

Messy Images

Call for Papers for the Journal *Montage AV* (issue 31,01, 2022)

Make-up tutorials, honeymoon vlogs, food porn, dance challenges, and bokeh atmospheres stand for a visual aesthetic in social media that celebrates the beautiful, virtuous, and perfect. In contrast to these glossy images, we would like to examine phenomena that could be described as *messy images*, to observe their media-based dynamics in digital networks, and to discuss their aesthetic, ethical, and/or political meanings and potentials.

Conceived as an open working concept, «messiness» addresses obscure, unclean, overflowing, overwhelming, ambiguous, unpredictable, sprawling, opaque, and unsatisfying processes in networked visual cultures. Current examples include viral video memes such as [Melania's Greenscreen Dress](#) (2020), [Myanmar Coup Dance Instructor Videos](#) (2021), or [Zoom Cat Lawyer](#) (2021), but also confusing photo compilations on Pinterest, off-the-rails video pranks on TikTok, dubious image trophies on Instagram, deepfakes on Twitter, depictions of violence on unmoderated image boards, and scambaiting or blackfacing memes. Some of these images are re-published and re-contextualized on critical websites such as [Yolocaust](#) or in «messy archives» like [Humans of Late Capitalism](#).

Visual phenomena of «messiness» can be analyzed with regard to the content of images, their form (e.g. blurring, over-filtering, glitches, lossy compression, etc.), their circulation and interconnection, their embedding in specific platform environments, and their reception and distribution by viewers/users/viewers. Analyses on one or more of these levels can help conceptualize messiness as a distinct and idiosyncratic aesthetic category that extends the classical repertoