define an affective mixture of boredom and aesthetic awe—the sublime infused with stupidity.¹²² As one reviewer writes: “When Blaire unwisely constructs her reply, we see several beats of her writing messages and deleting them to say something else. Yes, this is truly meant to be suspenseful. Instead, it’s all pretty silly.”¹²³ (The “silly” here is equated with a sense of boredom that’s opposed to the properly “suspenseful.”) Another reviewer claims that “*Unfriended* explores the average lives of teenagers in the most boring way possible that this horror film could not even be called horrifying. [...] Never have I seen a horror movie so

¹²² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

¹²³ Michael Henley, “‘Unfriended’ Is Silly and Lacking Suspense,” *Delco Times*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.delcotimes.com/2015/04/20/unfriended-is-silly-and-lacking-suspense/>.

boring.”¹²⁴ The film thus works with a kind of silly stuplimity, such that “‘stuplimity’ involves comic exhaustion rather than terror,” that is, a comic exhaustion with the embarrassingly familiar and thus boring experience of seeing the silly glitches of thought-and/as-computation unfold in “real-time.”¹²⁵ *Unfriended* ultimately transforms the desktop interface into a stage for both technological and cognitive glitches, where silliness (manifested in characters’ indecisiveness, digital errors, and awkward interactions) becomes a powerful tool to expose the fragility of human and machine collaboration. This is, I argue, a dynamic that queer(ie)s the feelings of confident control in the Chrome IGB ad by foregrounding a nonsovereign silliness—via nervousness, hesitation, and failure—as central to the experience of contemporary digital life.

In another moment later in the film, shortly after Val’s feed disconnects from the Skype call, Blaire gets an email from “bill ie” with the subject “Val Plays The Game” just before the group proposes hanging up the call. Blaire alerts the group of the email, which reads “ROUND 1: EXPOSURE” with a link to an Instagram post. Blaire begins freaking out, and her friends tell her to send the email to tech-savvy Ken because he can track down the user via their IP address. But there is no “forward” button. Adam complains that Blaire doesn’t know how to “fucking use a computer,” prompting Blaire to share her screen with the group. After confirming the absence of the “forward” button, Jess notes: “Weird computer shit happens to me all of the time.” A long quiet moment passes as Blaire’s jittery cursor hovers hesitantly over the link, refusing to click it. The frozen moment feels heavy, until Ken ruptures the silence, impatiently slamming his hand down and loudly exclaiming: “Click the fucking link, dude!” The hesitant silliness of Blaire’s exteriorized thinking generates a moment of suspense broken by Ken’s “jump scare.” Blaire

¹²⁴ EpicLadySponge, “Unfriended User Reviews,” *Metacritic*, December 29, 2015, <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/unfriended/user-reviews/>.

¹²⁵ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 36.

finally clicks the link, which takes her to an Instagram post uploaded minutes ago featuring a screen shot of a private DM sent by Laura to Val a year ago. The message shows Laura's plea to Val for her to stop the bullying, with Val writing in response: "KILL URSELF lol"

Until it is impossible to ignore, the friend group denies that Laura/billie227 could possibly be a supernatural or a real threat. Instead, they optimistically classify her as a mere "glitch" that can be thwarted by the collective cyber-literacy of the group. This reduction of the "monster" to a silly little "glitch" frames the group as sharing a general cultural delusion: that intractable problems (or "weird computer shit") can finally be overcome by technological reason. The core of this belief is our faith in teleological techno-progress, that we have (and continually will) transcend previous eras' failures—that the flaws we still detect in the system are merely residual glitches from prior, inadequate times. But Laura/billie227 continually sabotages the groups' efforts to kill viruses, shut down applications, or generally make the internet work.

If *Unfriended* discloses the "connection between visible bodily movement and the invisible processes of mind," it does so by extensions of bodily movement and exteriorizations of interiorities onscreen. Desktop cinema displays "how bodies figure glitches in the conditions of the reproduction of life in the historical present," to borrow Lauren Berlant's phrasing.¹²⁶ This carries political weight. Even though the media forms seen in *Unfriended* are "hyper-modern," Johanna Isaacson argues that "the film hints at a dread that reaches beyond new technologies to capitalist social relations as a whole."¹²⁷ Extending this section's understanding of cognitive and computational glitches to account for the question of difference, the following section elaborates on the nexus of race, thinking, and silliness in desktop media, troubling the postracial hopes of

¹²⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 198.

¹²⁷ Johanna Isaacson, "'Unfriended' Unpacks Cyber-Sociality," *Blind Field: A Journal of Cultural Inquiry*, February 16, 2016, <https://blindfieldjournal.com/2016/02/16/unfriended-unpacks-cyber-sociality/>.

the early age of the internet, and building on Cavell's understanding of silliness as a form of radical nonsovereignty that disrupts the pretense of confidence, control, and coherence online.

III. Whiteness Scared Silly: Or, "It Gets Better" Gets "Ghetto"

No, I'll tell you what is. It's a dumb ass white movie about some dumb ass white girls getting their white asses cut the fuck up.

*- Maureen (Jada Pinkett-Smith), *Scream 2* (1997)*

In his critical review of the "partially fascinating Skype-mare slasher" *Unfriended*, critic Wesley Morris writes that the "near-comprehensive whiteness of these Blumhouse [Studios] movies...poses no problem from film to film," shruggingly asking: "What would adding a black character...have done to reshape the meaning of the bogeyman?"¹²⁸ In *Unfriended*, it is precisely the absence of any characters of color that uniquely shapes the meaning of the film's so-called "bogeyman." Recall the scene where, after a compromising post of friend Val Rommel tagged "VAL GETS SHIT FACED" suddenly appears on each of the friends' seemingly hacked/haunted Facebook pages, the Skype conversation gets very heated as the messaging interface is invaded by billie227. One of the teens, Jess, calls Val a "bitch" and "slut," while Val retorts, calling Jess a "trashy little bitch" and telling her to "close your trashy little mouth." Jess replies: "you can suck my fucking dick," "piss off," and "I will beat your ass any goddamn day." Another friend, Ken, further agitates them, butting in to say: "I'll come pick you girls up and we can go fight outside of a Wendy's or something...We can go to a Taco Bell parking lot and you guys can slap-fight it out." As the teens slowly begin to unravel, both visually and relationally, Blaire interrupts and tries to quell the situation: "Girls...Whoa stop! Listen, *we are not ghetto!*" Clearly offended by the accusation of ghetto-ness, Val replies "Blaire, really?!" as Jess rolls her eyes.

¹²⁸ Wesley Morris, "Hope/Less? Another Failed Shot for Ryan Reynolds; Plus, 'The Gallows' Nightmare and 'Tangerine' Dream," *Grantland*, July 10, 2015, <https://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/ryan-reynolds-self-less-the-gallows-review/>.

Blaire's (improvised) "*we are not ghetto!*" line stood out to many black and brown viewers and critics as both an extremely silly and comically questionable piece of dialogue.¹²⁹ Lamar "BlogXilla" Valentine, in an interview with the cast of *Unfriended* for GlobalGrind.com, a website for "urban millennials," cited the line just before giving the cast his own "Ghetto Test," ultimately affirming that the "cast of *Unfriended* is pretty damn ghetto."¹³⁰ Blaire's pause-worthy line delivery incited double-takes and shrieks of laughter in numerous reaction videos by black and brown YouTubers. In one, for instance, YouTuber @jaymeetsworld calls the film a "messy masterpiece," pausing and laughing in giddy shock at the moment the line is delivered by Blaire.

In "messy" moments like these, the collective whiteness of the group is explicitly (and embarrassingly) foregrounded and linked to their collective unlikability, a notably different strategy from its sequel *Unfriended: Dark Web* (2018). Jacob Hall explains that the sequel's "inherent meanness hits harder" and is "especially disarming" because, this time, its group of friends are not only "charming and likable" but "one of the most diverse casts in recent horror memory: people of color, queer folks, and disabled people, all hanging out, all being fun to be around, all being positive representations," until the film incites violence "they did nothing to earn," adding: "In a bizarre way, it feels like a bold step forward. Diverse horror movie casts scream and yell and die just as well as casts of bland white people!"¹³¹ Instead of offering clear points of identification like its sequel, the formal suturing of the viewer to "bland white" teen Blaire's haptic POV both draws us closer and creates space for our scrutiny of her every in/action. Throughout the film, the question of (cyber)bullying as an obstruction to productive,

¹²⁹ The word "ghetto" is often used pejoratively to describe working-class African Americans, and their presumed forms of behavior, dress, or speech. It is also more generically used to describe "crude" or "unsophisticated" things.

¹³⁰ Xilla Valentine, "The Cast Of 'Unfriended' Reveals Its Love For WorldStar, Horror Films, & More," *Global Grind*, April 18, 2015, <https://globalgrind.com/4074108/unfriended-movie-cast-interview-with-blogxilla/>.

¹³¹ Jacob Hall, "'Unfriended: Dark Web' Is A Cruel And Clever Evolution Of The First Film [SXSW]," *SlashFilm*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.slashfilm.com/556821/unfriended-dark-web-review/>.

homophilic (cyber)sociality gives way as we see that beneath the thin veil of chumminess, it turns out that all of the characters are without exception bullies.

In part, this is the appeal of the film. Critic Lee Shoquist writes that as “silly as the film’s premise seems—and that is to say significantly” there’s a pleasurable “kick in watching the picture...dole out nasty retribution for the unlikeable cool kids who each have it coming. They are cheaters, liars, connivers, loudmouths and duplicitously self-absorbed. They are also fun to watch.”¹³² Their whiteness and uniform unlikability also turns our attention to more deeply embedded forms of capitalist alienation. For Isaacson, *Unfriended* can provide “a critical realism, shedding light on persevering forms of class and oppression that get lost in the discourse of techno-triumphalism.”¹³³ Since the film marks the group as obnoxious, privileged, middle-class white kids, the seemingly trivial interactions among them mask deeper social anxieties not only around class and techno-capitalism but also race, homophilic networks, and identity online.

Laura’s “passing” as billie227—using the standard faceless, humanoid looking Skype avatar, a sleek white plastic body—is key here, recalling Hansen’s (now outmoded) claim that “the suspension of the social category of visibility in online environments” enables a new ethics of encounter between humans, rendering them invisible to one another.¹³⁴ In a chapter in his 2006 book *Bodies In Code*, adapted from a 2004 essay, Hansen finds that “passing” (his use of the term) in pre-graphic, pre-Web 2.0 online environments subjects all users to “a ‘zero degree’ of racial difference,” halting the “automatic ascription of racial signifiers according to visible traits.”¹³⁵ The Internet, for him, “suspends the constraint exercised by the body as a *visible*

¹³² Lee Shoquist, “Unfriended,” *ChicagoFilm*, April 17, 2015, <https://chicagofilm.com/2015/04/unfriended/>.

¹³³ Isaacson, “‘Unfriended’ Unpacks Cyber-Sociality.”

¹³⁴ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 141.

¹³⁵ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 141.

signifier—as a receptive surface for the markings of racial (and gendered) particularity.”¹³⁶ And so, by celebrating the ubiquity of passing online, Hansen optimistically hopes that “cultural signifiers” (of race or gender) will be shown to be mere “social codings” that carry “no natural correlation to any particular body,” thus exposing the very “bankruptcy of identity categories.”¹³⁷

In this era, then, new media art is capable of facilitating new and radical forms of “community beyond identity.”¹³⁸ Yet the rifts opened by Hansen’s insistence on technology’s processes of exteriorization and the primacy of affectivity, especially in the decades since, reminds us that categories of identity cannot simply be “moved beyond,” because they are not properties of individuals but rather “relation[s] of public encounter,” as Jennifer González suggests.¹³⁹ González critiques Hansen’s “overly utopian, universalizing” understanding of the “facelessness” of the Internet—as “sites of universal subjectivity” that escape the limits of race and gender—arguing that underlying his basic argument is “a hopeful interest” in the emergence of an “unprecedented ethical relation” from the “anonymity” of the Internet.¹⁴⁰ While dated, Hansen’s view was one shared by many in the late 90s and early aughts. This new “Age of the Internet” was a period that many defined by its seemingly radical “postracial” (as well as “postfeminist”) possibilities, as Nakamura and Chow-White argue.¹⁴¹ Of course, the reality that has emerged since is quite different, and over the last two decades, belief in this possible, utopic route became less and less prominent. Nonetheless, this chapter argues that these now-outmoded discourses are important to reading with *Unfriended* as a response to the 2010s cultural moment, discourses that are strategically integrated in and cannibalized by the film to critically silly ends.

¹³⁶ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 144.

¹³⁷ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 147, 168.

¹³⁸ Hansen, *Bodies in Code*, 141.

¹³⁹ Jennifer González, “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 24, no. 1 (70) (2009): 56.

¹⁴⁰ González, “The Face and the Public,” 47.

¹⁴¹ Nakamura and Chow-White, *Race after the Internet*, 1.

Visibility, and the face in particular, remain critical in mediating belonging, particularly on social media and video conferencing platforms, which reveal (rather than neutralize) the persistence and complexity of identity categories. As the “most reproduced visual sign on the Internet,” the face continues to operate as the threshold to public space—a device that “mediates the historicity of the subject and its interior character.”¹⁴² And for Allan Cameron, “Faces are absolutely central to [*Unfriended*’s] formal logic,” given the fact that direct visual interactions between characters take place entirely via the square windows of the Skype interface. Because of this, Cameron claims that “faces are a key element of the production of horror in *Unfriended*.”¹⁴³ *Unfriended* cleverly plays off the tension between the facedness and the facelessness of online environments, where “passing” itself—that is, for Pinkerton, “the total license that comes from operating behind the detachment and distance of a keyboard”—becomes a source of horror.¹⁴⁴

Returning to the scene from *Unfriended*, as the group tries to figure out who (or what) is generating all the defaming posts and messages, the bright-white faceless avatar haunting Skype suddenly reveals its username, “billie227,” to the group, in a message that reads, “it was me.” Everyone stops talking, and the scene goes quiet apart from the ambient hum of the computer and Val’s barking dog in the background. Now side-by-side in tiny square windows lined up at the bottom of the screen, the faces of the white teen friends are suddenly heavily glitched, their visible whiteness swirled and data-moshed beneath the now-enlarged, towering blank-whiteness of billie227’s Skype avatar (Figure 3.6). Moments later, rupturing a long silence, billie227 types

¹⁴² González, “The Face and the Public,” 55.

¹⁴³ Allan Cameron, “Facing the Glitch: Abstraction, Abjection and the Digital Image,” in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, ed. Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 346.

¹⁴⁴ Pinkerton, “Unfriended: Dark Web.”



Figure 3.6. The glitch in *Unfriended* (2014).

“hello 😊.” In response to billie227’s unnerving silliness, Blaire says: “Ken, you said it was just a glitch.” Val retorts: “Well the glitch just typed!” Billie227 continues to agitate the group.

Angry and visibly shocked, Val eventually calls the police to report that she is being harassed. Her video feed abruptly cuts out. The group then receives a photo of Val and Laura’s private Facebook messages from before Laura’s death, with Val telling Laura to kill herself. A moment later, the video feed returns, showing Val sitting motionless in front of the web camera with an alarmed look on her face. The video appears frozen. Strategically, the movie established earlier that Val has a loud dog, and now, the dog barks in the background, confirming that her audio is working but her video isn’t. Jess attempts to call her to circumvent the supposedly broken connection—only to find that, in the corner of the image, Val’s ringing cellphone vibrates on the table, gradually buzzing into frame. Val’s video isn’t frozen; Val herself is “frozen.” This unexpected disjunction between movement and stasis within the one frame is unnerving. The

group notices a broken mirror behind Val and an empty bottle of bleach by her side.¹⁴⁵ Val still doesn't move as her computer falls to the ground in a sudden jump-scare. The police arrive and the group comes to realize that Val has apparently committed suicide. Here, *Unfriended* uses the viewer-user's hyper-familiarity with the forms and feelings of the "frozen frame" to great effect, with the eerie stillness of unmoving, glitched out frames heightening the viewer's vigilance and engagement with the hypermediated screen as they wait for movement to recommence.

Unfriended continues the interrogation of our unease with technology's relentless progression and our overfamiliarity with (yet inability to fully understand) it. The film exploits the omnipresent threat of the glitch by presenting its origins as malevolent and supernatural without changing the look and feel of its familiar dys/functions—we still easily recognize these audiovisual malfunctions as "ordinary" glitches and not necessarily extraordinary errors. In the film, billie227, who is frequently named "the glitch" by the friends in the film, is formally synonymized with the glitch of the user's/victim's white face when staging an online or physical attack. As in the scene leading up to Val's death, the glitching of the face often occurs as the Skype group conversation is interrupted by "buffering" when one of the characters is (about to be) murdered. Here, the "lost connection becomes, literally, a loss of human life," as Neta Alexander argues; "Buffering's endless shapes and forms are often described in technology blogs and popular media as 'the spinning wheel of death,'" a necropolitical correlation among "waiting, 'wasted time,' and lethality," or "slow death" to use Lauren Berlant's term.¹⁴⁶

As the film progresses, characters who are agitated, fearful, or facing imminent death are subjected to the same effect, where the face is suddenly disordered by a data-moshing effect. In

¹⁴⁵ Another nod to Amanda Todd, who first attempted suicide by drinking bleach.

¹⁴⁶ Neta Alexander, "Rage against the Machine: Buffering, Noise, and Perpetual Anxiety in the Age of Connected Viewing," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (2017): 16.

each case, the digital face, trapped within the tight frame of the video interface, is smeared and disarranged before reconstituting itself. As Cameron elaborates, the “victims” are defined:

as vulnerable by the presence of their faces, while the mysterious presence actually *lacks a face* (and a voice) altogether. This presence [...] is instead represented by the generic, faceless Skype icon that stands in for the absence of a portrait image. [...] To have a face, in this context, is to be at a disadvantage. [...] The glitch serves to unmask these characters—to suggest that they should not be taken at face value, and also that they will be unable to escape the abject, even within the tightly defined windows they occupy.¹⁴⁷

Following suit, I argue that the film refamiliarizes us with the racial logics underlying (or rather lying on the very surface of) the “neutral” genericness of that standard(ized) white Skype icon, which lacks a face (or masks an absent one). And by contrast, the film makes us inadvertently aware of the whiteness of the group of teens who do “have” a face—one which is continually “unmasked” and unmade by glitches that garble the wholeness of their visible whiteness.

This leads me to read the (glitched) face in *Unfriended* as a device for the critical “unfolding, or unmaking” of race and gender in the public space of the Internet.¹⁴⁸ I understand the simulated glitching of the face in the film as a queer computational strategy that engages in a silly practice of “critical unmaking,” to quote Jacob Gaboury’s use of the term, by “mak[ing] central those externalities—exploits, bugs, breakdown, abuse, and misuse—of our digital culture that, while pervasive, we nonetheless disavow.”¹⁴⁹ This tactic of “critical unmaking” works to challenge, undo, disassemble, or (propose to) destroy (or provocatively interrogate) systems, foregrounding concerns of stability, precarity, and the rich spectrum of silly states in between. While unmaking systems is a serious topic, potentially a provocative and critical endeavor engaging with issues of power, privilege, and entrenched interests, I aim to approach this in a

¹⁴⁷ Cameron, “Facing the Glitch,” 346.

¹⁴⁸ González, “The Face and the Public,” 38.

¹⁴⁹ Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” 485.

way which encourages and highlights its playfully destructive and generative silliness, asking: how can we play with the systems we're in and reveal them to be inherently silly?

IV. Making Unmaking Silly: Queer Glitches and Silly Visceralizations

Silliness is not quite hysteria, doesn't have its ominous edge, but is nonetheless a somewhat 'ungrounded' experience, a relatively pleasant symptom of anxiety, tension, disturbance.

- Maria Damon¹⁵⁰

A small but playful form of disruption, the “glitch” is perhaps the most familiar version of the queer project of “critical unmaking.” Traditionally understood, a glitch is a minor malfunction in a technical, usually computational, system. It is, as Jennny Sundén describes, a “sudden unexpected event, a surge of current or a spurious, illegitimate signal that breaks the flow of energy or information.”¹⁵¹ A glitch is a momentary error—an unexpected microtemporal event that is (usually) trivial enough to be overcome. Importantly, as Gaboury reminds us, glitches do not shut down a system entirely: “They temporarily transform a technical object by producing an unintended result or error, and in the process lay bare its material function.”¹⁵² As much as glitches are unwanted and unexpected transformations, glitches are also an irritatingly familiar and thus somewhat anticipated reality of online communication, and *Unfriended* works to continually refamiliarize us with these “silly” annoyances of digitality.

The digital glitches in *Unfriended*, then, should not be written off as “mere gimmicks,” writes Denson, arguing that they help us make sense of our broken interpellation within mediated systems, what he terms “discorrelation, or the severing of the perceptual connection between subjects of consciousness and mediated objects.”¹⁵³ The digital glitch serves as “a concise

¹⁵⁰ Maria Damon, “Electronic Poetics Essay. Diaspora, Silliness and ?Gender?,” in *Ergodic Poetry: A Special Section of the Cybertext Yearbook* (University of Jyväskylä, 2002), 152.

¹⁵¹ Jenny Sundén, “On Trans-, Glitch, and Gender as Machinery of Failure,” *First Monday* 20, no. 4 (2015).

¹⁵² Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” 485.

¹⁵³ Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, 160.

emblem” of this experience, where viewers perceive computationally mediated images as disconnected from themselves, revealing them to be “highly volatile and always in danger of dissolution.”¹⁵⁴ In *Unfriended*, glitches exemplify “the horror of discorellation as a stylistic or generic formation,” triggering our techno-anxieties while mediating the “ongoing shift” to “a post-cinematic lifeworld.”¹⁵⁵ Feelings of “suspense” in the film are thus figured in the “micro-intervals of the picturing process and the algorithmic computation,” as Chang-Min Yu explains:

The microscopic burst of tension comes from each pixel recalculated and reformulated—incrementally aggregated—as deformations of the pictorial entities on screen. What is this if not the form of the affect [...] that Eugenie Brinkema forcefully argues in *The Forms of the Affects* (2014)? We are no longer waiting for the inevitable to happen in the supposed ‘film world;’ we are relocated in the thick mix of affective transformation in the on-screen image. [...] Every pixel is a unit of affect that, when multiplied and composited, reveals the hidden infrastructure of the cinematic apparatus.¹⁵⁶

In this formulation, the glitch is a “formal affect,” combining pictorial precarity with felt anxiety. Yet, the specific affect/s attached to the form of the digital glitch can vary widely, and the role of “anxiety” in our affective experiences of digital media and digital horror can be overdetermined.

The glitch has become such a common “gimmick” and, at times, a fairly de-dramatized (even desired) experience in digital media art and culture, one which viewer-users anticipate and have grown more and more accustomed to, dislocated from major feelings like fear, terror, or suspense and increasingly relocated in more minor feelings like disappointment, mild irritation, or silly annoyance. The result, in *Unfriended*, is decidedly not a total or complete discorellation via the glitch nor is it a purely immersive correlation; rather, the affective experience unfolds in a much weirder in-between as the film knowingly works the border between silliness and terror. The result is that the “thick mix of affective transformation in the on-screen image” not only

¹⁵⁴ Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, 3.

¹⁵⁵ Denson, *Discorrelated Images*, 175.

¹⁵⁶ Chang-Min Yu, “Figures for Figuring Out,” *Film Criticism* 40, no. 1 (2016).

produces an extreme or perpetual terror but a more minor sort of discomfort laced with the (over)familiar “silly” feelings of navigating digital spaces. Maria Damon, turning to “silliness’s proximity to horror,” to its “wisdom about horror,” argues that “silliness” is a “relatively pleasant symptom of anxiety, tension, disturbance,” a kind of “light-headedness” in an “experience of dissociation” residing “between catastrophe and silliness.”¹⁵⁷ (This is, for instance, a way of describing the calmingly discomfiting, dissociative silliness of “doom-scrolling.”) The silly, in a sense, is a glitch in horror’s intended terrors, incompletely combining the silly’s dissociations with the glitch’s discorellations, and generating both sillied suspense and suspenseful silliness—suspense that evaporates into silliness and sublimates back into suspense.

As much as glitches are frustrating and anxiety-inducing malfunctions, they also make computers do very silly things—producing silly frozen faces or meme-worthy faults. The existence of glitch-based representation, as Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin write, “depends upon the inability of software to treat a wrong bit of data in anything other than the right way. [...] An isolated problem is encountered and, rather than shutting down, the software prattles on. Stated differently, it is a given program’s failure to fully fail upon encountering bad data that allows a glitch to appear.”¹⁵⁸ Even when simulated, such as in *Unfriended*, glitching is a form of enacting, performing, or playing with these (irritatingly) silly incidents, accidents, and failures of computational processes, reminding us of the ease with which complex computational systems are easily undone. That is, glitches refamiliarize us with the underlying silliness of computers.

The silly and the glitch share key aesthetic and affective qualities. Like the glitch, the silly provides a “practice for dealing with the unexpected and unexplained” as it works to

¹⁵⁷ Damon, “Electronic Poetics Essay. Diaspora, Silliness and ?Gender?,” 152.

¹⁵⁸ Hugh S. Manon and Daniel Temkin, “Notes on Glitch,” *World Picture* 6 (2011).

“unhitch the safety belt of predictability and embrace...volatility.”¹⁵⁹ Through this, the anarchy of the silly (as itself a kind of glitch) helps us read (with) glitches to better feel and know the nonsovereignty of networks. The silly and the glitch are both nonsovereign formal affects that work in tandem to critically unravel (but not break) complex ideological and technological systems. In this way, silliness is “an impetus,” writes artist Louis Osmosis; It is “a lens by which you navigate the world. It glitches the matrix, insofar as you don’t have to serve meaning up on a platter to people, instead it gets displaced into a lot of differentiated affective modes. Like, it’s just a sperm with a hat, you know what I’m saying?”¹⁶⁰ That silliness is dispersed across different affective modes is key here, particularly in reading silliness with/in horror.

And given the fact that “mediated citizenship” is only “getting sillier,” as John Hartley proposes, these common and ubiquitous breakdowns in mediation are also enfolded and expected in this kind of “silly citizenship.”¹⁶¹ The glitch becomes an irritatingly familiar goof in the system with both tragic and ludic potential. Indeed, “Networks are not quite pleasure domes,” writes Geert Lovink; “Discontent grows around forms and causes” in the digital.¹⁶² The glitch is perhaps the most emblematic and recognizable form of this silly discontent that Lovink describes. This sense of silliness-as-discontent can help us understand the mixed feelings we may have when engaging with digital media—the joy and frustration, play and despair, and so on. Indeed, sometimes all it takes is a silly little glitch in the system to render it entirely useless, shattering the illusive “invisibility” of a medium by bringing us back to its material surface.

¹⁵⁹ Peter Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History* (Wakefield Press, 2019), 3.

¹⁶⁰ Louis Osmosis, “REDUNDANCY AND OBJECTHOOD: Louis Osmosis,” interview by Tess Pollok, *Animal Blood Magazine*, February 27, 2024, <https://animalbloodmagazine.com/features/redundancy-and-objecthood>.

¹⁶¹ John Hartley, “Silly Citizenship,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010): 241.

¹⁶² Geert Lovink, *Sad by Design: On Platform Nihilism* (Pluto Press, 2019), 33.

Broadly, the concept of the “silly” seems to capture at least some of these feelings of digital discomfort. The nuances of silliness can include a sense of frustrated expectation and of broken-down communication, the experience of comic error, a downcast-yet-not-bitter sense of dashed hopes, and an interest in the hidden underpinnings (and not-so-hidden materialities) of surface phenomena—in the typical-yet-preposterous errors in otherwise impressive technical performances. *Unfriended* embraces the silly and glitchy absurdities of technology and how completely we adopt these things that are so unnatural and awkward, inviting viewers to make “fun” of themselves by re/engaging with (overly)familiar technology.

The glitch, however, has long been a site for artistic and critical investigation into the aesthetics and politics of digital media. And the interest in shattering the illusion of a medium by laying bare the processes and materials that produce its technical form is a longstanding tradition in modernist art and the avant-garde—a tactic of defamiliarization that renders the familiar strange. It is also a gesture taken up by many queer and trans scholars and artists.¹⁶³ For Kara Keeling, queer/ing is itself a kind of glitch/ing. Unserious and irreverent, the queer is that which “unsettles the common senses—as a malfunction...with a capacity to reorder things...and make what was legible soar into unpredictable relations.”¹⁶⁴ In the queer and trans digital humanities, the glitch as a temporary undoing encourages subversive practices—like “critical unmaking” for Jacob Gaboury, “unmediation” for Whitney Pow, and “unlearning” for Lauren Berlant. The queer project of the glitch, as Berlant explains, provides “a pedagogy of unlearning while living with the malfunctioning world”—a project that asks what gender and sexuality can do to provide

¹⁶³ In 1978, Jamie Faye Fenton, a queer and transgender programmer, created the very first example of experimental video glitch art, *Digital TV Dinner*, using the Bally Astrocade, a home computer and gaming console of her own design. See: Whitney (Whit) Pow, “A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 1 (2021): 197–230.

¹⁶⁴ Kara Keeling, “Queer OS,” *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 154, 157.

“glitchfrastructures” for a “nonsovereign relationality.”¹⁶⁵ For these scholars, to unmake is to make differently, to unmediate is to mediate differently, and to unlearn is to learn differently, while nonetheless re/using the same parts and pieces. This is a way to gently but unpredictably “reorder things,” transqueerying the familiar in silly ways without inventing or innovating something entirely new or totally strange. This is a way to make silly through refamiliarization without making strange through defamiliarization. The queer practice of critical unmaking via the glitch becomes an “extension” to (silly) making and a way to recover material for reuse.

In the time between the birth of Google Chrome and the release of *Unfriended*, the aesthetics of the glitch have grown in visibility and popularity, outside of the queer and trans undercommons. Then and now, popular artists and amateur users adopt techniques for producing pleasurable (or pleasurably irritating) glitches in a variety of audiovisual works. From its notable use in music videos from artists like Kanye West and Janelle Monae to its proliferation as a form of viral meme humor across platforms like (the now defunct) Vine and TikTok, the glitch has undoubtedly become a “hot” aesthetic (to use Rosa Menkman’s designation). In Chapter 2, I looked at the “hot” case of trans and nonbinary hyperpop music videos to unpack some of the obfuscating potentialities of the glitch and other digital modulations. In this case, the glitch has become a notably “silly” and desirable aesthetic, particularly for Gen Z and younger Millennials. As one critic writes, “Gen Z has taken a keen interest” in the glitch—the “malfunction,” the “defect”—which has “evolved into a style around the same time the pandemic emerged.”¹⁶⁶ This has resulted in what another writer calls “the glitch generation,” which embraces “the beauty of

¹⁶⁵ Lauren Berlant, “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times*,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 3 (2016): 394.

¹⁶⁶ Bilge Şahbaz, “Glitchcore Is Gen Z’s Favorite New Trend,” *L’Officiel USA*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.lofficielusa.com/fashion/glitchcore-fashion-trend-spring-summer-2022-runway-gen-z>.

digital loss and ephemerality.”¹⁶⁷ While yet another source claims that the “frighteningly Gen Z world of TikTok [...] almost certainly represents the future of glitch,” with thousands of visceral and experimental “#glitchcore videos” and “knowingly self-aware #eyestrain edits.”¹⁶⁸

As a result, the failures of technology—and our failures with technology—can easily be made productive to the modes of critique in queer and trans media studies—just as the glitch continues to be recuperated as a “hot” aesthetic or “silly” source of humor. This proliferation of the glitch as a “productive” aesthetic practice can (arguably) diminish its radical potential by marking the silliness of failure, and thus transqueerness, as an “explicit and repeatable practice.”¹⁶⁹ The confounding and often contradictory task of marking a mode of being and knowing bound by a refusal to be made useful, productive, or serious has been at the heart of trans and queer theory for decades. But, as Gaboury aptly reminds us: “All channels are noisy channels. All systems contain glitch. These phenomena have no essential quality; they are simply that which we disavow as irregular, unwanted, or queer.”¹⁷⁰ In this way, (trans)queerness, silliness, and the glitch all partake in a shared sense of centrally being of no obvious use.

The glitch, then, is a figure that is both queer and silly, and this queer silliness and silly queerness generates a key ambivalence, offering “both a compelling and frustrating example of queer computation.”¹⁷¹ Gaboury elaborates on this troubling “double bind”:

While we may desire to identify or prescribe a queer computational form that we might use to disrupt or transform our digital landscape, we must acknowledge that any such prescription opens queerness to a radical visibility such that it may be repurposed to serve a normative ideology. [...] We must find ways to negotiate queer technological practices while working against the recuperative drive toward productivity and futurity.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Dorrit Corwin, “The Glitch Generation,” *Post-Magazine*, March 9, 2023, <https://www.browndailyherald.com/post-magazine/article/2023/03/glitch-corwin>.

¹⁶⁸ Future Music, “The Beginner’s Guide to: Glitch,” *MusicRadar*, December 20, 2021, <https://www.musicradar.com/news/the-beginners-guide-to-glitch>.

¹⁶⁹ Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” 486.

¹⁷⁰ Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” 486.

¹⁷¹ Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” 486.

¹⁷² Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation,” 486.

Might the “silly” provide us with an answer—or an outside—to this double bind? Perhaps. But probably not entirely. This chapter engages Gaboury’s cautions by asking how we might instead encounter such “hot” uses of the glitch in a flick like *Unfriended* in critically queer and silly ways that lead us to unexpected places and produce unanticipated insights. Sharing Gaboury’s concerns, Cameron ponders if *Unfriended* might seem merely “to have colonised the glitch, to have used it in the most conservative way possible by rendering it legible and giving it a ‘face.’”¹⁷³ (We might also ask if *Unfriended* has merely colonized the silly to conservative ends, to indict the silly, self-centered relations of the “always-on” generation.) That *Unfriended* seems to have “colonised the glitch” is an important point, one that I also approach with ambivalence.

My take on the queer forms of the glitch differs from the technical project of “Queer OS.”¹⁷⁴ Aligned with Muñoz’s utopian investment in the “not yet” of queer time, a Queer OS “remains a largely speculative project,” a proposition for “a technical project that does not yet exist and may never come to exist, a project that does not yet function and may never function.”¹⁷⁵ But why must a “Queer OS” be speculative, utopian, and focused on avant-garde, experimental work, as these scholars propose? This chapter alternatively considers where in the present, in the popular and silly archives of the everyday, we might identify points of entry for a (trans)queerying of media studies that takes “critical unmaking” as a key point of entry. Against the drive to (re)produce queerness as a useful, productive, and/or recuperable technological apparatus through generative uses of the glitch, I understand the practice of “critical unmaking”

¹⁷³ Cameron, “Facing the Glitch,” 347.

¹⁷⁴ Keeling, “Queer OS.”

¹⁷⁵ Fiona Barnett, Zach Blas, Micha Cárdenas, Jacob Gaboury, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Margaret Rhee, “QueerOS: A User’s Manual,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

in this context in/through the critically queer potentialities of “making silly.” I look at this sense of “critical unmaking”-as-“making silly”—and of making unmaking silly—via the glitch.

And I do so differently than scholars like Denson. Largely unconcerned with the queer frustrations and possibilities of the glitch, Denson reads it as a “generative” aesthetic practice—a “‘productive and creative’ force”—opting not to simply focus on the corrupting/negative nature of the glitch.¹⁷⁶ In passing, Denson briefly alludes to the possibly “useful” connection between discorellation and queerness, suggesting that discorellation “shifts the arena of action squarely away from representational identity politics,” claiming that it should then be possible to mobilize discorellation for “a politics of de- and resubjectivation, for the artificialization and queering of subjectivity.”¹⁷⁷ This leads me to a number of questions: Why does Denson merely allude to the “possible” here? Why cite “queering” here at all? To what extent is queerness discorellation and/or discorellation queerness? Similarly, in her work on the aesthetics of buffering in digital media, Neta Alexander momentarily turns to queer critique, suggesting that queer theorists have “recently studied and problematized the neoliberal notions of success and happiness by foregrounding and focusing their attention on moments of breakdown.”¹⁷⁸ Alexander suggests that buffering is a “cultural phenomenon” that has “morphed into a visual trope in Hollywood films,” turning briefly to *Unfriended* as an example.¹⁷⁹ But how does this focus on a visual trope connect to the work of queer critique that both Denson and Alexander feel compelled to bring up in passing? Is their citation of queerness merely a signposting?

Perhaps, but this chapter takes up Denson and Alexander’s throwaway citation of queerness “seriously,” so to speak, reengaging their work with the question of experiential

¹⁷⁶ Denson, *Discorellated Images*, 176.

¹⁷⁷ Denson, *Discorellated Images*, 148.

¹⁷⁸ Alexander, “Rage against the Machine,” 16.

¹⁷⁹ Alexander, “Rage against the Machine,” 10.

difference in mind. Though Denson regularly turns to the phenomenological and affective experience of a generic viewer/user, his take on disconnection neglects to acknowledge that the “temporal window of human perception and decision-making” is always already marked by difference and disconnection.¹⁸⁰ Many users are always already disconnected from a rational spatial and temporal experience in the digital due to race, gender, sexuality, and other identity markers.¹⁸¹ With this in mind, I extend their readings of the aesthetics of failure in *Unfriended* to more forcefully consider disconnection and/as queerness in the film. Rather than using, or recuperating, the glitch in any productive or useful way, I think of the glitch in and through its “silly” innervations and interventions: “a playful, half-serious, yet deeply political form of computational subversion,” to borrow Gaboury’s words.¹⁸² Expanding on the role of race and whiteness in the dialogue between the IGB Chrome ad and *Unfriended*, I argue that the latter’s silly tactics produce “glitches” in the white social body’s reproductive wholeness. In doing so, *Unfriended* queerly uses the digital glitch as a device for the critical unmaking of race and gender online—one that simultaneously sees “foolishness and waste” as one of “the fundamental aspects of glitch and pixel art,” as Ebru Yetiskin writes.¹⁸³

Returning again to the moment of billie227’s first named appearance, the film presents a clear binary between the un-glitched faceless white avatar and the glitching faces of white users, throwing the face of whiteness out of place and out of order. Here, *Unfriended*’s glitching of the white face realizes a practice of critically unmaking histories of data reduction, compression, and

¹⁸⁰ Denson, *Disconnected Images*, 157.

¹⁸¹ A classic example is the video uploaded to YouTube in 2009, “HP COMPUTERS ARE RACIST,” which demonstrates that an HP MediaSmart computer’s facial-tracking software could not follow the movements of a black user’s face, but it could do so just fine for his white co-worker. Here we see that race disconnects from the outset, necessarily making its user aware of the underlying anti-black processes of computation.

¹⁸² Gaboury, “Critical Unmaking,” 488.

¹⁸³ Ebru Yetiskin, “Paratactic Media and Social Networks: Emerging Forms of Resistance to Algorithmic Power in Artistic Practices,” *Anglistica AION: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18, no. 2 (2014), 122.

chromatic algorithms that overdetermine the transparency of the white face. According to Richard Dyer, the “white face” was always seen as the “most important thing in an image” and “the control on the visual quality of everything,” serving as the litmus test by which proper coloring in photography, cinema, and digital technology was gauged.¹⁸⁴ The white, often female face was the benchmark when experimenting with techniques and equipment, developing reference images like the “China Girls” on the leaders of motion pictures and the “Shirleys” of the print-processing lab. Another industry standard, “Lena,” a compression-algorithm test image scanned from a 1972 Playboy centerfold, remained a standard reference for digital image compression technologies throughout the 21st century. The digitally disturbed image was itself spawned from Lena’s coquettish white face—a scan which is itself a bad reference image for numerous reasons other than its whiteness, such as being blurry and heavily quantized.

Dyer maintains that as media of light, photography and film were designed to depict the “Spirit” of the white body, to make whites look ideal, bright, and often, literally white, further showing how the Cartesian body-spirit paradox of whiteness has been central to the technology of photography and film. If the history of white representation is a recurrent struggle to become disembodied, then death is the extreme version of whiteness, or for Da Silva, “the most evident effect of the post-Enlightenment desire for transparency and the historical and scientific signifying strategies that (re)produce it.”¹⁸⁵ Richard Dyer elaborates on this condition:

Death may in some traditions be a vivid experience, but within much of the white tradition it is a blank that may be immateriality (pure spirit) or else just nothing at all. [...] In the transparent representation of the culture of light, the white face has to be read in the blanks on the paper or screen. To be positioned as an over-seeing subject without properties may lead one to wonder if one is a subject at all. If it is spirit not body that makes a person white, then where does this leave the white body which is the vehicle for the reproduction of whiteness, of white power and possession, here on earth?¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (Routledge, 1997), 88.

¹⁸⁵ Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, 10.

¹⁸⁶ Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, 207.

Following Dyer and Da Silva, I suggest that *Unfriended* reads in the blanks onscreen and works to sillily and critically unmake, or rather queer, the technocultural logics that “rationally” understand disembodied whiteness as a touchstone for photographic innovation—teasing out and refamiliarizing us with the irrational silliness of such industry standards.¹⁸⁷

The film’s “screenlife” format was a fairly new mode of media making advertised to tell more “authentic” narratives “without cinema’s traditional mediator, the human body,” instead embracing technology’s processes of exteriorization.¹⁸⁸ However, I suggest it in fact uses the haptics of simulated glitches to identify “fleshy avatars and incoherent identities...bringing them together through a form of data visceralization.”¹⁸⁹ The glitching of the white face in the webcam “selfie” image throws the white body out of place and out of order, yet it necessarily brings whiteness back to the medium of the body, to embodiment, by laying bare the processes and materials that produce its technical form, making its data visceral and not just visible in the space of the screen. Such data visceralization transforms data into affective experience—in this case, a particularly silly affective experience, a kind of silly visceralization.

The flickering, distorted visage of whiteness becomes cartoonishly monstrous, a garbled parody of its own authority, represented in the ghostly Skype avatar (the “blank,” immaterial, pure spirit of whiteness “without properties”) looming above the data-mashed white faces. And moments later, billie227, the “user” behind the faceless image, types “hello ☺,” taunting the group with a sense of horror-humor usually reserved to a slasher villain like Freddy Krueger or Chucky. When Val calls this “glitch” a “fucking asshole” and threatens to “come over and knock

¹⁸⁷ In this way, *Unfriended* proposes a similar project as Jamie Allen’s 2007 video work “Killing Lena,” which takes the famous Lena reference photo and repeatedly exposes the image to compression techniques it helped develop.

¹⁸⁸ “The Art of Click, Typing and Cursor Movement in Screenlife,” posted October 18, 2019, by Screenlife, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Blfm7qLR2x0&t=78s>.

¹⁸⁹ Barnett et al., “QueerOS: A User’s Manual.”

the trash out of your ears,” billie227 replies in the chat: “but you wouldn’t like it here”—an “unfunny” joke followed by a long silence amongst the group. In moments like these, as one critic writes: “the usual faceless silhouette of a default profile image suddenly starts to resemble a Michael Myers or Ghostface mask—though, of course, the filmmakers fully understand that seeing a blank avatar in your replies or chat window is already a sign that you’re about to have an unpleasant interaction.”¹⁹⁰ In this way, the glitch does not just break representation; it reworks it in a way that is both unsettling, familiar, and comically excessive.

In other words, the glitch in *Unfriended* operates as a queer act of making unmaking silly. This intersection of “critical unmaking” and “making silly” enacts a queer computational logic, unsettling the film’s representational whiteness through the glitch, forcefully making whiteness present and visceral—an irritational refamiliarization of whiteness. *Unfriended* causes “glitches” in the white social body’s reproductive wholeness, disrupting white-as-postracial, posthuman futurity. Such bodily glitches deconstruct whiteness’s seamless transition into a postracial future by emphasizing the unevenness and disjunctive temporalities of racialization. The dis correlation of the white face via the glitching webcam selfie further unravels the post-Enlightenment logic of race as a spatialized exteriority—and whiteness as a temporalized interiority.

Unlike the IGB Chrome ad and Savage’s haptic point-of-view that produces his interior mind in and through time, the camera here imitates the frozen gaze of one computer user, necessitating the viewer-user to filter through multiple small pieces of information across the spatial montage of the computer screen. We are forced to scan the screen for ir/relevant information; our gaze is not really sutured, not directed, and to this extent “we are hailed not as an integral subject, but as a bundle of affects engaged in a collective effort to perceive.”¹⁹¹ With

¹⁹⁰ Dowd, “Unfriended Is the Quintessential Movie about the Internet Age.”

¹⁹¹ Denson, *Discorellated Images*, 175.

our view/feel of the glitching white face spatialized, *Unfriended* realizes a project that, in Da Silva's words, deploys "the tools of scientific reason not to create a rational living thing but to show how the tools of universal nomos, the 'laws of nature,' produce the mind of man."¹⁹² And in the blank white Skype avatar, the (neutral) "face of man" becomes the (coded) "face of the other." *Unfriended*'s glitching of the white face thus realizes a queer practice of critically and sillily unmaking histories that overdetermine the transparency of the white face as the visual quality of everything. In this way, *Unfriended* can be said to use "the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things," in this case systemic racism, the histories of technological innovation, and the commodification of ignorance.¹⁹³

To conclude, then, I follow Gaboury's warning that we must "acknowledge how futurity has been colonized by the cultural logic of contemporary technology, and as such cannot serve as the primary vector for queer computational critique."¹⁹⁴ Rather than mobilize queerness as a useful technological apparatus, this paper has argued for its deployment as part of a critical and silly practice of unmaking. This approach carries with it the "power to retrain affective practical being" and in particular "dishabituate through unlearning the overskilled sensorium that is so quick to adapt to damaged life with a straight, and not a queer, face," as Berlant argues.¹⁹⁵

I have considered the intersections of queer studies and digital humanities to question how a popular "screenlife" project, read in its implication with the form and discourse of the "It Gets Better" Chrome campaign and its broader culture moment, might critically queer the chrononormative lifelogging of the "search story" format through considerations of its embodied

¹⁹² Da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, 94.

¹⁹³ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997), 12.

¹⁹⁴ Gaboury, "Critical Unmaking: Toward a Queer Computation," 490.

¹⁹⁵ Berlant, "The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times*," 399.

critique of techno-triumphalist futurism. In doing so, this chapter ends by asking: what might it mean to do the work of the digital humanities queerly through intentionally silly modes of thinking? Unraveling the temporal politics of the IGB Chrome campaign—its formal convergence of “it gets better” (a futurity that is always already here) and “to make better” (a futurity mandated by techno-triumphalism)—through the temporally delimited glitch, this chapter has explored the ways in which *Unfriended* makes central the cost of getting/making better, literalizing Puar’s claim that the IGB campaign “now shimmers on the Internet as an ironic testament to how it actually may not get better.”¹⁹⁶ Or as one review of the film describes: “There’s that moment when your few-years-too-old laptop stutters and you impatiently wait for it to get it together...*Unfriended* feels like this, except it never gets better and your computer murders you and your close friends.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 10

¹⁹⁷ Christian Kennedy, “‘Unfriended’ Has Original Premise, but Isn’t Great,” *The Michigan Daily*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.michigandaily.com/uncategorized/04unfriended-review17/>.

CHAPTER 4

Silliness as Queer Negativity: Or, the Unbearable Black Anal-ity of *The Eric André Show*

I long for queer radical schlock. Of color. Maybe a more pronounced sense of humor that cuts deep. More laughter, less finger-wagging. A labor that reads you with throwaway materials rife with indelible images. Maybe nobody eating dogshit per se. But close.

- Raquel Gutiérrez¹

On November 13, 2014, episode two, season three of *The Eric André Show* aired on The Adult Swim network. In a hidden-camera sketch midway through the episode, biracial comedian Eric André's character bursts through the front door of a small West Indian restaurant in Queens, New York. André appears panicked, yelling hysterically as cartoonish sound effects accompany his entrance. Closely following André through the door is a screaming white police officer (played by queer comedian James Adomian). The officer catches up to André, aggressively pinning him against the counter and handcuffing him from behind. The officer promptly turns André around to face him, as if to question him. After a pregnant pause, the two suddenly proceed to passionately make out. The cop sensually squeezes André's ass as they kiss. Meanwhile, the pranked workers and customers all look on in shock and awe, yelling expletives at André and the officer. All except one, the wide-eyed cashier who stares intently as the two make out, smiling and slowly nodding with excitement. One white customer yells at the two to "get out of here!" and André yells back: "I wanna fuck that guy!" A freeze frame of the disturbed customer is crudely superimposed with stills of André and the officer licking and kissing his face. A large heart appears over the queer throuple as an erotic sigh ends the scene (Figure 4.1).

As a comedian known for his wild and unpredictable sexual antics, it is perhaps unsurprising that André occupies a precarious relationship to queerness; his humor thrives on a form of radical queer schlock while nonetheless never fully claiming any stakes in the category.

¹ Raquel Gutiérrez, "Radical Schlock," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19, no. 4 (2013): 572–73.



Figure 4.1. Cop kiss prank from *The Eric André Show* (2014).

Though the above sketch is exemplary of the show's frequent fascination with perverted and interruptive queer tactics, the comedian has never explicitly identified himself (or his show) as "queer" in any clear way. (He has, however, consistently provided provocative responses to questions about his sexuality, claiming that "everyone is bi," "I'll fuck anything that moves," and "a hole is a hole has always been my motto."²) Compounded in this scene by the visceral abjection of a black man—of Afro-Haitian and Ashkenazi Jewish descent—kissing a white cop in a predominantly black public space and in the midst of an act of violence, such disruptive sexual antics in the show epitomize André's unique brand of humor—one which frequently invests in aggressively shocking and, as I will argue, silly queer tactics.

² Eric André, "Comedian Eric Andre: The Gay Interview," interview by Mark Allen, *Towleroad Gay News*, August 11, 2016, <https://www.towleroad.com/2016/08/eric-andre-bisexual/>.

With the cashier's aroused excitement, the other non-consenting patrons' repulsed and disgusted reactions, and the consenting at-home viewers' assumed enjoyment, the cop kiss skit perfectly encapsulates *The Eric André Show* as a grotesque yet appealing work of silliness in media. This chapter uses André's show as both a key example and a noteworthy exception in the vast scene of comics working in the genre of "cringe media," including works by Tim Heidecker, Eric Wareheim, Nathan Fielder, Tim Robinson, Ziwe Fumodoh, and numerous others. Given its particular combinations, *The Eric André Show*'s silliness importantly shifts the discussion away from the limiting scope of (good or bad) "representational politics" towards the complexities of the discursive and aesthetic, exploring both queerness and blackness in their many guises.

The concept of *The Eric André Show* is simple: co-directed by Kitao Sakurai and Andrew Barchilon, the show stars Eric André as the host to a parodic low-budget late-night talk show. Each episode promptly descends into complete madness as André frenetically demolishes his entire set while being casually ignored by his deadpan co-host, Hannibal Burress. Since its debut in 2012, André's series has both disrupted and critiqued the inoffensive monotony and disingenuous positivity of daytime and late-night talk show culture with its absurd parody of the format, shuttling between surreal celebrity interviews, short sketches, candid camera footage, and various non sequiturs. Six seasons in, *The Eric André Show* stands out as a remarkably, intentionally, and blithely distasteful example of perverse silliness in popular media—one which importantly calls for new theorizations of what silliness is and does in (and apart from) comedy.

Oftentimes difficult to watch, André's show has a tenuous relationship to "comedy" as such; the show is oversaturated with an irritating and intense form of *silly negativity*—what I call an *unbearable silliness*, or silliness at its most distasteful, repulsive, and abject. Here, I approach the problematic of silly negativity, of the unbearable with/in silliness, as Lauren Berlant and Lee

Edelman approach the scene of queer relationality by “focusing on the ‘negativity’ that can make it so disturbing.”³ In this view, silliness is not a strict disavowal of what’s unbearable in negativity, or even an embrace of what Sara Ahmed calls the “worthless happiness” of “inappropriately positive affects.”⁴ Instead, André strategically deploys his sexually charged brand of silly grotesquerie to uncomfortably dwell in moments where “the potential for shock gets activated by the nearness of the unbearable,” that is, in especially cursed, cringe-inducing, often unfunny moments of queer/ed silliness.⁵ This is, in other words, silliness at its most abject.

Consider another moment from the same episode. After the cop kiss sketch, the show promptly cuts back to the interview portion of the show, where André is heard candidly whispering to his bored guest, reality television star Lauren Conrad: “I could take a pinky but not a whole dick. Yea that’d be rough.” Without a proper segue, André turns to address the audience: “And we’re back with Lauren Conrad.” After some sparse applause, the camera unexpectedly turns to Buress quietly standing to the side and fiddling with an origami cootie catcher. A silent moment passes, and the camera continues to linger on an apathetic Buress; he proceeds to sneeze numerous times and is then met with more sparse applause. André continues with a few more awkward interview questions before suddenly, and intensely, puking all over his desk. As André proceeds to slurp up the chunky vomit off his desk, Conrad storms off set. “She’s a great guest,” André mumbles as Buress takes Conrad’s seat. André then randomly ties a red bandana around his eyes and casually leans back in his desk chair. Buress, still inexpressive, pulls out an antique revolver and shoots André in the chest. From the hole in André’s chest, a little bird suddenly

³ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press, 2014), vii.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), 220.

⁵ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 9.

flutters out. The segment quietly ends there, cutting promptly to another absurd man-on-the-street sketch—an especially disturbing segment where André scalps himself in public.

These moments exemplify this chapter’s turn to *The Eric André Show* as an object of discomforting silliness, one which swiftly moves between moments of excess abjection, debasing anality, awkward silences, gut-busting laughter, and visceral disgust. In the show, interviewed guests are flanked by the apotheosis of both black comic excess and black comic inexpression—a unique juxtaposition which will be important to this chapter. Whereas in Chapter 2, I explored aesthetics of silliness in and through practices of masking and obfuscation in hyperpop music videos by transgender and nonbinary artists, contrary to those practices and performances, *The Eric André Show* mobilizes the silly in and through the hyper-visibility of identity—a hyper-visibility which both overwhelms and underwhelms, as seen in the above example. The temporality of encounter is important here as, over time, in the course of a single episode, a whole season, or the entire series, one can become quite numb to the initially “unbearable” shock value, exhausted by the show’s expected repetitions of abject silliness.

André’s television series explores another formal dimension to theorizations of media silliness in and through its forceful presencing of the confounding queer excesses (and recesses) of blackness. André’s sensibilities closely follow C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp as they invoke “thinking race at its saturation point,” using the framework of “saturation” to “contend with approaches to and methods of racial representation as well as to signal the messiness of dealing with race as a category that exceeds its saturation point.”⁶ Following suit, this chapter invokes thinking the nexus of blackness, queerness, and silliness at its audiovisual saturation

⁶ C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp, “‘Sensuous Contemplation’: Thinking Race at Its Saturation Points,” in *Saturation: Race, Art, and the Circulation of Value*, ed. C. Riley Snorton and Hentyle Yapp (The MIT Press, 2020), 2.

point—at its messiest, its most abject and unbearable—just as André’s show does. And while most readings of the show narrowly theorize this saturation point exclusively via the aesthetic excesses and representational extremities of André’s overwhelming brand of silliness, this chapter stresses the show’s integral mixing of black excess with black deadpan aesthetics—an underwhelming comic sensibility which André’s show privileges just as much as excess in its ambivalent theorizations and practices of televisual blackness, positing the unbearable with/in silliness as both the “too much” and “not enough” of queer/ed blackness.

This chapter moves through two larger projects. The first draws together blackness, queerness, and silliness through a logic of the “unbearable,” which I primarily explore via the show’s deployment of anal aesthetics and ideologies. Thinking race at its saturation point, for André, regularly takes shape in and through moments of shocking debasement centering the anus and other adjacent forms of scatological silliness. Describing his series, André exemplarily claims that “it’s like poop and pee mixed together,” or in other words, the show is a filthy and wasteful piece of media through and through.⁷ Embracing these descriptors, this chapter explores the ways in which André’s silliness overwhelms—as much as it underwhelms—in its queer/ed emphasis on what Jennifer C. Nash terms “black anality,” or the manner in which “black pleasures are imagined to be peculiarly and particularly oriented toward the anus” and thus attached to “*anal ideologies* including *spatiality*, *waste*, *toxicity*, and *filth*.”⁸ The anus as a potentially transgressive space has been developed in both black feminist and queer theories, shaping understandings of the anus as a (radically) counter/productive, counter/political, and

⁷ Gloria Brancatisano, “Vomit, Trump and Going to Jail: A Chat with Eric Andre,” *Beat Magazine*, December 7, 2016, <https://beat.com.au/vomit-trump-and-going-to-jail-a-chat-with-eric-andre/>.

⁸ Jennifer C. Nash, “Black Anality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 4 (2014): 439.

dis/pleasurable site of disruption within normative cultures that rely on abjection as a strategy for producing racial and/or sexual binaries and hierarchies of desirability and pleasure.

Apart from queerness and blackness, anality has been theorized in comedy studies as a crude yet perverse site at which the vulgar physicality of the “funny” and the “abject” meet.⁹ Typically, the forms and feelings of the “unbearable”—the insufferable, the unwatchable, etc.—are only ever asymptotically approached; the unbearable is rarely embraced fully as to not threaten or disavow one of the comic genre’s key goals: laughter. Whereas comedy as such rarely moves into the extremes of the “unbearable,” at least not intentionally so, I argue that silliness regularly does; this is clear in André’s often knowingly unfunny and insufferable reliance on anal silliness—a silliness that is just “too much” for some.

This chapter’s second project turns to “silliness” as an overlooked, undertheorized, and misunderstood term in relation to comedy studies, one which is key to understanding how the “too much” of the “unbearable” takes shape within silliness and (often) without comedy, particularly when amplified by abject forms and feelings of queer/ed blackness. In doing so, I aim to show that the “unbearable” with/in silliness dwells not in the funny or the humorous—and thus not in “comedy” per se—but rather in moments at which everything feels too much, or not enough, that is, as Ahmed argues, “when a body, a life, a world becomes unbearable,” and thus the usual pleasures of silliness queerly dissolve into discomfort.¹⁰ To address this, I dwell in detail on the negative modalities of silliness in the televisual comic genre, using *The Eric André Show* as a key case study. I focus in particular on the negative affective category of the “unbearable,” specifically the point in which the aesthetics of queer/ed blackness and the

⁹ See for example: William Paul, “Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality,” in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew Horton (University of California Press, 2020), 109-130.

¹⁰ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 97.

aesthetics of silliness become simultaneously unbearable with/in the comic genre, and where the efficacy of “comedy” altogether comes under threat. In other words, I ask: when does “comedy” become unbearably black, unbearably queer, and unbearably silly all at once?

What ties these two projects together, beyond the logic of the silly in each, is the way that *The Eric André Show* works to create a bridge—at the level of the aesthetic, discursive, and representational—between queerness and blackness, and vice versa. The show is rarely considered in terms of its place in either black or queer visual culture—perhaps due to its extreme, anti-redemptive focus on anal forms of silliness. But this is exactly what makes it worth considering. As I argue, *The Eric André Show* is uniquely difficult to endure (even for consenting viewers and those familiar with cringe media) due to both its abrasively queer intensifications of blackness and silly aesthetic distortions of the televisual medium.

To address this, this chapter engages with queer theorizations of blackness, which have, in varied ways, emphasized the “queerness of blackness.” Calling on us to think about “how blackness *is* queer,” Darieck Scott considers how “the history that produces blackness is a sexual history.”¹¹ Engaging with this scholarship on negativity, abjection, and the black popular image, André’s silly self-shattering intensities call for a reading of the show that centers its queer/ed blackness at the level of aesthetics and affect. Beyond the limits of representational politics, I explore the slippery intersections at which the forms and feelings of queer/ed blackness, visceral silliness, and abject negativity interoperate in André’s comedy series and become difficult to bear, gleefully embracing a nonsovereign loss of bearings where random, unexpectedly queer intensifications of blackness stretch and strain the televisual to its breaking point, allowing for ambivalently silly possibilities which recuperative cultural and political projects do not.

¹¹ Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York University Press, 2010), 8.

I. Silliness and the Limits of Comedy

I'm Eric. I'm an Andre. Comedy doesn't exist. Ask me anything.
- Eric André¹²

Let him entertain you . . . or else.
- The Adult Swim Network¹³

While André's ironic provocation at the outset of a 2016 Reddit AMA ("Ask Me Anything") that "comedy doesn't exist" can easily be dismissed as just another joke by the agitating prankster, it nonetheless opens up questions about how fitting the category of "comedy" is for defining the unruly, interminable, and discomforting silliness of *The Eric André Show*. At first, the "silly" and the "comedic" appear to be simple cognates. Silliness is all about the laugh, and comedy is all about silliness. Or so it seems. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock summarizes this common perspective, claiming that silliness, as an "innocently playful" and lighthearted comic sensibility or disposition, is "qualitatively different from disgust, revulsion, and aversion."¹⁴ In this formulation, silliness solely has a positive social value. Silliness is affirming; it is the negation of all things unpleasant. Or, at the very least, it is the negation of all things which threaten to discomfort the sovereign subject. As Weinstock adds:

the moment of silliness is one of absorption, as one is caught up in the movement of laughter—not the laugh of the Medusa, which is one of scorn, but rather the child's laugh of surprise and delight. It is laughter as affirmation rather than negation or denigration. Silliness [...] is an act or moment of fullness, of plenitude, and of effervescent good humor. True silliness is also its own end—one is silly for no other reason than to be silly, and laughter is the manifestation of its excessiveness. The pleasure of silliness inheres in being silly, and silliness is both inwardly and outwardly directed—as an internal disposition that manifests itself through laughter, through the body, it is inward; however, silliness, as fullness to overflowing, also bubbles over into the world.¹⁵

¹² ericandreericandre, "I'm Eric. I'm an Andre. Comedy Doesn't Exist. Ask Me Anything.," Reddit Post, *R/IAmA*, October 12, 2016,

www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/5752au/im_eric_im_an_andre_comedy_doesnt_exist_ask_me/.

¹³ "HANDCUFFED! | The Eric Andre Show | Adult Swim," posted November 19, 2014, by Adult Swim, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYFIACJ40cc>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film," in *Science Fiction Double Feature*, ed. J. P. Telotte and Gerald Duchovnay (Liverpool University Press, 2015), 235.

¹⁵ Weinstock, "Bubba Ho-Tep and the Seriously Silly Cult Film," 235.

This is a common view of silliness—one which definitionally equates silliness with comedy and comedy with silliness. In this, silliness is “intentionally pointless and superficial, seeking nothing more than a good laugh,” as Peter Timms writes.¹⁶ However, while silliness can certainly involve or invoke the pleurably comedic, humorous, funny, and/or laughable, it can (and often does) also take shape in/through a range of other often-negative and/or disorderly modalities—even those which Weinstock firmly pits silliness against (i.e. disgust, revulsion, and aversion).

While silliness can be innocently ludic and playful, like a giddy group of adults playing tag or a round of *Candy Land*, silliness can also be cruel and punishing, like an unexpected pie to the face or a kick in the groin. It can revolt and disgust, like an excessively abject or scatological sense of goofiness. It can distantiate, alienate, and even denigrate, like an insult comic routine or a self-deprecating joke. It can be hyperbolic and irritating, like an autotuned hyperpop song with extreme vocals; or, it can be flat, muted, and/or entirely inexpressive, like an awkward moment of silence or a subtle side-eye glance to a friend across the room. It can be annoying and grating, like a sugar-fueled hyperactive child or a catnip-high cat rampaging around a room. It can be cringe-inducing, like the dialogue in a porno’s narrative setup. It can be painfully unfunny, like the oppressive incompetence of the privileged and those in positions of power. And so on. There are certainly affinities between silliness and humor, and silliness can take shape with/in laughter, but I aim to show that this is a problematically simplistic view. Such a conflation of terms is especially inadequate when dealing with (the histories of) racialized comic representations and silly performances of blackness which may or may not produce laughter in all audiences.

I am thus less concerned with questions posed by scholars like Evan Elkins who simply ask: “Why is *The Eric André Show* funny? [...] given all of its wanton destruction, violence, and

¹⁶ Peter Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History* (Wakefield Press, 2019), 18.

object distastefulness.”¹⁷ Indeed, this shouldn’t be a hard question to answer for those who care to ask it, for comedy need not be inherently funny.¹⁸ And since humor has long involved displays of unruly violence, bodily dysfunctions, and perversions of both good taste and televisual conventions, I instead shift the discussion around André’s show to consider silliness itself as an affective intensity and aesthetic category that is distinct from comedy or humor (even as it can operate in/through them). Whereas comedy conforms to well established patterns and theories (i.e. superiority, incongruity, relief/release, play, etc.) and is “a little too neat and tidy: a little too predictable” as Timms suggests, silliness is essentially unruly—much more slippery, chaotic, and confounding in its generated affects, both intended and unintended, and seemingly impossible to define clearly.¹⁹ Even more so than comedy, the undertheorized concept and slippery aesthetic category of silliness fundamentally intertwines its positive and negative modalities, the funny and unfunny, into a singularly twisty and unending loop—a tangled Möbius strip of silliness.

Consider, on the other hand, one of the dominant theories used to explain humorous things, namely, the incongruity theory of comedy, which posits laughter as a response to the perception of incongruity, arising from the lack of correspondence between expectation and delivered result. At first glance, this theory appears to share a lot with leading conceptualizations of silliness-as-laughter, which similarly rely on the perception of “surprise and delight,” on something being humorously unexpected, absurd, out of the ordinary, strange, or bizarre. Yet, this version of comic amusement, for Noël Carroll, “requires as its object a perceived incongruity [...] which is neither threatening nor anxiety producing nor annoying but which can, on the

¹⁷ Evan Elkins, “The New Logic of the Absurd: The Eric André Show,” in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (University of Texas Press, 2018), 59.

¹⁸ Comedy (in its original genre form) was more about the narrative arc in contradistinction to the tragic genre.

¹⁹ Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 2.

contrary, be enjoyed.”²⁰ For something to be genuinely amusing, it must not be annoying. Instead, incongruity “dissipates pleasantly when the silliness it signifies dawns upon us. That is, a phenomenological sense of tensing or being set aback when confronted by a humorous absurdity is then followed by a psychological feeling of settling back, or ease, or relaxation when we realize it presents no challenge.”²¹ Silliness is again mistaken for a cathartic levity internal to the process of comic amusement. Yet, Carroll’s definition disqualifies a lot of comedy from the last many decades. Annoyance is often integral to silliness—sometimes to an unbearable extent. If silliness can depend on unbearable modalities—on “threatening” and “annoying” pleasures which are difficult to bear—then more often than not, silliness is not *just* comedy—and comedy is not *just* silliness. While this may not seem to be a very controversial claim—of course silliness can be annoying—the consequences of such an argument nonetheless continue to be largely ignored, underplayed, or entirely misunderstood in both scholarly and popular explanations.

Simply put, we might instead ask: Why is an often unbearably unpleasant show like *The Eric André Show* still considered to be an unquestionably “silly” work, even to those who find it exceedingly unfunny? Is silliness still silly if its surprises do not simply delight? How and why do the affective and aesthetic categories of negativity, abjection, and silliness essentially coexist? And why, as one critic notes, is *The Eric André Show* “simultaneously silly and slightly alarming,” surprisingly light and yet confoundingly intense?²² Or, as Steven Shaviro writes of Jerry Lewis’s comedy, “[it] is funny...but it is never *just* funny”—a statement that summarizes comedy studies, in general, fairly well.²³ In this way, as André’s brand of “comedy”

²⁰ Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 82.

²¹ Carroll, *Humour*, 124.

²² Rachel Aroesti, “‘Horribly Absurd’: How Did Millennial Comedy Get so Surreal?,” *The Guardian*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/aug/13/how-did-millennial-comedy-get-so-surreal>.

²³ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 108.

demonstrates, the pleasures of silliness are frequently unbearable, or as Berlant and Edelman have aptly argued, “enjoyment itself...can be unbearable.”²⁴ Renegotiating the benign catharsis that usually accompanies the comic genre’s theorized conventions, André’s show is a reminder that silliness is not necessarily comforting, pleasurable, or even funny; it is instead “an incoherence we cannot master by finding it comic.”²⁵ Silliness is its own aim.

My aim is not only to expand the scope of comedy studies to better account for silliness, but also, and more importantly, to suggest an understanding of silliness as a distinct—though related—category to humor. Consider the opening setup of every episode of André’s show, which begins by literalizing the program’s focus on silliness-for-silliness-sake as André violently destroys the cheap-looking set, beating his desk with his hands, vomiting, crying, bleeding, and so on. Take, for example, the opening of the show’s very first episode. We open on the show’s main set: a standard talk-show set-up with a desk, a chair, and some bland décor. The show’s title is superimposed in plain white text over the set. A booming announcement starts the show: “Ladies and gentlemen, *The Eric André Show!*” The recognizable sounds of a talk show’s jazzy opening music follow as André sprints onscreen, shrieking as he leaps over his desk chair and tears down the backdrop curtains. He then bum-rushes the house band, hurling the bass drum across the demolished set before violently tackling the drummer.

From here, André’s grotesque mayhem becomes increasingly difficult to watch. Now shirtless, André screams with two raw chickens on his hands; he pulls out his own teeth with pliers, kisses a woman with his bloodied mouth, and throws her onto the ground; he strips naked and destroys what’s left of the set. Exhausted and sweat-drenched, he sits down in a chair while a

²⁴ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, vii.

²⁵ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 8.



Figure 4.2. The destructive opening sequence of *The Eric André Show* (2012).

new set is promptly brought in and built back up around him by stagehands (Figure 4.2). Upon sitting at his desk, André remarks, “That’s all I had planned for the show. What should I do now?” Co-host Buress apathetically replies, “I don’t know, do a monologue or something.” André proceeds to perform a half-hearted monologue before lamenting, “I’m dying.” Buress retorts, “We all are,” and suddenly falls asleep as the show switches to a public-access-quality

“We’ll be right back” card, complete with oddly cheery transition muzak. The show’s opening sequences vary from episode to episode, growing more bizarre and elaborate each time.

The danger of moments like these, as Shaviro explains, is that in the dramatization of abjection, “comedy will disappear altogether.”²⁶ While the unproductive destruction in sequences like these can easily register to viewers as “silly,” as pointlessly goofy and juvenile, the violent slapstick is taken to such an extreme that the category of “comedy” seems to no longer make sense, at least not by itself. What’s so funny about a deranged man pulling out his own teeth and forcefully kissing a woman? While André identifies (and is identified) as a “comedian,” many have also identified André’s avant-garde brand of silliness as an example of the limits of comedy. For Elkins, “the excess of André’s comedy threatens to render theories of comedy and humor unsuitable for the task of decoding it.”²⁷ As a result, audiences react to André’s comedy with extreme variance; while some find it to be extremely funny, others find it unwatchable, humorless, or unbearably juvenile—“so unfunny its insulting,” as one redditor writes, “Its insulting to comedy, its insulting to my senses.”²⁸ It’s just “too silly,” another redditor claims.²⁹ As such, designations of “silliness” are not dependent on the efficacy of the show’s “comedy.” Comedy is undoubtedly subjective, but silliness appears to be more structural and unanimous. For some, then, *The Eric André Show* is painfully unfunny precisely because it is “too silly”; and yet, André’s silliness is often intended to be insulting and painfully unfunny.

André’s uncompromisingly silly brand of humor rarely conforms to either Weinstock’s or Timms’s rigid definitions of silliness-as-laughter. André’s extreme silliness repels rather than

²⁶ Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 114.

²⁷ Elkins, “The New Logic of the Absurd: The Eric André Show,” 59.

²⁸ elephantear11, “Eric Andre Show Is so Unfunny Its Insulting,” Reddit Post, *R/Unpopularopinion*, April 16, 2021, www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/ms5y4z/eric_andre_show_is_so_unfunny_its_insulting/.

²⁹ “[IIL] Absurd Comedy and Surreal Fiction Such as the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Monty Python, David Firth, Etc [WEWIL?] [Film][TV][Books][YouTube],” Reddit Post, *R/Ifyoulikeblank*, July 1, 2017, www.reddit.com/r/ifyoulikeblank/comments/6kq0ct/iil_absurd_comedy_and_surreal_fiction_such_as_the/.

absorbs, denigrates rather than affirms, drains rather than fulfills. His intense commitment to the aesthetic intensities of silly negativity is often misread in terms of strict negation, a commitment to producing “a true anti-talk show,” a moniker bestowed on the program by *The New York Times*.³⁰ Co-director of the show, Kitao Sakurai, eschewed labelling the show as an “anti-talk show,” saying in an interview: “I think [the term] implies that we’re 100% dependent on the material that other, legitimate talk shows supply, that we’re just living off of that.”³¹ Such incomprehensible moments as the cop kiss prank, in their overblown extremity, can barely be considered to be simple parodies or deconstructions of usual talk-show antics.

In his reading of the show, Elkins claims “André’s humor aligns closely with a loose, avant-garde subgenre of comedy varyingly known as ‘anti-humor,’ ‘anti-comedy,’ ‘post-funny,’ or ‘metacomedy.’”³² Elkins cites Jeffrey Sconce who first developed the idea of “metacomedy,” defining the term as “stand-up, sketch, and even narrative comedy that is explicitly about the art of comedy itself, a foregrounding of its expectations, conventions, and execution.”³³ (Sconce specifically analyzes metacomedy through the work of Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim, a.k.a., Tim and Eric, an Adult Swim-based comedy duo identified by their easily recognizable aesthetic of absurdism, awkward performances, and bizarre bodily humor presented in a low-budget style. *The Eric André Show* is in fact coproduced by Tim and Eric’s Abso Lutely Productions.) Yet much of *The Eric André Show* has nothing to do with “the art of comedy itself,” but rather the art of silliness itself. It is instead a “metacomedy” about what silliness is and does—a work of “metasilliness” where silliness is itself about the art of silliness. The show

³⁰ Jason Zinoman, “The Rise of the Anti-Talk Show,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/arts/television/the-rise-of-the-anti-talk-show.html>.

³¹ Jason Tabrys, “Interview: The Mad Genius of The Eric Andre Show,” *GeekNation*, June 12, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170425022852/http://geeknation.com/interview-the-eric-andre-show/>.

³² Elkins, “The New Logic of the Absurd: The Eric André Show,” 63.

³³ Jeffrey Sconce, “Tim and Eric’s Awesome Show, Great Job! Metacomedy,” in *How To Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mitchell (New York University Press, 2013), 75.

itself offers a new and important theorization of silliness. André's humor comes not from the negation of jokes in a classical sense, but from an interstitial form of silliness that has become part of Adult Swim's brand, incorporating "extreme ugliness, unpleasantness, and legitimately uncomfortable moments into bits that nevertheless gesture toward comedic traditions from throughout media history," especially from the vast archives of black comic performances.³⁴

Comedy is merely one mode silliness can take, with laughter being one of its many possible exteriorizations. As scholars of comedy have already pointed out, the comic genre is itself not just about laughter and amusement, but also fundamentally about playfully exploiting the many negative, unflattering parts of human nature—the silly, clumsy, embarrassing, anxious, or otherwise flawed qualities of human beings. Comedy exposes the "silly side" of humanity; and, even more so, it understands such "silliness" as the defining trait of human beings; and so, one of the primary roles of comedy is to reveal this silly and anxious side. (This returns us to my discussion of Stanley Cavell's view on thinking and/as silliness in the prior chapter.)

In the same vein, Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai have explored comedy's anxious affects, arguing that "[c]omedy's pleasure comes in part from its ability to dispel anxiety" but also, "[as] both an aesthetic mode and a form of life, its action just as likely produces anxiety: risking transgression, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure."³⁵ In this view, *The Eric André Show* does not simply negate or exceed the comic genre in its displeasures; rather, it makes a lateral move, one which more fully embraces silliness as its own aesthetic and affective category. Comedy studies has long accounted for the place of negative affects and the extremities of abject unruliness in the genre. What it has yet to account for, however, is the role of silliness as itself "an aesthetic mode

³⁴ Elkins, "The New Logic of the Absurd: The Eric André Show," 63.

³⁵ Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 233.

and a form of life,” one that flows in and out of the comic mode, intensifying comedy’s negative affects and anxious modalities, frequently to the point of being unbearable.

II. The Unbearable in Silliness

Unbearable, interminable, unfathomable: I might call this blackness as persistence.

Jared Sexton³⁶

The unbearable [...] is best defined as any overwhelming affect that feels like it might cause system collapse but must be taken up, even as it may shatter its bearer. [...] The unbearable points to a pressure we feel that points to a system at its limit, a structure or a mind being tested until it appears to bend to the point of nearly giving out. [...] [T]he unbearable is the pure form of threat at its highest intensity. [...] It is a limit case of inconvenience to the reproduction of life.

- Lauren Berlant³⁷

As the above two quotes suggest, the category of “the unbearable” has a special relationship to both black thought and queer thought, and it is an especially important touchstone for recent theorizations of “black negativity” and “queer negativity.” “Unbearable Blackness” is the title of one of Jared Sexton’s seminal reflections on afro-pessimism and political life, and a key text of the movement’s canon. In it, blackness is, indeed, found unbearable. The same goes with queer negativity, where “the unbearable” has there too a place of prominence, as one of the framework’s signal monographs, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s *Sex, or the Unbearable*, suggests. As I argue in this section, the “unbearable” also has a special relationship to silliness, especially when theorized as an aesthetic and affective modality of blackness and queerness. Of course, silliness is not reducible to the unbearable—just as blackness and queerness are both not reducible to the unbearable. In this section, I nonetheless aim to locate the unbearable with/in silliness—and the silliness with/in the unbearable—at the precarious intersections of black negativity and queer negativity, specifically within the context of *The Eric André Show*.

³⁶ Jared Sexton, “On Black Negativity, Or The Affirmation Of Nothing,” interview by Daniel Barber, September 18, 2017, *Society and Space*, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing>.

³⁷ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Duke University Press, 2022), 151-152.

Before turning to the show, it's important to clarify that André is not alone in his turn to an unbearable silliness and fascination with the "comic frames that negativity can inhabit."³⁸ Many other contemporary comics have made a name for themselves by exploiting the unbearable negativity with/in silliness: from the graphic stupidity and shocking violence of the *Jackass* franchise (2000-), the unpleasant ordinariness and improvisational discomfort of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-), the cringe comedy and toilet humor of comic duo Tim & Eric (2004-), the annoyingly offensive narcissism of the cast of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005-), the punitive hidden-camera humiliation of the *Impractical Jokers* (2011-), the aggressive vox-pop shenanigans of Billy Eichner's *Billy on the Street* (2011-2017), the embarrassing stubbornness of Tim Robinson's characters in *I Think You Should Leave* (2019-), the anxious awkwardness of Nathan Fielder's characters in *Nathan For You* (2013-2017) and *The Rehearsal* (2022-), the flirty clumsiness of Amelia Dimoldenberg's *Chicken Shop Date* interviews (2014-), the droll dopiness of Diane Morgan's Philemona Cunk in *Cunk on Earth* (2022-), the deadpan inexpression of Bobbi Althoff's celebrity interviews on *The Really Good Podcast* (2023-), and so on. Millennial and Gen-Z humor is increasingly invested in the (radically) freeing possibilities of embracing anxiousness, awkwardness, cringe, discomfort, irony, depressive feelings, and casual abjection.

These dysphoric affects, however, are deployed predominantly by white comics; indeed, all above examples are white. Whether in excess embodiment or withdrawn underperformance, these comics deploy abjection to mark their whiteness as a particular "affective code," as José Esteban Muñoz suggests, one which more easily dwells in the zone of negativity without much repercussion, without fears of "misrepresentation" and demands for positivity and racial uplift.³⁹

³⁸ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, xiv.

³⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, "Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's 'The Sweetest Hangover (And Other STDs),' " *Theatre Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 69.

As Rebecca Wanzo argues, “race makes a critical difference in how middle-class millennial abjection is represented as a path toward freedom.”⁴⁰ The added element of race/non-whiteness is one of the reasons why some have argued that André’s humor poses a threat to traditional theories of comedy. For Elkins, one reason these theories of comedy “can’t fully explain the dynamics of André’s humor” is that “they don’t account for the program’s representational politics in the context of post-network television culture.”⁴¹ Furthering this point, Wanzo notes:

While white comedians depict acceptance of the abject self as signifying a more evolved self, Western black subjects nonetheless have a different relation to abjection. [...] For middle-class white subjects, abjection historically has not been a defining characteristic of white identity; thus, the embrace of abjection for [white subjects] means coming to terms with a new, uglier place to inhabit. But since black subjects arguably have emerged from abjection, reframing the affective response to that history and taking away some of that history’s power to wound has been the work of many black cultural producers.⁴²

If blackness has a different relation to abjection—itsself emerging from the condition of the unbearable (and the often unlivable)—then black comics’ play with “unbearable silliness” is undoubtedly riskier, messier, but no less silly. While comedy’s anxious affects are more easily exploited by white comics, some, like André, have specifically exploited its (transgressive) identifications with blackness (or brownness)—such as Ziwe Fumodoh in her trolling mock talk-show *Ziwe* (2021-2022), Isa Rae in her web series *Awkward Black Girl* (2011-2013) and show *Insecure* (2016-2021), or even Mindy Kaling in her show *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017).⁴³

The above examples, however, rarely exceed slight discomfort or cringe, refusing to plunge into the unbearable and opaque depths of what Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman terms “black

⁴⁰ Rebecca Wanzo, “Precarious-Girl Comedy: Issa Rae, Lena Dunham, and Abjection Aesthetics,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 31, no. 2 (92) (2016): 29.

⁴¹ Elkins, “The New Logic of the Absurd: The Eric André Show,” 66.

⁴² Wanzo, “Precarious-Girl Comedy,” 29-30.

⁴³ Wanzo’s argument, however, becomes a bit more complicated when placed in dialogue with something like the ethnic, Jewish American humor in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which does not redeem the abject self, and keeps the viewer in perpetual discomfort. In that series, Larry David is indeed never “more evolved.”

grotesquerie.”⁴⁴ Instead, they remain quite palatable, bearable, and often relatable, altogether avoiding the alienation of white viewers. André, on the other hand, viscerally embraces the signal features of “black grotesquerie” in the “acceptance of catastrophe as the context for black being, the practice of living on in outmoded shapes, the appetite for the unbearable underside of enjoyment, and the determination to make last what has already been ruined,” even as the show’s target demographics are often identified as young, white, and male.⁴⁵ Not satisfied by simply dipping his toes in the abject, André instead plays with the aesthetics of silliness at their most unbearable—at the queer extremes of visceral excess and the recesses of unbearable evacuation which signify televisual blackness. In doing so, André uniquely stresses the queer/ed abjection of black masculinity in and through the aesthetic silliness of an often-unbearable negativity.

Through this, André challenges views of silliness that imagine a universal positive social value, that all silly things are puerile and innocently positive, and views of blackness that insist on positive representations and racial uplift, where attachments to the possibility of upward mobility characterize “the good life” fantasy. Shows like André’s are resultantly haunted by their antecedents, particularly racial uplift film and television, where the unbearable in blackness is anxiously disavowed. The show’s abject aesthetics counter the normative uplift model in black media, whose creators often see themselves as providing forms of respectable representation that trouble media’s long role in the production and reinforcement of racial hierarchies. In the United States, the comic genre regularly positioned the “racialized subject as an excessively emotional and expressive subject,” what Ngai terms “the racialized affect of animatedness.”⁴⁶ Racialized animatedness historically figured people of color as abject objects of unruly excess. Laughed at

⁴⁴ Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “Black Grotesquerie,” *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (2017): 682–703.

⁴⁵ Abdur-Rahman, “Black Grotesquerie,” 683.

⁴⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

and denigrated, they were comic characters treated as overly expressive exteriorities, as pure surface, lacking any interiority. By 1900, the image of silly and exaggerated black performers in comic routines became the mainstay of musical acts, songs, and skits that dominated vaudeville and the theatrical scene across America, intentionally acting in a manner that Stanley M. Elkins identifies as “full of infantile silliness...and childish exaggeration” in order to elicit laughter from predominately white audiences.⁴⁷ From the legacies of blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville performances of racialized silliness, the history of comic blackness onscreen troubles generous readings of the silly’s universal positive value, which prioritize the cathartic possibilities of laughter as the essential expression of (race-blind) silliness.

In an article on *The Eric André Show*, reviewer Craig D. Lindsey places André squarely within this long and troubling history of comic blackness in America:

As a culture, African-Americans generally frown upon the idea of being unabashedly clownish for the masses—black folks call it “showing your ass.” All those years of early-20th-century performers like Stepin Fetchit, shucking and jiving for the amusement of white audiences, have made later generations of African-American performers cautious about how they present themselves to both black and white crowds. [...] It’s OK to make people laugh — but don’t be a complete buffoon. The biracial and bushy-haired Eric André apparently didn’t get the memo on how to act like an African-American comedian. Instead, he proudly acts like a shameless, goddamn fool.⁴⁸

Lindsey makes the distinction between the respectable positivity of comic laughter and the much less respectable negativity of a performative silliness with no discernible point, one which he identifies with André as a perverse black creator dwelling in the excesses of black abjection and unruliness to entertain white audiences. As a result, though André’s show is ostensibly a satire of talk-show culture, André’s excess silliness eschews from the purposefulness of satire. If satire is

⁴⁷ Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, 3rd ed., rev. ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 82.

⁴⁸ Craig D. Lindsey, “A Toast to the Epic Dada Madness of The Eric Andre Show,” *Miami New Times*, September 6, 2016, <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/film/a-toast-to-the-epic-dada-madness-of-the-eric-andre-show-8742452>.

about laughing society into reform, silliness is incapable of redemption. It isn't meant to be helpful or productive; it is instead enthusiastically wasteful and unproductive.

Consider here a starkly different (and much more self-serious) approach to satire—one taken by Spike Lee in his 2000 film *Bamboozled*, which sternly interrogates why the television performance industry, and its audiences, have an affinity for depictions of blacks as funny and silly caricatures. Like André, Lee satirizes television specifically. While Lee's work is certainly not humorless, at times embracing forms of silliness such as in the deliberately over-the-top performance of black respectability in Damon Wayans's character, Pierre Delaroix, ultimately, for Lee, the infrequent representation of "serious" black life in the present century is a disturbing residual of previous black disenfranchisement in the media. And as such, it should be met with a level of seriousness and depth not taken by satirists like André. Satire is Lee's agit-prop tool. Plain silliness, however, is emphatically not the path to black liberation; it is instead seen to intensify the racist trope of a laughably unruly exteriority without interiority.

André nonetheless embraces the radical irritations of silliness as a way to play out "a logic of exposure to the unbearable as a source of knowledge that is better not to be managed properly," as Berlant writes.⁴⁹ André's approach to satire is markedly different in its enthusiastic embrace of the wasteful, unproductive, and nonsovereign exteriorities of silliness, abjection, and negativity, and the show's overall disinterest in redemptive politics. Or as Timms summarizes: "If satire speaks truth to power...then silliness speaks a language power will never understand," a language which power cannot bear, or simply does not care about, or is bored by.⁵⁰ If blackness emerges from the unbearable—"constructed by a history of abjection and is a form of abjection," as Scott describes—and if "aesthetic silliness" inheres in the queerly abject excess of black male

⁴⁹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 155.

⁵⁰ Timms, *Silliness: A Serious History*, 8.

style—as Francesca Royster argues—then André’s indulgence in black abjection in and through an excessively silly style of satire demands nuanced analysis: an attention to an unbearable silliness which takes shape as a non-sovereign form of queer negativity in black media.⁵¹

III. Silliness and Negativity

When it’s time to create, never forget to give your lower brain a good squeeze and give a fair shake to the juice that drips out your mouth. No matter who you are, dumb ideas are a low-cost and infinite resource.

- Eric André and Dan Curry⁵²

The heading I want to bring this work under is *silly negativity*. As I’ve suggested, the concept of “negativity” has a central force not only in queer discourse, but also in writings on black aesthetics. To further theorize the negativity of silliness, I first turn to contemporary scholarship on the trope of negativity and the black popular image, which mines assumptions about positive and negative texts as they map onto categories of performance, reception, affect, aesthetics, and most of all blackness. As Racquel Gates summarizes, negative representations are opposed to the “serious” artwork that constitutes the work of racial uplift and “serve as the repository for all of the feelings that positive images cast aside.”⁵³ Gates’s understanding of the disproportionate burden placed on black texts to prove their worth recalls Nicole Fleetwood’s claim that “the visual sphere has been understood in black cultural studies as a punitive field—the scene of punishment—in which the subjugation of blacks continues through the reproduction of denigrating racial stereotypes that allow whites to define themselves through the process of ‘negative differentiation.’”⁵⁴ As a result, black negativity, for Gates, rests precisely on this quality of negative differentiation, such that the negative text is either “defined by its distance

⁵¹ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 5.

⁵² Eric André and Dan Curry, *Dumb Ideas: A Behind-the-Scenes Exposé on Making Pranks and Other Stupid Creative Endeavors (and How You Can Also Too!)* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 4.

⁵³ Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 2018), 21.

⁵⁴ Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 13.

from normative, white hegemonic standards of quality” and/or is “an inversion of another media text” that is “not recognized as bearing significant meaning.”⁵⁵ Through these definitions, Gates is concerned with recognizing new modes of analysis for seeing and reading black media texts, particularly the work that “negative” texts are doing in relation to “positive” texts.

Gates works through several categories of negativity, including the category of “formal negativity,” which “involves a text that becomes a ‘negative’ because one or more of its formal qualities [...] can function as an inversion of those of typical positive texts.”⁵⁶ From this view, André’s show can be read as a negative text because it formally inverts the traditional talk show format, which has historically been marked by forms of respectable whiteness. Yet, Gates’s turn to “formal” negativity is only loosely concerned with “form” itself; it is instead more narrowly interested in representational, ideological negations of white cinematic expressions. Gates further claims to “use ‘negative’ discursively,” activating the idea of negativity as an “antithesis to positivity, bound within categories of respectability.”⁵⁷ The turn from the representational to the discursive is also shared by Michael Gillespie in his shift from “black film” to “film blackness,” which we might extend to television, as a shift from “black television” to “televisual blackness.” Gillespie posits a disinterest in claims that “the black lifeworld be the sole line of inquiry” and suggests that our investments should be aimed at understanding media’s place in the “conceptual field of black visual and expressive culture.”⁵⁸ This strategy reads televisual blackness as critical rather than authentic, about the “speculations and remediations of history and culture”⁵⁹ rather than a question of expressing the lived experienced of “blackness.” Following Gillespie, I offer

⁵⁵ Gates, *Double Negative*, 17

⁵⁶ Gates, *Double Negative*, 32.

⁵⁷ Racquel J. Gates, “Activating the Negative Image,” *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (2015): 623.

⁵⁸ Michael Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

⁵⁹ Gillespie, *Film Blackness*, 35

an understanding of the relationship between silliness and negativity by focusing on both the formal and discursive, whereby the aesthetic intensities of televisual blackness re/negotiate the forms of the medium and allow for more challenging and irrecoverable imaginings of blackness.

I follow Gates, Gillespie, and other black scholars in their turn to the discursive, yet I see negativity as something apart from an antithesis to positivity and/as respectability. I introduce another category of negativity, what I term “silly negativity,” a seemingly oxymoronic phrase which bridges the gap between positivity and negativity, confounding existing definitions of the two terms. My understanding of negativity in this formulation borrows heavily from Sexton, who describes negativity as a kind of “intensification—the introduction of ever greater tension into a material or medium or movement through stretching and straining.”⁶⁰ *The Eric André Show* introduces this tension in the form of an aesthetic silliness—a silly negativity which becomes more and more unbearable as it intensifies audiovisually.⁶¹ Whether stretched out into awkward moments of unbearable inaction or straining to accumulate as many irritating interruptions as possible, *The Eric André Show* epitomizes the expression of silly negativity. André himself, with his performative intensifications of black anality, the literally outstretched and straining asshole, becomes a receptive vessel for the show’s perverse imaginings and silly negativity.

Sexton’s turn to the language of “intensification” allows me to understand silly negativity as a constellation of intensities, of flesh, shape, color, and affect, in *The Eric André Show*. Sexton ties intensification to a “material or medium or movement,” which intimates its close relation to a non-anthropomorphic formal register, an intensive aesthetic change. This move allows me to

⁶⁰ Sexton, “On Black Negativity.”

⁶¹ André makes his goal of intensification apparent: “If [Jackass’s Johnny] Knoxville is a 10,” he says, “I want to turn it up to 11. I just want to fuckin’ push it.” Eric André, *The Peaceful Madness of Eric André*, interview by Carrie Battan, *Grantland*, October 22, 2014, <https://grantland.com/features/eric-andre-adult-swim-eric-andre-show-hannibal-buress/>.

attend to film and television's non-narrative, nonrepresentational intensities in reading with silly black negativity in film, television, and other media. At the nexus of negativity and blackness, the silly intensification of formal registers in André's show distorts the medium away from the synchronous and sovereign, instead investing in aesthetic disorder. Eugenie Brinkema's radical approach to the formal dimension of negative affects is instructive, where she claims:

One critical pressure that affectivity in particular brings to bear on form is in the way that negative affects exert negative stresses on, even distentions of, cinematic construction, undoing grids, schemas, orderings, all aesthetic plans. The genealogy of non-unities written by an attention to the *mise-n'en-scène* is a fitting anti-narrative for an approach to form that reads for its impersonal impresence and structural destructurings.⁶²

My approach to reading the silly negativity of *The Eric André Show* closely follows Brinkema's call to attend to "negative stresses"—and not mere negations—as "distentions of cinematic construction" that are brought about by the negative affects (of silliness). And if, as Berlant and Edelman remind us, the work of "negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience" and is thus defined as "the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty," then aesthetic negativity in film and television likewise works through sillily negative forms of undoing, unmaking, and unlearning.⁶³

Negativity as intensification is an account of the intensive change in a quality, and for Sexton that quality is blackness, and that blackness is unbearable. Sexton goes on to describe the intensification of negativity as a "procedure that complicates thinking, that makes things difficult and uncomfortable, that ruins the initial plan, that throws things off balance, we might even say that which blackens things."⁶⁴ As Sexton further elaborates:

This intensification of negativity, this negativity stretched to its extreme or limit, this black negativity, might be what we otherwise call afro-pessimism. [...] The intensification of negativity is a way of thinking seriously with and through the various

⁶² Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Duke University Press, 2014), 46.

⁶³ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, Or the Unbearable*, xii.

⁶⁴ Sexton, "On Black Negativity."

black colloquialisms to “break it down.” Blackness might be that spirit of inquiry and argumentation that, borrowing a phrase from Public Enemy, says “bring that beat back,” a gesture that says you didn’t really understand all there is yet to understand, feel all there is yet to feel, hear all there is yet to hear—within your own experience.⁶⁵

The politics and aesthetics of black negativity, then, are in part aligned with the rubric of afro-pessimist thought. Yet I am drawn to the qualification of black negativity as an intensification precisely because this formulation does not depend on a relation of negation between concepts or representations; negativity has a meaning that is independent from negation. It attempts to think opposition as “something other than a type of dialectic” without being “simply non-dialectical or making recourse to an affirmation of difference in itself.”⁶⁶ Sexton’s call to attend to a black vernacular, a call to “break it down” or “bring that beat back,” intimates that (black) negativity encompasses more than a simple inversion of (white) standards of taste, quality, or performance. Silliness also does not rely on the negation of categories like seriousness or respectability. As an unstable constellation of intensities and intensifications, silliness with/in black negativity takes shape as a formal register that stretches or strains the tension between seemingly opposing terms to their breaking point, forging a muddled multiplicity of affective intensities in the process.

IV. “This is Bird Up!”: Or, Silliness in Chroma-Key Green

It was a dance, a trance, a real piece of degenerative art.

- Dan Curry, head writer of The Eric André Show⁶⁷

In the tenth episode of season three, André’s silly negativity reaches peak intensity. This episode is titled “Bird Up!” (2015) in reference to one of the show’s recurring man-on-the-street bits, where André’s character dresses in a chroma-key green bodysuit with a toy bird perched on his shoulder hiding a Go-Pro camera. At the start of the segment, André declares “This is Bird

⁶⁵ Sexton, “On Black Negativity.”

⁶⁶ Sexton, “On Black Negativity.”

⁶⁷ André and Curry, *Dumb Ideas*, 88.

Up! The worst show on television!” and proceeds to do wildly perverted things to people on the street, typically involving André non-consensually humping, licking, and putting his fingers in stranger’s mouths as he yells gibberish phrases like “Yah Boobay! Yah Boobay!” Bird Up is a recurring segment on the show, but, in this particular episode, the skit reaches peak intensity. Glitchy Bird Up segments interrupt the show’s regular serial format, building tension in endless superimpositions, collisions, and parodic permutations. Layers are continually added onto Bird Up, such as Bird Up the musical, Chris Up with Chris Rock, and Hannibal Buress’s Snail Down. Series editor Doug Lussenhop recalls the challenges of creating such a unique episode:

I remember getting a bunch of footage called ‘Eric in a green-screen suit.’ I had to figure out what to do with it. There was a lot of funny nonsense in there but it needed a hook and a rhythm, so I singled out his ‘Bird up’ line, added a jazz sting, and punched in on freeze-frames of each of the marks. Luckily, parrots are the funniest sounding animals (besides horses) so I added some parrot chirps and it all came together. For the ‘Bird Up’ episode, I tried to melt the computer down with as many unnecessary layers and effects as possible. It had to be “How did this get on TV?”⁶⁸

In its short 11-minute runtime, Lussenhop was inspired to make the nonsensically silly episode as visually and sonically unbearable as possible—a complete audiovisual mess.

The episode begins with its (un)usual deconstructive opening: André destroys his set; he assaults his band; he plays a prop trumpet and slams it on the ground; he gets stung by hundreds of bees and yells “Not the bees!” like Nicolas Cage in *The Wicker Man* (2006); André fights his guitarist and wins; he beats up Bob Hope with a golf club; and the stagehands rebuild the set as Buress makes his underwhelming entrance. After a half-hearted monologue where André rants about New Yorkers using extreme stereotypes and aggressively insults Buress, the monologue ends with André telling his audience to “vote or die, y’all.” A freeze-frame pops up with the words “VOTE OR DIE!” and a tune singing “I’m American made!” begins.

⁶⁸ André and Curry, *Dumb Ideas*, 89.

The scene cuts to the show's first skit: "Yo you're watching Bird Up! The worst show on television!," André announces in a morph suit with a cloudy sky chroma-keyed over his body. The audio cuts on André mid-sentence as a purple "BIRD UP!" title card appears in a freeze frame and glitchy orchestra hits rise in pitch in tandem with seven choppy zooms into the toy bird on his shoulder that squawks on transition. André proceeds with a fairly typical Bird Up segment. While adjusting a lengthy prop-penis in his crotch, he asks a woman to act out a scene from her favorite movie, *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and to key into the bird, promising that his green morph suit will be edited out in post. André starts licking her cheek, and the bit jump cuts to her walking away asking, "what the hell?!" A Bird Up title card appears with orchestra hits and a choppy zoom on André. Another bit finds André asking a mother and child if they've ever seen *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) while he bends over, grinding his ass onto the woman. Later, André tells a man in a navy uniform that "they won't even see me," proceeding to kiss and hump him. The man pushes him away. Another BIRD UP! title card appears with orchestra hits and a choppy zoom onto André's gaping mouth and then a random man in the background. And so on.

Back at his desk, André introduces Stephen Colletti, a star from *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012). André immediately asks to see Stephen's penis, which Colletti deflects to Buress, who is inexplicably playing with a rain stick. Buress tells Stephen "that was rain." After interrogating guest Stephen Colletti about the lack of black actors on *One Tree Hill*, André talks about people online who have been "talking shit" about Stephen, calling him "Colletti, the human piece of shit, a pink princess, a unicorn's vagina, a big shitter, a human piece of..." After less than thirty seconds of the interview, André in his green morph suit and toy bird again interrupt: "You're watching bird up byaaaaaaaaaatch!," André exclaims as the shot zooms repeatedly into and out

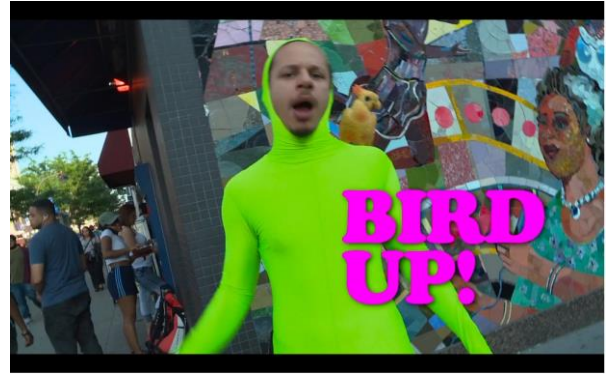


Figure 4.3. First Bird Up! segment in season 3, episode 10 of *The Eric André Show* (2015).

of the recesses of André's gaping mouth (Figure 4.3). From here on, the bird up skits quickly intensify, and the show entirely abandons its standard structure and interview format.

In these segments, André is notably dressed in a green bodysuit, often chroma-keyed to show various images and effects on his body. "They won't even see me," André repeatedly insists, while his bright chroma-key green bodysuit is very much still hyper-visible. Even when saturated with a nonsensical and distracting array of superimposed images, André's digitally unmanipulated face poses another problem of visibility. His face hovers uncomfortably around

his glitching, morphing body. In one shot, his morph suit changes color each time a woman aggressively humps him from behind, turning bright orange, cyan, magenta, and then finally (imperfectly) keying out the entire suit. André's face remains unmorphed the entire time as he stares directly into the camera, mouth agape, loudly moaning with each thrust into his ass (Figure 4.4). Fittingly, the shot is filmed in front of an open portable toilet. In the next shot, André enters the portable restroom and invites a white man inside. André forces him to sit on the toilet, smack himself across the face, and repeatedly bemoan "I'm sorry!" in an act of debasement.

In these moments, André teases out unexpected, silly intensities in his embarrassing use of chroma-key green aesthetics. André's body is saturated in this hue—the chroma keying ground that is meant to contrast with a brightly lit figure's skin and make it easier to extract them from their surroundings. Chroma-key green, as Soyoung Yoon writes, is typically the color "of digital world-making that speaks to fantasies of space travel: the possibility of positioning a subject against any background, in any place," or even rendering them invisible.⁶⁹ Chroma-keying is a technique of controlled in/visibility that is aimed at a set of norms—including lighting, hair color, skin color, etc.⁷⁰ Yet wrapped around André, it renders his undisciplined body glowing and highly visible, becoming a light that simultaneously illuminates as it conceals.

Behind the scenes, chroma-key technology is far from glamorous; in fact, it is quite silly, a laughably and deceptively simple apparatus behind Hollywood's biggest budget films. Series writer Dan Curry reflects on watching massive blockbuster movies with extensive CGI; instead of being absorbed, he claims, "my brain can only see the bottom layer: some skinny dork in a lime-green onesie acting the fool on a sterile soundstage."⁷¹ In the Bird Up segments, André

⁶⁹ Soyoung Yoon, "Beware the Light: Figure Versus Ground, White Versus Black (Blue), or: Sondra Perry's Blue Room and Technologies of Race," *Millenium Film Journal*, no. 65 (2017): 32.

⁷⁰ Chroma-key green is best for darker subjects than chroma-key blue (because blue is more active in black skin).

⁷¹ André and Curry, *Dumb Ideas*, 86.



Figure 4.4. André's floating face in season 3, episode 10 of *The Eric André Show* (2015).

playfully exploits and repurposes these feelings of silly distancing, cleverly misusing chroma-key technology, as his foolish presence refuses invisibility, instead becoming an ever-morphing disruptive focal point. Chroma-key green, here, draws attention to the relationship between blackness and color, visibility and invisibility, and the racialized materiality of technologies of seeing. “Chroma screens are a performance of ‘colour’,” Charu Maithani writes, “where it is at once about the colour of the skin, the colour of the screen and colour as a cultural performance of racism.”⁷² André's floating face reminds us of the problematic of black skin. Embracing what Royster calls a “queered and eccentric politics of embodiment,” his skin, that overdetermined site for the “fact” of blackness, in all its fluidity, viscosity, and sensuality, spills over, spreads out, in ceaseless movement, constantly folding into and out of the background.⁷³ Sometimes, his own glitching image is doubled, even tripled or quadrupled, and layered in superimpositions over his bodysuit, intensifying the unbearable force of his tactics of silly negativity (Figure 4.5).

Another moment, like André's distribution of chroma-key green masks and body suits to fellow black pedestrians—the proliferation of André's chromatic disruptions and performance of silliness onto a wider public—I would argue, is not dissimilar in its politics to the work that artist

⁷² Charu Maithani, “Chroma Screens –Intra-Actions, Connections and Gesturalities,” *RE:SOUND* (2019): 256.

⁷³ Francesca Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 14.



Figure 4.5. André's glitching face in season 3, episode 10 of *The Eric André Show* (2015).



Figure 4.6. Chroma-key masks in season 3, episode 10 of *The Eric André Show* (2015).



Figure 4.7. Perry's *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One* (2015).

Sondra Perry is doing in her 2015 2-channel piece *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One*, where family members appear in hyper-visible chroma-key green balaclavas (Figures 4.6 and 4.7). For Perry, the strategic opacity in using chroma-key masks to document her family history becomes a tactic to trouble the power to see and know black subjects. Other artists—like Hito Steyerl, Cauleen Smith, and Stephanie Syjuco—have also used chroma-key green aesthetics to similar effect. For Steyerl, chroma-key invisibility is the solution to the

problem of ubiquitous surveillance. For Smith, technologized in/visibility extends to acts of gentrification, of neighborhood renewal, of forced erasure. And for Syjuco, making the invisible visible is an act of protest and a form of speculative dissent. We can even consider a Hollywood film like Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022), which also explores the racial politics of film technology, making visible the chroma-key green aesthetics on which *Nope* itself depends to present it as "a form of dangerous power."⁷⁴ Through the playful uses and misuses of chroma-key green, these artists, including André, all reject the accumulation of meaning produced on and through the heightened visibility of black bodies. For these artists, chroma screens provide a space where relations and conditions of racialized in/visibility can be playfully renegotiated.

The Eric André Show figures audiovisuality itself as a racial formation, a total saturation of image and sound. The chromatically intensifying tinny orchestra hits and bird squawks that accompany speedy, choppy zooms into and out of André's chroma-key green body overwhelm the senses, recalling Fred Moten's claim that "a certain chromatic saturation" (in both sound and color) inhabits black social life. Accompanying André's unruly, public performance of silliness, the episode renders sound and vision at their chromatic saturation point, at their silliest and most annoying—at the point in which the audiovisuality of blackness becomes unbearable.

V. Temporalities of Silliness-as-Interruption

To be overwhelmed in this way suggests a loss of bearings.

- Jared Sexton⁷⁵

A bearable life is a life that can hold up, which can keep its shape or direction, in the face of what it is asked to endure. [...] A bearable life is a life where what must be endured does not threaten that life [...] A bearable life is a life that in being endured can keep its bearings. The unbearable life is a life which cannot be tolerated or endured, help up, held onto. The unbearable life "breaks" or "shatters" under the "too much" of what is being borne.

- Sara Ahmed⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Richard Brody, "Review: 'Nope' Is One of the Great Movies About Moviemaking," *The New Yorker*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/nope-is-one-of-the-great-movies-about-moviemaking>.

⁷⁵ Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," *Cultural Critique* 90 (2015): 165.

⁷⁶ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 97.

In another sequence in the tenth episode of season three, just after an older black man addresses the camera and announces, “Samuel L. Jackson, take a look at me and we can do a picture together, Samuel L. Jackson, wherever you’re at,” the tinny orchestra hits and choppy zooms into the toy bird that usual transition between bits take over the entire show—a total chromatic saturation. The hits intensify in pitch and the zooms increase in speed as we transition through and zoom into freeze frames of André on the street interacting predominantly with black and brown pedestrians. Unexpectedly, the camera zooms out in intervals from the bird’s eye into the quiet recesses of outer space à la *Powers of Ten* (1977). André is seen floating in a different galaxy, repeatedly gesturing to his outstretched anus and reciting the show’s title “Bird Up!” as he slowly crosses the screen (Figure 4.8). The camera zooms out again in freeze frames through space, accompanied by chromatically intensifying hits, now briefly landing on André back on the street being carried by two random pedestrians. With his legs agape and chroma-key green draped ass on display, he makes a crude fart joke. Another rapid zoom cuts to André “going for the record” as he repeatedly sticks “all four fingers” into and out of a random, unbothered woman’s mouth (Figure 4.9). The scene suddenly cuts to a red velvet curtain opening to André dancing and snapping to the introduction of “Bird Up: The Musical.” The chaos continues.

Throughout these peculiar moments, *The Eric André Show* conceives its aesthetics of silliness as an accumulation of interruptions—temporal ruptures that register a silly yet troubling assemblage of affectivity, one which relies on the accumulation of disordered, incongruous, and inappropriate emotions.⁷⁷ Shock, disgust, cruelty, and comedy all converge in an assemblage of silly negativity as moments pass by with barely a moment to perceive them. Taking to the

⁷⁷ The show’s shortform interruptive comic tactics can also be explained as a means of catering to the short attention span of contemporary viewers, particularly given the show’s partial address to stoner culture.



Figure 4.8. André in outer space in season 3, episode 10 of *The Eric André Show* (2015).



Figure 4.9. André pranks pedestrians in season 3, episode 10 of *The Eric André Show* (2015).

extreme Donald Crafton's understanding of gags as violent temporal "intrusions," Andre's show understands the aesthetics of silliness as a tapestry of short, often-violent intrusions that disrupt hopes of a cohesive televisual experience. Silliness breaks time in several ways; it is not just a performative interruption, but it also arises as a temporal break in the structure of the show itself, as a temporal break in the ontologies of the talk show format, which ordinarily shuttles between live interviews and recorded bits, and as a temporal break in the ordinariness of life in

public spaces. Green screens and chroma-keying (or the lack thereof) add another layer of disorienting temporal interruption, with images being manipulated (or not) in post-production.

In these moments, André approaches negativity as a constellation of silly intensities, an exhausting affective assemblage, invoking what Katherine McKittrick calls “the aesthetics of black miscellanea,” or “textual accumulation”—an engagement of blackness with “overlapping and conflicting” feelings and forms.⁷⁸ Silliness takes shape in the ambivalence of unresolved contradictions, in “intensely clashing images” and the opacity of free-associative randomness.⁷⁹ For McKittrick, as for André, “contradiction and ambivalence, that feeling and expression and thick representation, of unresolved uneasiness, is where black aesthetics live,” specifically where the aesthetics of black negativity live.⁸⁰ The project of black negativity, as Frank B. Wilderson III argues, is “an embrace of disorder and incoherence.”⁸¹ André’s unbearable aesthetic silliness dwells in the affective creativity of unresolved uneasiness at the heart of this black negativity.

André’s silly black negativity insists on, or as, a question of temporality. The intrusive slapstick gags of his guerilla pranks combined with the disintegrational surprises of his show’s aesthetics depend on forms of extreme temporal degradation and queer asynchrony. As Crafton argues, slapstick in early cinema relied on a “lack of linear integration,” wherein it functioned as comedic excess that the film could not wholly contain.⁸² Like these slapstick films, *The Eric André Show* contains a “high concentration of gag and spectacle” and features gags that function as “atemporal bursts of violence and or hedonism.”⁸³ André’s aesthetic silliness takes shape as a

⁷⁸ Katherine McKittrick, “Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea,” *Antipode* 54, no. 1 (2022): 3.

⁷⁹ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 33.

⁸⁰ McKittrick, “Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea,” 4.

⁸¹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Racked and Dispatched, 2017), 11.

⁸² Donald Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle, and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (Routledge, 1995), 108.

⁸³ Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle, and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy,” 109.

form of temporal interruption, again taking this aesthetic element to its logical extreme such that bits generally last a minute or two at the very longest, and some are only a few seconds long.

André's collection of slapstick intrusions, particularly in the season three finale, echoes the way Moten sees blackness as "always a disruptive surprise moving in the rich nonfullness of every term it modifies."⁸⁴ Aesthetics are key to this way of thinking about blackness. Moten draws attention to a consideration of blackness as a noisy, performative, and critical intervention rather than a sociological determinant or *a priori* visual certainty. As Gillespie summarizes, "Moten's qualification of blackness purposefully thrives on its performative quality" and "operates as a churning and refining force beyond the bounds of identitarian ontologies."⁸⁵ In the season three finale, the disruptive surprises of André's queer/ed performance of blackness register a troubling field of affectivity—a form of silliness that is made unbearable through excessive repetitions of aesthetic disruption and aggressive temporal disordering.

Albert Sergio Laguna aptly reminds us that "race and comedy share formal qualities for producing meaning in the world—excess, ambiguity, and repetition."⁸⁶ Excess and repetition are key aesthetic strategies for André as a black comedian. However, comedy's penchant for excess, for over-the-top magnification, and "the centrality of repetition to comedy" can be "particularly challenging for people of color, whose legibility has been shaped by a comic repetition of negative, excessive traits."⁸⁷ Aesthetics of comic repetition bring up questions of whether or not

⁸⁴ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), 255.

⁸⁵ Michael Gillespie, "Cinema," in *Keywords for African American Studies*, ed. Erica R. Edwards, Rodrick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar (New York University Press, 2018), 35.

⁸⁶ Albert Sergio Laguna, "On the Comedy of Race," *Cultural Critique* 111, no. 1 (2021): 105.

⁸⁷ Laguna, "On the Comedy of Race," 118.

comedy is “a productive or paralyzing force.”⁸⁸ Yet, André giddily embraces the paralysis of repetition in an “orgy of unproductive expenditure,” a relentless display of black foolishness.⁸⁹

As I argue, André’s brand of foolishness and silly negativity is queer/ed in its intense opposition to the general positivity of social production. As Tomasz Sikora aptly writes:

[B]eyond the alchemical dreams of turning shit into pure money, queer subjects come close to the recognition of the wasteful productivity of desire. To waste one’s life deliberately...is an ethical choice, a choice against the logic of accumulation...a choice of a different mode of being; a mode which depends on creation rather than procreation, but is well aware that creation is, essentially, synonymous with waste.⁹⁰

The show’s formal structures of repetition and intensifications of the “unbearable”—in blackness and in silliness—resist chrononormativity and queerly refuse to be redeemed, made useful to the reproduction of culture as such. André vomits, eats his vomit, and vomits again—literally and figuratively—in an endless unproductive cycle of abjection. The result, as Berlant suggests, is “the possibility of a recalibrated sensorium” such that the “comic orientation toward aggression and pleasure produces new capacities for bearing, and not repairing, ambivalence.”⁹¹ Or in other words, André turns shit into more shit, making “nothing out of nothing,” waste out of waste.⁹²

VI. Spatialities of Silliness and the Lower Bodily Stratum

Dumb is not only in the eye of the beholder, but also in the asshole of the beheld.
- Dan Curry, head writer of *The Eric André Show*⁹³

The Eric André Show’s intense and rapid style of non-linear discontinuity editing foregrounds what is typically hidden from sight in film and television, namely, the cut. In the right hands, making a cut visible can be an extremely transgressive, disorienting, and even queer

⁸⁸ Laguna, “On the Comedy of Race,” 122.

⁸⁹ Shavero, *The Cinematic Body*, 57.

⁹⁰ Thomas Sikora, “Queer/Waste,” in *Rubbish, Waste and Litter: Culture and Its Refuse/Als*, ed. Tadeusz Rachwał (Wydawnictwo SWPS Academica, 2008), 587.

⁹¹ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 61.

⁹² “How The Eric Andre Show Makes Nothing Out Of Nothing,” posted December 29, 2019, by Nerdstalgic, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkYCbqq_ShU.

⁹³ André and Curry, *Dumb Ideas*, 79.

act. If as D.A. Miller suggests, “the anus is a cut, and vice versa,” then by making the cut visible, the show also makes the anus visible.⁹⁴ Much more explicitly than in Miller’s reading of *Rope* (1948), André takes the association to the extreme. The anus is on full display. Fingered, penetrated, and rendered hyper-visible, the anus literally and figurately takes up space on screen.

André’s fascination with temporal disintegration is compounded by a visceral focus on the spatialities of black anal sexual economies, where the fictive space of the “black hole” has long marked black sexuality as deviant and as queer. For Nash, “black sexualities are imagined to be pathologically related to spatial formations,” rooted in (and perhaps even generative of) certain kinds of filthy spaces.⁹⁵ The anus, as Nash conceives it, is “a racially marked *sexual-spatial* formation” akin to “the ghetto,” that is, toxic, filthy, nonreproductive, and wasteful. It is this attachment to the “*sexual-spatial*” that separates black anality from other versions of (comic) anality. As Amber Jamilla Musser clarifies, “Black anality is not just about the anus; rather, it connects the anus to other aspects of black abjection,” where abjection here has to do with the “filthiness of blackness and its traumatic histories.”⁹⁶ Black anality thus foregrounds the sexual-spatial embodied location—the anus—from which the filthy—shit—emerges.

In this view, spatiality becomes an analytic mode—a “pivotal point of entry for reframing discussions of sexuality,” as Terrance Wooten puts it.⁹⁷ When the sexual-spatial excesses of André’s unbearable saturated blackness fling him into the dark recesses of outer space—a literal “black hole”—*The Eric André Show* echoes Sexton’s claim that in afro-pessimism, “Black life is

⁹⁴ For, as Miller elaborates, the “most immediate reason for wanting to hide the cut...is that it is imagined to be a penetrable hole in the celluloid film body; and though there are countless obvious and ordinary reasons for wanting to hide the anus, it is hidden here as what remains and reminds of a cut.” See: D. A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” *Representations*, no. 32 (1990): 114–33.

⁹⁵ Nash, “Black Anality,” 448.

⁹⁶ Amber Jamilla Musser, “Toward Mythic Feminist Theorizing: Simone Leigh and the Power of the Vessel,” *Differences* 30, no. 3 (2019): 70.

⁹⁷ Terrance Wooten, “On Black Bottom Epistemologies and The New Negro,” *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 1 (2020): 49.

not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space.”⁹⁸

Sexton, like André, refuses to read the afro-pessimist project as a strict negation of black (social) life but a project of negativity that assumes black (social) life is positioned in such a way that its intensities cannot register sovereignty and integration in the world that the world lives in. Black life is queer life—a frequently made point. For Sexton, blackness is a form of spatial excess.

Even as André takes his show to the street, to the world that the world lives in, the intensities of his non-sovereign blackness—in the silly abjection of black anality—inevitably assert their own atemporal and aspatial existence. What results is a moment of ecstatic rupture consisting of suspended and therefore wasted time. Moten’s definition of blackness as “the surrealization of space and time” is useful to understanding the aesthetics of silly black negativity in Andre’s work.⁹⁹ Andre’s intensification of the spectacle of a black man “showing his ass” becomes a literal rupture, another “black hole,” so to speak, in expected televisual spatiotemporalities.

André is certainly not the first comic to embrace anality. Comedy has long been associated with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “the lower stratum of the body.”¹⁰⁰ In his work on Charlie Chaplin, for instance, William Paul emphasizes how much “carnavalesque” attention Chaplin gives to the needs and pleasures of “the lower bodily stratum” and the Bakhtinian-derived category of the “grotesque body,” or “the body in its most grossly physical terms and located in the mouth, the genitals, the anus.”¹⁰¹ For Paul, Chaplin’s comedy provides “a joyous insistence on the lower bodily stratum.”¹⁰² However, as Nash again reminds us, the anus is “racialized terrain”—it is “a location in and through which imagined racial differences are

⁹⁸ Jared Sexton, “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,” *Lateral*, no. 1 (2012).

⁹⁹ Fred Moten, “Blackness,” in *Keywords for African American Studies*, ed. Erica R. Edwards, Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar (New York University Press, 2018), 27.

¹⁰⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (The MIT Press, 1968), 21.

¹⁰¹ Paul, “Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality,” 111.

¹⁰² Paul, “Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality,” 114.

produced.”¹⁰³ Unlike their white counterparts, black comics are burdened to acknowledge that the anus is always already racialized—a site of symbolic filth that for Nash can “limit black sexual freedom” as much as it can liberate.¹⁰⁴ Black liberation then cannot come through the complete annihilation, erasure, or rejection of the anus. Instead, the anus must also be read as a queer site that can radically “engender delight in blackness itself.”¹⁰⁵ Nash’s analytic of black anality develops queer theorist Leo Bersani’s earlier formulation of the rectum as a powerful site of transgression that can operate as a productive and desired site of self-shattering. Nash connects Bersani’s idea of self-shattering to Scott’s formulation of the anus as a site of counterintuitive power and pleasure for the black subject, particularly black men. Scott’s work carefully traces uncomfortable moments where black men take pleasure in both sexual and racial humiliation and degradation and thus locate power in abjection and bottomness. (Nash’s intervention importantly extends these insights to the experience of black women as well.)

Across these formulations, the anus poses a critical threat to identitarian sovereignty. In his writing on embarrassment and abjection in comedy, Shaviro suggests that what is “most disturbing in such scenes is that the comic destruction of norms becomes the source of a judgment not against the norm, but against the self.”¹⁰⁶ The self shatters, and, as a result, the spectator is inspired by “a passion for that very loss of control, that abjection, fragmentation, and subversion of self-identity.”¹⁰⁷ Dredge Byung’chu Kang and Nguyen Tan Hoang further this, arguing that anality specifically offers “a well of abjection from which gendered and racialized

¹⁰³ Nash, “Black Anality,” 445.

¹⁰⁴ Nash, “Black Anality,” 439.

¹⁰⁵ Nash, “Black Anality,” 439.

¹⁰⁶ Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 112.

¹⁰⁷ Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 56.

subjects can remake themselves.”¹⁰⁸ For marginalized spectators, this self-shattering can offer a strategy for survival, a non-sovereign embrace of the power of the anus to reimagine the self.

Unsurprisingly, *The Eric André Show* takes this radical self-refashioning to an extreme, such that André quite literally remakes himself from season to season. André drastically changes his look, body type, and “silly sartorial style” to give each season its own vibe and aesthetic.¹⁰⁹ Seasons 1 and 2 have a similar look, with André donning an afro and wearing a poorly fitting gray suit and tie. Season 3 marginally changes the look, with André perming and slicking back his hair à la Katt Williams. In season 4, he dramatically loses weight, going for a “filthy and sickly” look with dirty clothes, pale skin, and nappy hair—“a stinky gray hungry pale mess.”¹¹⁰ In season 5, he gains 40 lbs., goes bald, waxes off all his body hair (except his eyebrows), gets tanned, and wears a clean bright-white suit with an open collar. In season 6, he loses the 40 lbs. he gained in the season prior and gets jacked, donning a long and slicked back ponytail, a groomed mustache, and a high maintenance look. The set design also drastically fluctuates from season to season to match André’s extreme body modification and self-refashioning, ranging from dark to vibrant, dull to opulent, low-def to high-def, and so on (Figure 4.10).

In Chapter 2, I explored trans musicians’ fascination with self-shattering via modulated and obfuscated facial display—rendering the face invisible and unknowable via silly aesthetic irritations. Contrarily, through *The Eric André Show*’s various aesthetic fluctuations and the host’s extreme body modifications, André seems to insist on a form of self-shattering that is predicated on hyper-visibility and excess display—of the face as much as the ass.¹¹¹ André’s

¹⁰⁸ Dredge Byung’chu Kang and Nguyen Tan Hoang, “Anal,” in *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. The Keywords Feminist Editorial Collective (New York University Press, 2021), 19.

¹⁰⁹ Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 108.

¹¹⁰ André and Curry, *Dumb Ideas*, 96

¹¹¹ Not satisfied with *irritating*, André embraces the *unbearable*, evidenced by the Adult Swim YouTube channel’s compilation videos titled “Eric Andre Skits That Burn Your Retinas” and “Street Skits We Wish We Could Forget.”



Figure 4.10. André's self-shattering body modifications from season 1 to season 6.

work also debases the face in its repeated focus on penetrative, evacuative, and expulsive anal acts, on “the intimacy of an illegible act taking place at the ass’s asshole.”¹¹² For André, anality is the radical inverse of faciality. As Sikora argues, the “anus stands for non-identity, it is the grotesque ‘reverse’ of the face” as it “mocks the face and neutralizes its ‘human dignity,’ it faces the wrong direction, so to speak.”¹¹³ The typical late-night talk show format is reliant on the

¹¹² Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 29.

¹¹³ Sikora, “Queer/Waste,” 383.

performative sheltering of the straight man's/host's ass behind the desk. (Even during standing, opening monologues, the talk show host is typically filmed in a frontal medium shot, cutting off the body right above the groin.) In each episode of André's show, however, the host destroys—rebuilds, destroys, and rebuilds again—the desk. For, as Edelman writes, the straight man can be sheltered only “so long as he performatively shelters the structural flaw that opens his body,” that is, the anus, an opening to “the various psychic vicissitudes able to generate illicit desires.”¹¹⁴ Instead, André quite literally turns his face to the respectability of the talk show format's frontal comic performativity, such that, as Berlant argues, the “unbearable object/scene is never fully faced, if by ‘faced’ we mean incorporated, understood, mastered.”¹¹⁵ André's queer/ed, defaced, and undisciplined rebelliousness insists on displaying his ass front and center, embracing the aesthetics and politics of anality in his raucous delight in noise, mess, evacuation, and expulsion.

Ever the exhibitionist, André repeatedly bares his uncensored ass onscreen and frequently appears fully nude on his show. Examples of his anality are thus boundless. In skits from season 1, he jumps onto a tennis court and runs into a bowling alley fully nude—and later goes “reverse streaking” (fully clothed) at a gathering of nudists. In a segment from season 2, he appears as a pantsed police officer tied up to a pole on a public street; in another episode, he dresses as a tube of toothpaste, giving away free toothpaste by explosively shitting it out onto the street. In season 3, guest Mac Demarco's face is repeatedly shoved into a man's bare ass as André intently watches from behind the desk; he dresses in a potato costume in another skit, repeatedly squatting his ass over an injured bicyclist's face; and he pokes, prods, and penetrates a man's receptive mouth with carrots-fingers at a buffet. In later seasons, his anal proclivities drastically intensify. In a skit from season 4, he appears as the front half of a two-person horse costume,

¹¹⁴ Lee Edelman, “Men's Room,” in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, ed. Joel Sanders (Routledge, 1996), 152.

¹¹⁵ Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, 152.

loudly accusing his back half of “fingering my asshole”; in an opening sequence, he gets shot and then anally fucked by Abraham Lincoln; another episode sees him ranting to guest Tichina Arnold about getting anally penetrated during a prostate exam; in another interview, he exclaims, “I’ve been eating burritos for weeks for this segment” before shitting on his desk and then immediately getting shot by his co-host (Figure 4.11); and, in another infamous episode, he strips down, bears his ass, and takes a nude bath in front of Flava Flav before Buress kicks the rapper in the face. In season 5, André eats fresh horse shit; he hosts a fake prank show called “Fartsplosion”; and he aggressively “boofs” an entire cheesecake into his uncensored asshole in front of awestruck guest Diane Guerrero, moaning in ecstasy from the “sugar rush” before smelling his finger and sitting back down in discomfort (Figure 4.12). Outside of *The Eric André Show*, André’s play with anal humor persists.¹¹⁶ In an episode of the show *Man Seeking Woman* (2015), André’s typecast character practices bottoming as a submissive sex slave to an alien overlord. In his stand-up special *Legalize Everything* (2020), André opens and closes the show by bearing his ass to the audience, a staple of his comic routines. And in one noteworthy gag from his hidden camera comedy film *Bad Trip* (2021), directed by *The Eric André Show* co-director Kitao Sakurai, André gets pummeled and sodomized by a gorilla when trying to take a selfie at the zoo as shocked onlookers film the scene before calling out for help (Figure 4.13).

Across these examples, “the asshole retains its libidinal associations with the assertion and undoing of control.”¹¹⁷ While the extremities of his anal proclivities seem to assert control over the scene as pranked guests flail helplessly in utter shock (especially when the guests or people on the street are unsuspecting or uninitiated), André also relinquishes control. The self

¹¹⁶ Yet, it can also be argued that André capitalizes on being known in the industry as a black man willing to show his ass and thus playing into the sovereignty of being typecast as “nonsovereign.”

¹¹⁷ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 32.



Figure 4.11. André shits on his desk.



Figure 4.12. André “boofs” a cheesecake.



Figure 4.13. André bottoms for a gorilla in *Bad Trip* (2021).

shatters from the unbearable discomforts of André's nonsovereign play with anality. And especially in moments that dwell on the touching and fingering of the asshole, André gives us what Edelman describes as "the palpation of the anal opening that opens the ass to a space of enjoyment no subject *as* subject, as sovereign, can bear," that is, an unbearable anality.¹¹⁸

VII. Inexpression and Visual Excess: An Ambivalent Blackness

This sucks man.
- Hannibal Burress

As I've argued, *The Eric André Show* dwells in an excess of silliness as it does in the silliness of excess. In doing so, the show is exemplary of what Royster calls an "aesthetic of silliness," a phrase which she sees as fundamental to queerly reading certain modes of excess in/as black male style.¹¹⁹ Royster suggests that "black masculinity can and does often have elements of the 'silly' or 'queer,' if...pushed into excess."¹²⁰ Through an embrace of silliness as an affect and aesthetic of irritating excess and unbearable pleasure, André takes the "inherent aspects of silliness/excess in black male style" and pushes them to the edge, becoming "the eccentric [that] joins forces with the 'queer,' 'freak,' and 'pervert' to see around corners."¹²¹

Yet André's show also suggests that black masculinity carries elements of the "silly" or "queer" not only when it's pushed into excess but also when it's pulled into the underwhelming recesses of black deadpan. At first glance, one of the primary appeals of *The Eric André Show* is witnessing pranked guests' and pedestrians' genuinely visceral reactions to André's unbearable and vulgar excesses. Indeed, André not only humiliates and degrades himself but also his many guests. "My show is all real. You never, never fake reactions," he explained in an interview.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 32.

¹¹⁹ Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 107.

¹²⁰ Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 102.

¹²¹ Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No*, 8.

¹²² Patrick Phillips, "The Truth About Eric André's Infamous Lauren Conrad Interview," *Looper*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.looper.com/235742/the-truth-about-eric-andres-infamous-lauren-conrad-interview/>.

Eliciting a genuine “strong reaction” is one of the show’s goals. With hopes of having celebrities reach their boiling point, André creates a hostile and unbearable environment, keeping the set as hot as possible during interviews by refusing to have the air conditioning on. “Although it’s a nightmare, it has a great effect on the guests, because they truly feel like they’re having a psychotic break. It’s like filming in a sauna for over an hour,” André explains.¹²³ “We got it down to a science,” André states, “it doesn’t matter who they are, they’re going to have a strong reaction.”¹²⁴ One reviewer also explains that “on Andre’s show, we observe [celebrities] tricked, embarrassed, pranked, and humiliated,” such that celebrities “finally become visible, in all their naked silliness and stupidity.”¹²⁵ Unlike other unusual interviewers like Nardwuar (the Human Serviette), who have made a career from their in-depth knowledge of and deference to celebrities, André’s interviews consistently play on a feigned ignorance of the famous people he interviews, seeking to reveal nothing more than the superficiality and absurdity of celebrity culture.

As a result, one of the show’s frequent concerns is having guests elicit a weak, undramatic, or sensible response. Consider again the “Bird Up!” segment, and specifically the shot of André “going for the record” as he sticks “all four fingers” into a woman’s mouth. As he repeatedly penetrates her mouth, a receptive hole acting as a substitute for the anus, the woman slightly winces and smirks but otherwise remains surprisingly unresponsive and unbothered—perhaps out of shock or confusion, or perhaps out of total disinterest and boredom. As the shot is sped up in post, the scene focuses in on her inexpressive face, layering and superimposing her apathetic facial expression in extreme close-up. Consider also a segment titled “Street Goofs,”

¹²³ André and Curry, *Dumb Ideas*, 68.

¹²⁴ Lanre Bakare, “Comedian Eric Andre: ‘We Don’t Tell Guests a Thing – They Waltz into a House of Horrors,’” *The Guardian*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/27/comedian-eric-andre-we-dont-tell-guests-a-thing-they-waltz-into-a-house-of-horrors>.

¹²⁵ Brianna Zigler, “The Horrible Human Self and ‘The Eric Andre Show,’” *Film School Rejects*, December 15, 2020, <https://filmschoolrejects.com/the-eric-andre-show-and-the-mortifying-ordeal-of-being-known/>.



Figure 4.14. Pedestrians eliciting a weak response to André's man-on-the-street pranks.

which appears later in the same episode. With bubbly enthusiasm, André approaches a random white man on the street, giddily explaining that the two are going to hide in a nook and jump-scare the first passerby. When a paid actor finally passes by, the two jump out holding hands, “scaring” the actor who proceeds to pull out a firearm and shoots André repeatedly in the chest. Bloody squibs burst from his chest as he dramatically falls, laying “dead” on the sidewalk. The abject moment of a black man dying on the street is here paired with a discomfortingly muted response by the white onlooker. The pranked pedestrian elicits a surprisingly weak response to an event which would conventionally elicit strong emotion. With his mouth slightly agape and one eyebrow raised, the now motionless pranked man withholds expression as he glances around, trying to find emotional cues from other onlookers (and crew members), and seemingly unable to take in the possibility that he might have just witnessed a real murder (Figure 4.14).

While critics and reviewers of the show are quick to point out André's performative and audiovisual excesses, and the pranked guests' resultant strong reactions, few (if any) explore the show's deep, persistent fascination with inexpression, underperformance, and the withholding of emotion. Moreover, with works like *The Eric André Show*, there's always a risk of reaching the point where a performer's extremity becomes expected and therefore uninteresting—the moment when its novelty wears out. (This has arguably happened to someone like Sacha Baron Cohen, whose characters like “Borat” came to saturate media culture.) Even at a formal level, André's

show cleverly embraces the possibilities of viewers' bored disinterest, dwelling in strangely reserved, muted, and quiet moments of "narrative inaction."¹²⁶ Consider a sketch from season 2: after a brief, underwhelming monologue, the straight-faced host suddenly pulls out a gun, fires a number of shots into his inexpressive co-host Hannibal Buress, quietly reloads the gun in real time, and then unloads another clip into Buress. Aside from the sound of gunshots, the set is completely silent. A deadpan André turns to face the camera and naively whispers, "Who killed Hannibal?" Quiet plucks of a bass guitar soundtrack the next sequence, which parodies the opening credits of *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991). The shot transitions to a slow zoom into André's face followed by fluid superimpositions of André and various objects across the set. A title card reading "WHO KILLED HANNIBAL?" appears over the set, closely mimicking the font in the *Twin Peaks* opening credits. The title card is then followed by more languid superimpositions, this time of increasingly surreal objects and scenes—a hand feeds wooden planks into a table saw, a running faucet fills up a sink, and a band member glances at the camera. The music suddenly stops as the scene cuts back to Buress, who appears alive and well, still seated beside the desk but now fully asleep and snoring. We cut back to André seated at his desk, covering his eyes with his hands as he whispers to Buress, "I have a secret." Removing his hands, André suddenly reveals that he no longer has eyes. A sudden harsh sound accompanies a crash zoom into a freeze-frame of André's deformed face, now superimposed with absurdly tiny eyes.

In another bit from season 3, the show cuts back from a commercial break. André appears bored, throwing pencils around the set, before asking "Alright, what do we got next?" A random man offstage gestures to André to stretch the time. After an awkward silence, André turns and mumbles to Buress, "You got anything planned or..." Buress doesn't respond. The scene cuts to

¹²⁶ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 12.

a lengthy close-up shot of André's bored face staring off into the distance, before Burrell interjects, asking: "What do you think people did before ladders?" The two quietly muse about the invention of ladders for over a minute before cutting to another segment. As we see here, one of the show's main sources of deadpanned affect is, of course, André's straight-man Hannibal Burrell, a stand-up comic known for his flat delivery. Yet, in addition to Burrell's sleepy and muted presence, examples of affective evacuation and inexpression are numerous, with the show itself frequently incorporating uncomfortably quiet moments, awkward silences, and undramatic moments of narrative inaction in tandem with dramatic moments of sheer excess.

I understand André's show to be a key example of contemporary artists interested in the intersections of excess and flatness with/in the silly. These artists, as Tina Post argues, uniquely "pair visual excess with gestures of evacuation, confusion, or flatness."¹²⁷ And, as Post reminds us, "excessive blackness can become an act of evacuation," itself an opaque and underwhelming scene.¹²⁸ Indeed, Post's use of "evacuation" is quite apt here as the show's anal aesthetics figuratively strain to find moments of evacuation and cathartic release within its excess filth. Following Post, I argue that André's show strategically renders blackness, as a category, "hypervisible to the point of being confounding."¹²⁹ As a result, *The Eric André Show* carefully walks "the razor-thin line between the registers of excess and deadpanned affect," as we see clearly in the clever final moments of the show's season three finale.

In a strange twist, at the end of this episode, it is revealed that a befuddled, middle-aged focus group has been watching this episode all along (Figure 4.15). Here, the scene quietly lingers on the genuine facial reactions of the group watching the episode on a small television

¹²⁷ Tina Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression* (New York University Press, 2022), 140.

¹²⁸ Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression*, 120.

¹²⁹ Post, *Deadpan: The Aesthetics of Black Inexpression*, 140.



Figure 4.15. A quietly confused focus group watching *Bird Up!*

screen. As the episode ends, fading to black, the dismayed group stare uncomfortably at the final, black-filled frame. One level-headed man interjects, trying to calmly explain his confusion: “It was weird because he said he couldn’t be seen but how could he not be seen... Obviously he is seen.” With a look of deadpan seriousness, a black man in the group attempts to further make sense of the episode, claiming that André is clearly going to be edited out in post. Another panelist similarly hypothesizes that there is no way they just saw the finished product. As these moments suggest, viewers regularly react to André’s dramatic excesses quite undramatically, “with not much more than a nod and sometimes comic shrugging.”¹³⁰ As Berlant explains, “subjects are not usually shocked to discover... the incoherence of the world; they often find it comic, feel a little ashamed of it, or are interested in it, excited by it, and exhausted by it too.”¹³¹

¹³⁰ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 54.

¹³¹ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 6.

André's show embraces excess to the point of complete illegibility and opacity—an impenetrable density that often results in nothing more than an underwhelmed shrug or confused wince.

As the focus group continues to discuss the show, André suddenly shows up in his Bird Up attire in the adjoining room, separated by a see-through wall. The focus group mumbles “that’s the guy,” as André proceed to yell obscenities at them from behind the glass panel: “focus group, give me a goddamn break, they should focus on their own assholes.” André singles out the black man in the group: “God look at that black dude. Look at his lips. I want to suck on his tongue like it’s a dick.” André then exclaims: “I need to fuck everyone in that room!” The episode abruptly ends shortly after this line, but André is still popping up in the production cards (where he usually doesn’t). Clearly, André cannot be contained by television.

The season three finale’s reflexive ending, and André’s final eroticizing address to the black man in the focus group, must also be considered in the context of the show’s ambivalent awareness of the television industry’s “use of blackness...as a method of cultivating brand identities with transracial appeal” in the post-network era.¹³² This ambivalence is apparent in the program’s presence on Adult Swim, a US cable TV channel that broadcasts in late-night time slots (on the same channel as Cartoon Network) and mobilizes aesthetic and textual forms of silliness generally considered subcultural or “fringe” in some way. Adult Swim has long leveraged nondominant cultural forms, including black comedy and hip-hop, in order to court a demographic of mainly young, white, heterosexual men. According to Elkins, “Adult Swim’s synthesis of young, white, heteronormative masculinity, stoner culture, and a knowing appropriation of hip hop all cohere in the network’s mobilization of nerd and geek

¹³² Jennifer Fuller, “Branding Blackness on US Cable Television,” *Media, Culture and Society* 32, no. 2 (2010): 287.

empowerment.”¹³³ Blackness is a structuring presence of the network’s programming including shows like *The PJs*, *The Boondocks*, *Black Dynamite*, *Loiter Squad*, *Afro Samurai*, *Black Jesus*, *Lazor Wulf*, *Mike Tyson Mysteries*, as well as the network’s ventures into hip-hop including collaborations with Schoolly D, MF Doom, Killer Mike, Odd Future, and others.

If Adult Swim is in part aligned with black visual and expressive culture, then in its reflexivity, exemplified in moments like the focus group reveal, and its production of visceral feelings tied to André’s unruly blackness, *The Eric Andre Show* is concerned with “calling upon the spectator to do certain work, to perform a function as arbiter, or decoder, of visual signs that become aligned with blackness.”¹³⁴ Following Fleetwood, *The Eric André Show* provides “a lens to look at the affective power of black cultural production,” demonstrating that “the visual sphere is a performative field where seeing race is not a transparent act; it is itself a ‘doing.’”¹³⁵ In so doing, *The Eric André Show* proffers a negativity in the form of a silliness that knowingly plays into its predominantly young white male audience’s supposedly transparent notions of blackness, particularly of black masculinity, in order to make fun of them. As Sexton also argues, it is not a coincidence that black artists “are drawn with some regularity to paradoxical ideas about fighting anti-blackness by over-identifying with its desire to disappear or distort or disfigure blackness, essentially taking it over and enforcing it hyperbolically, satirically, even vindictively.”¹³⁶ In his hyperbolic over-identification with the affective, aesthetic, archival, and political intensities of black negativity, André distorts and disfigures his white audience’s transparent assumptions of

¹³³ Evan Elkins, “Cultural Identity and Subcultural Forums: The Post-Network Politics of Adult Swim,” *Television & New Media* 15, no. 7 (2014): 602.

¹³⁴ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 7.

¹³⁵ Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 7.

¹³⁶ Sexton, “On Black Negativity.”

black-male-ness, drawing attention to the opacities of blackness and ultimately drawing attention to the different work necessary to read (with) silliness in black audiovisuality.

I also contend that *The Eric André Show* in part sees itself as addressing a black audience. André suggests his show aims “to prove to America that black people are the most diverse, creative group of people and we can express any way we want. [...] What both white people and black people, what their expectations of the black community are, we try to hopefully shatter that or switch things up. It’s a celebration of the evolving black experience in America.”¹³⁷ André directly acknowledges his show’s address to both white and black audiences. Moreover, André’s show mines an archive of “bad objects” in black media. In season three, for instance, he perms his hair to look like Kat Williams, Chris Rock makes an appearance in the season three finale as the director of a “Bird Up!” segment, the show’s “Chubby Hannibal” bit satirizes Eddie Murphy and Tyler Perry roles that make them wear fat suits, Flavor Flav appears as a guest in one of the show’s controversial episodes, and he frequently has women of color from reality television as guests. André’s intensities are directed at an archive of negative texts that are most legible and meaningful to black audiences, creating new meanings in his encounters with and performances through these texts. As such, *The Eric André Show* provides a creative outlet for André to engage with the meanings of silliness and negativity for both blackness and its audiences.

Ultimately, it is André’s aesthetic and affective intensities that necessitate an examination of silliness as an unbearable form of black negativity. While the unbearable in comedy continues to be a notable subgenre that audiences regularly enjoy and seek out, especially in more recent decades, *The Eric André Show* stands out as both a key example and a noteworthy exception in the scene. Across his degenerative oeuvre, André embraces the (potentially) radically queer

¹³⁷ “Eric André, Eric Andre Is Insanely Honest Because Who Else Is Going To Be?,” interview by Jordan Darville, *The FADER*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.thefader.com/2016/10/26/eric-andre-interview>.

possibilities of the silly's pessimistic playfulness in black audiovisuality. Returning to Sexton's definition of black negativity as an intensification of the unbearable, this chapter has argued that *The Eric André Show* stretches and strains the silly intensities of black negativity in the televisual medium to the extreme, to incomparably visceral highs and irritating lows, allowing for queerly creative possibilities that recuperative projects do not.

CONCLUSION

On (Not) “Taking Silliness Seriously”

wdn't it be silly to be serious, now
- A.R. Ammons¹

In a 1980 interview with American poet Tim Dlugos, queer American artist Joe Brainard states: “Most artists are very straight, I mean straight in their seriousness and in what they’re trying to do. I think I’m a lot more sensual, I mean a lot more ga-ga than that—but on purpose. No, not on purpose.”² In the interview, Brainard claims that “straightness is not only a sexuality, but also an attitude, a *serious* attitude,” as Gavin Butt summarizes, which Brainard’s art “departs from by dint of what we might therefore call its ‘un-straight’, deliberately ‘ga-ga’ sensuality.”³ Straightness, like seriousness, is a stylized practice, enabling the straight-and/as-serious subject to performatively demonstrate their competence, authority, and capacity to generate and perform the sovereign forms and types of knowledge deemed appropriate to the spaces of straightness and seriousness. Let us not forget that, definitionally, “straight” not only refers to the “heterosexual,” or that which is not curved or bent, but also that which is ostensibly serious, simple, as well as straightforward—the no-nonsense, clear, logical, and unemotional—as in to “think straight” or to “give a straight answer.” Simply put, straight is serious. Butt defines “serious culture” as:

That which is grave in nature; which addresses important matters—perhaps of life and death; it is earnest and sincere in its address to such issues; it requires some effort and attention—it is not something to be frivolous about; and serious culture is often held in high regard by the canons of aesthetic and critical judgement.⁴

Against this straight model of seriousness, Butt asks if it may be possible to think of seriousness differently, perhaps even queerly. Is it possible to be un-straight in seriousness? What might

¹ A. R. Ammons, *Glare* (Norton, 1998), 3.

² Joe Brainard, “The Joe Brainard Interview by Tim Dlugos,” in *The Collected Writings of Joe Brainard*, ed. Ron Padgett (The Library of America, 2012).

³ Gavin Butt, “Joe Brainard’s Queer Seriousness, or, How to Make Fun out of the Avant-Garde,” in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. David Hopkins (Rodopi, 2006), 284.

⁴ Butt, “Joe Brainard’s Queer Seriousness,” 279-280.

constitute a perverse or queer/ed valorization of the deeply serious? How might it, for instance, be possible to make fun out of the serious business of avant-garde art production?

This is not to suggest that art's queerness must be considered "simply as *non-serious* and trivial, and judged accordingly" but instead that it might be taken as providing an *alternative* approach to serious meanings, ones which Butt construes "in terms of an un-straight seriousness, a 'queer' kind of earnestness," one which might invest in "spending time and effort writing about the absurd necessity of a sentimental embrace with a flower," for instance.⁵ In his work on queer seriousness, Damon Young looks at "a contemporary queer aesthetics in which the negativity of irony is elevated to an overarching formal principle," allowing him to also address "the question of seriousness in specific relation to current developments in queer aesthetics."⁶ Citing what Frederick Schlegel calls the "real transcendental buffoonery" by virtue of which some texts "breathe in their entirety, and in every detail, the divine breath of irony," Young argues that "it is its commitment to such buffoonery" that ultimately makes "a serious work, without that seriousness saving us from the 'error, madness, and simpleminded stupidity' that shine, as Schlegel also confoundingly asserts, through the most authentic speech."⁷

This dissertation is sympathetic to this alternative queer approach to seriousness, and it has approached its objects with a certain earnestness and even (to an extent) seriousness. But a "queer seriousness" is yet another kind of academic seriousness, and thus it is another way of being *taken seriously* by and within academia. "Queer seriousness" is just another way of "taking queerness seriously"—while also "taking seriousness queerly"—ultimately offering another way into academia's general discursive orientation towards "taking the silliest of things seriously," of

⁵ Butt, "Joe Brainard's Queer Seriousness," 279, 284.

⁶ Damon Young, "Queer Seriousness," *World Picture* 9 (2014), 2.

⁷ Young, "Queer Seriousness," 13-14.

pushing past the true weirdness, goofiness, and, of course, silliness of things and thoughts in order to enter into a more serious, sensible, and/or otherwise rational logic. (Perhaps this is so because, as Weinstock has it, “silliness as performed and consumed by adults is ironically serious stuff as it mocks conventional expectations concerning deportment and maturity.”⁸)

Seriousness (even queer seriousness) always entails the suspension of certain attitudes, aesthetics, vernaculars, and performances that shape and structure media and the world. If as I’ve construed it, the transqueer and the silly go hand in hand, perhaps even ontologically so, what place does silliness have in a transqueer/ed model of seriousness? If to “think straight” is to be/think serious, then (it seems) to “think queer(ly)” or to “think transqueer(ly)” is to be/think silly; and so, thinking sillily *is* thinking (trans)queerly? Does the silly then have a true opposite? Is it the “serious”? The “sensible”? The “wise”? The “rational”? In a sense, silliness is not opposed to the “serious.” It is not (just) an unseriousness. It is, it seems, more so in tension with the “straight”—or, as Butt calls it, “a *straight* model of seriousness.”⁹ And while Siegel argues “laughter” is the opposite of serious, Connor argues “comedy” is the opposite of seriousness.

Regardless, to be scholarly, it seems, is to be serious—as a result of which seriousness informs not only academia’s sense of its own identity but also the disciplinary strategies that flow therefrom. Thus far, scholars have made the mistake of trying to recuperate silliness, that is by “taking silliness seriously” without somehow entering into its logic. As an example, in their work on the “stupid” in media, Kerner and Hoxter argue that “while in conventional terms *Transformers* movies are stupid, the intentionality behind their stupidity, the specific nature of their deviations from normative storytelling paradigms, elevates them into a more interesting

⁸ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “In Praise of Silliness: The Cult of Python,” in *And Now for Something Completely Different: Critical Approaches to Monty Python*, ed. Kate Egan and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 205.

⁹ Butt, “Joe Brainard’s Queer Seriousness,” 288.

category.”¹⁰ But what is this more “interesting” category? Seriousness? If the silly (or the stupid) is itself valuable, why “elevate” it? Weinstock similarly claims that “cinematic silliness as the product of conscious deployment” is itself a “sophisticated manipulation of culturally embedded expectations.”¹¹ Intentional silliness, especially in art, then must be serious if it is sophisticated. Is unintentional silliness uselessly unsophisticated? The silly, even in the popular press, finds its justification through the serious; critic Elle Hunt writes that “science proves” silliness is valuable in “serious times.”¹² The “silly” is thus taken “seriously” in order to be studied with care.

More rarely, the “serious” can be (intellectually) brought down by the “silly”—such as in Ngai’s work on the “cuteness of the avant-garde”—but in either case the terms appear to be in a strict dialectical relationship. See, for instance, the intertwining of “serious” and “silly” that belies the aesthetic category of the “zany” for Ngai, where she clarifies that the zany has a sense of stress and desperation that “immediately sets it apart from its more lighthearted cousins, the goofy or the silly.”¹³ The result, for Ngai, is that silliness can be discredited as weak and non-threatening, whereas zaniness has a repelling force whereby the viewer does not want to confront the precarity that it makes visible. Yet, as I’ve argued, the silly is not necessarily lighthearted. Nor is it “immediately” easy to recognize and differentiate from its others.

I conclude my dissertation with an acknowledgement that the categories of seriousness and silliness are always necessarily co-constitutively entwined. Seriousness is often mediated through (or sublimated into) silliness, and vice versa, for which reason the two categories should not be thought of as binarily opposed. My counterpolitics of silliness has aimed to reckon with

¹⁰ Aaron Kerner and Julian Hoxter, *Theorizing Stupid Media: De-Naturalizing Story Structures in the Cinematic, Televisual, and Videogames* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 48.

¹¹ Weinstock, “In Praise of Silliness,” 191.

¹² Elle Hunt, “Why It’s Sensible to Be Silly,” *The Guardian*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/aug/23/why-it-is-sensible-to-be-silly-serious-times-call-for-drawing-smiley-faces-on-fruit>.

¹³ Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 185.

sites like these, where seriousness and silliness collide, or fail to collide, and where politics is inextricable—even at its most materially consequential—from silly sites of relationality and meaning-making. A sensitivity towards silliness, and a recognition of its mutually constitutive imbrication with seriousness facilitate broader, deeper, and richer engagements with the world.

Rather than extracting and distilling seriousness from silly objects, I instead have worked to make the very silliness in/of objects into a site of interrogation and exploration. It is possible, then, to be somewhat serious *with* silliness without necessarily taking silliness seriously—to treat silliness with care, intelligence, and importance, holding silliness closely while also reveling in its murky, muddy, even grotesque shapes and theories. As Jordan Alexander Stein proposes, “silliness is not an attempt to take theory down; rather, seriousness is an attempt to guard against the queer material of which theory is made—that big, difficult idea that always threatens to turn into a puddle of soft and ridiculous goo.”¹⁴ Yet, the silly and the serious still seem to be in a parasitic relationship to one another. The silly remains a secondary phenomenon that must cannibalize off the serious to make itself relevant to scholarly critique. Its value is always opaque, and it thus must be made transparent through the work of serious academics.

This project has hoped to (at least begin to) trouble this dialectic. Following the transqueerly slippery and sticky concept of the silly, I have done less to stress the importance of “taking silliness seriously,” as others have done before, or even legitimizing or elevating the “silly object” as necessarily “important” for study or as unambiguously “radical” for politics. Instead, I have highlighted the importance of thinking in the silliest of ways, that is, of not only making the silly serious or the serious silly but taking silliness itself to be a counter-political methodology, a pedagogical project, and an aesthetic phenomenon—an epistemic and erotic

¹⁴ Jordan Alexander Stein, *Avidly Reads Theory* (New York University Press, 2019).

entry point to transqueer studies of digital film, media, and beyond. I have thus considered silliness as fundamental to digital media scholarship in the humanities, not only for studying those things that might be called “silly objects” but also for those objects, forms, feelings, theories, and disciplines not conventionally understood within the parameters of “silliness.”

Overall, I have been interested in asking how best to take account of a world that does not necessarily cohere into a serious shape but instead often (if not usually) appears to be intimately intertwined with the forms, feelings, and problematics of silliness. We must refuse to fold the messy, unruly, and indeterminate contours of cultural and political life into the distributions of the sensible that characterizes the serious. This dissertation recognizes that the world is, and continues to become, a silly place, and it revels in the unanticipated openness that a silly thing, thought, or feeling allows to unfold. Silliness might allow us to find political promise in the cracks, impasses, and stoppages that constitute the silly, or it might act as its own impasse. This dissertation has opened a dialogue for engaging with the silly in digital film and media, offering a silly toolbox of transqueer, opaque, ambiguous, ambivalent, minor, nonsovereign, and messy modes of engaging and living with/in the contours of contemporary media cultures and politics.

While this dissertation has undoubtedly been at times quite sober and serious, I hope that my failures and flailings can nonetheless serve as an incentive for others to continue the work of *queerly*, *transly*, and *sillily* studying digital film and media works—to continue to develop and put into practice even sillier methodologies. In doing so, I hope we can continue to question the common-sense impulse to “take seriously” our objects of study, instead asking: What might it mean to not “take seriously” our objects, questions, and arguments? What would it take not to over-determine the reach and importance of our academic work and all the while continue to treat it with care? Moreover, as scholars, we feel differently about things; “instead of remaining

serious in the face of self-doubt, ridicule, and broader ecological crisis,” as Nicole Seymour suggests, let us work to embrace “the sense of our own absurdity, our uncertainty, our humor, even our perversity.”¹⁵ Most of all, I argue, we will have to be willing to affirm our own silliness.

For is it a bad sign that defenders of the humanities become tongue-tied so quickly when non-academics ask what the humanities are, and why we should value them, especially in crisis times? Perhaps the answers are, and should be, downright silly.

¹⁵ Nicole Seymour, “Toward an Irreverent Ecocriticism,” *Journal of Ecocriticism* 4, no. 2 (2012): 57.

CODA I I stay silly...

Struggle graced with silliness.
- Francesca Royster¹

January 19, 2023. Swiss developer and hacker maia arson crimew pulls off a major cybercrime, snagging a 2019 copy of the U.S. government’s No Fly List from an unsecured airline server, noticing very clear trends towards almost exclusively Arabic and Russian sounding names throughout the 1.56 million entries.² This version of the No Fly List belonged to US regional airline CommuteAir and was discovered by crimew while searching for unsecured databases on the Amazon Web Services cloud computing platform. The then-23-year-old nonbinary trans lesbian socialist and “anarchist kitten” revealed the news in an extremely cute pastel-pink blog post titled “how to completely own an airline in 3 easy steps” alongside an image of a Sprigatito Pokémon plush, announcing it with “holy shit, we actually have the nofly list. holy fucking bingle. what?! :3.”³ As the controversy surrounding the digital heist grew, crimew posted on then-Twitter: “congress is investigating now :) but I stay silly :3.”

This quote quickly made its way to Tumblr, with one post by user @sexygaywizard reading, “‘congress investigating now :) but i stay silly :3’ is honestly such a serve I’ve been thinking ‘but i stay silly :3’ all day...holy fucking bingle.” Another Tumblr user, @junoinfernal, became the first person to post the now-viral meme phrase: “the horrors are endless, but we stay silly :3.” The phrase spread rapidly with its use across various image macros, with one meme featuring a cursed picture of a dog with the phrase and another deep-fried meme of a frog using a variation of the phrase, reading: “The horrors are never ending, yet I remain silly.”

¹ Francesca Royster, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* (University of Michigan Press, 2012), 112.

² Crimew is a well-known figure among hacking and cybersecurity circles. She has either taken credit for or been attributed to hacks from several major multinational corporations, including Nintendo, Intel, Nissan, and Verkada.

³ maia arson crimew, “How to Completely Own an Airline in 3 Easy Steps,” *Maia.Crimew.Gay* (blog), January 19, 2023, <https://maia.crimew.gay/posts/how-to-hack-an-airline/>.

In another meme, also inspired by crimew, a two-column table titled “Stop Using Anti-Silly Language” presents a “not this” but “this” style meme. Rather than using the phrases listed in the left column, like “clinical depression,” “psychosis,” “severe substance reliance,” “mass industrial sabotage,” and “wanted by international criminal court,” each entry in the right column offers the same alternative: to say “silly :3” instead. It’s clear that the internet is up to its neck in silliness mediated through depression, anxiety, and all the overwhelming, never-ending horrors of being alive today, littered with equal parts “I wanna die” feels and Charli XCX “let’s ride” vibes. I wonder, when did the Millennial ☹ became the Gen Z 🧠 ? When did *feeling tickled* become *being dead*? Perhaps there’s nothing sillier than reveling in our death: “lol I’m dead!”

In certain corners of the internet, you can see/hear the “I stay silly” mantra repeated ad nauseum by its anhedonic, dysphoric users. Meme phrases using the language of the “silly” continue to surface across platforms, comprising a broader online category of memes referring to “being silly” or “too silly.” The site KnowYourMeme suggests that these memes “riff on the adjective ‘silly,’ often using the innocent connotations of the word for satirical exploitation by portraying ‘being silly’ as a problem,” thus offering a “subversion of the word ‘silly’” and leading to both “being silly” and getting “too silly” becoming recognizable catchphrases in their own right.⁴ Other notable meme phrase that riffs on the “silly” include: “tis a silly place,” “i’m just a silly little guy,” “me in my silly little bed avoiding my silly little tasks,” and “every day i put on my silly little outfits and do my silly little tasks.” These “silly” memes and meme phrases are often confined to using cute, sad, and/or “derpy” images or animals like “silly cats.”

But in one potent iteration, the “silly” is escalated to something beyond cuteness and beyond control. User @the_life_of_daz posted a meme on then-Twitter that read “i got too silly”

⁴ Owen and LiterallyAustin, “Being Silly / Too Silly,” *Know Your Meme* (blog), October 6, 2022, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/being-silly-too-silly>.



Figure 5.1. The “i got too silly” meme.

across the image in a bold, cartoonish, WordArt-style font, as if to say, “the goofs went too far, I must be contained” (Figure 5.1). The absurd gravity of the psych ward is, of course, not actually that absurd given, as I note in the preface, “silliness” is defined in the DSM-V as an affect of “lability,” where dramatic alternations in euphoria, dysphoria, and irritability, while mostly innocent in children, are potentially indicative of psychosis in adults.⁵ The “dissonance” between text and image is not merely ironic, but it is evocative of the deeply messy, fragile, and precarious, though omnipresent, relationship between silliness and depressive feelings—since, to reiterate, the silly is not necessarily joyous, cathartic release. It is the (transqueer) nonsovereign’s dangerous overstepping of sovereign boundaries that can then culminate in punitive isolation rather than, as I’ve suggested, and as I’ve hoped, a potentially radical and loving relationality.

But when precisely does “I stay silly” become “I got too silly”? The “too” in “too silly,” just like the “too much” implicit in acts of drinking, boring, or scaring silly, carries the weight of

⁵ Punitive affect designations like “hysteria” have had a similar history, particularly for women.

excess, transgression, and (sovereign-style) playfulness spiraled into something unmanageable, something that necessitates containment by the systems and societies that oppressively define what is rational, sensible, and coherent—where unruly spontaneity is suppressed and silliness is confined within the sterile walls of its own psychic pain. While this is a quite sober thought to end on, the meme itself, regularly deployed online in very silly ways, operates as a necessary reminder of the silly's depressive qualities and the depressive's silly qualities—of the fragile, precarious, and potentially generative im/balance between silliness and sadness. For maia arson crimew, after all, it was precisely in getting *too* silly, out of boredom, that led to her criminalized acts of hacktivism, resulting in radical revelations and potentially devastating legal trouble. And still, crimew affirms, “but i stay silly :3,” a commitment to staying with the trouble of silliness, to getting too silly, and staying too silly still.

Silly, in the face of the catastrophic. Silly, even when it makes no sense to be. Silly, not because it fixes anything. Silly, because what else is there to be?

CODA II

I stay sillier still...

Ah, the sea...so fascinating. So wonderful. Here, we see Bikini Bottom, teeming with life. Home to one of my favorite creatures, SpongeBob SquarePants. Yes, of course he lives in a pineapple, you silly.

- Narrator, SpongeBob SquarePants¹

SpongeBob and Patrick are thrilled! Two packages have arrived in the mail for them. Squealing with excitement, they unveil two brand new reef blowers! “Tag! You’re it!” They giggle as they both run around and tag each other with reef blower blasts of air. Patrick switches his blower to “suck” mode and giddily sucks up the large nose on Squidward’s moai-style house. Squidward is chafed, literally steaming. “Playing with a reef blower? That is the most childish thing I have ever heard of!” He’s absolutely fed up with his neighbors’ incessantly silly antics:

Squidward: *This is the final straw. I am going to move so far away, that I will be able to brag about it. I would...I would rather tear out my brain stem, carry it into the middle of the nearest four-way intersection, and skip rope with it, than go on living where I do now!*

[On TV] Tentacle Acres Spokesoctopus: *Hi there! Is this the final straw? Do you want to move so far away, that you can brag about it? Would you rather tear out your brain stem, walk out into the middle of the nearest three-way ... four-way intersection, and skip rope with it, than continue living where you do now? Then move to ... Tentacle Acres! Where happiness is just a suction cup away!*

Fleeing the chaos of Bikini Bottom, he sets his sights on the town of Tentacle Acres. Squidward arrives at the fenced-off complex, approaching a massive golden door and speaking into an intercom: “Hello? ... I’m here about the happiness. I’ll be moving in now.” The doors opens to Tentacle Acres, a utopian enclave tailored precisely to Squidward’s tastes and filled with fellow octopi peers. The homes are twins of his own, the residents share his sensible outlook on life, and sponges and starfish are strictly forbidden. The first few days are bliss; Squidward revels in the meticulously crafted sanctuary, where order reigns and silly neighbors are a distant memory.

¹ The opening lines of the show’s first episode: “Help Wanted,” *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Nickelodeon, 1999). This coda also offers a description of season 2, episode 6: “Squidville,” *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Nickelodeon, 2001).

But each day soon becomes indistinguishable from the next...and the next...and the next. Every day, he walks out of his home, rides his bike, picks up a can of his favorite “canned bread” at the grocery store, dances at the interpretive dance academy, plays in a clarinet trio, and then goes to bed. The next day, he rides his bike, picks up another can, dances, plays, sleeps, and the cycle continues over and over. With each passing scene, Squidward becomes less and less happy. On the 7th loop, he starts frowning, and on the 9th loop, the music becomes heavily distorted, and eventually, on the 12th loop, he is *very* depressed. At the end of the final cycle, while playing with his clarinet trio, he mumbles: “I sort of...don’t feel like playing my clarinet today,” and he walks away. The next day, Squidward sits on a park bench, glum and alone. He snickers: “Yep, this is great. They might as well rename this town ‘Squidward’s Paradise.’ Or perhaps ‘Too Much Paradise.’” The very sameness that once promised tranquility now suffocates him.

Suddenly, he hears a reef blower. He picks his head up, smiles, and whimpers with an air of hope: “SpongeBob?” Squidward turns and sees an octopus leaving a “back whenever” sign next to a reef blower. Squidward glances at it...it’s too tempting. He goes over and pokes it, setting it off for a second. He giggles. He whistles nonchalantly and knocks off the sign. “Oops.” Squidward picks up the nozzle, switches it to the “suck” mode, and his nose instantly gets sucked up. He switches it back to “blow” as his lengthy nose flutters over it. He chuckles.

An onlooking octopus echoes Squidward’s earlier complaint: “Playing...with a reef blower? That’s the most childish thing I’ve ever heard of!” Soon, Squidward loses control, giving himself over entirely to silliness. Embracing this unusually silly side of himself, he goes on a rampage, terrorizing Tentacle Acres with silly reef blower antics, until the entire town corners him down. To the crowd, he madly exclaims: “Grievances! This town is a grievance! There should be a law against so many stuck-up tightwads living in one place! This city needs to be

destroyed! ... or at least painted a different color.” Squidward quickly rockets out of Tentacle Acres, riding his reef blower up and away and laughing maniacally: “Freedom! Woo-hoo!”

In the depths of his disillusionment, Squidward finally realizes that what he truly longs for is the very silliness he once scorned—a silliness that emerges not as a form of resistance to or refusal of the mundane, not as an extraordinary thing, but as a vital and unstable force that burrows out from and breathes life into the ordinary, into the unstable now-ness of a kind of silly ordinariness. Squidward’s fantasy for a “good life”—one rid of all forms of silliness, every yellowish, pinkish, spongey, starry thing, any and everything that slowly unravels or brashly shatters his longing for self-sovereignty—now slowly rots from within. It isn’t until he loses his world-sustaining object, his always-deferred desire for a better life in a better place with better people, that Squidward is finally able to let go, to ride the reef blower, and to stay silly, maybe even too silly. For what Squidward desires most after cruel optimism, after the worn-out ambivalence of the impasse, is silliness itself. Beyond the impasse, beyond mere survival, perhaps true flourishing, for Squidward, for us all, lies not in a retreat from silliness but in an embrace of all its opaque, ambiguous, ambivalent, minor, nonsovereign, and messy forms—all its stuff, things, feels, vibes, riffs, rides, moods, modes, times, spaces, methods, and politics.

In the end, Squidward learns nothing (which, in a way, is what we expect of characters in serialized kids cartoons who learn and relearn lessons constantly). Squidward certainly does not learn to stay silly. In each episode, he maintains his anhedonic aversion to silliness, particularly of the sponge and star-like variety. Perhaps this is the very nature of silliness, if it truly has one, particularly within neoliberal capitalist systems; the silly is, in a sense, what we are constantly moving towards and away from, embracing it and letting it go. It draws us in with its stickiness just as well as it pulls us away with its slipperiness. This is, after all, the mess of silliness.

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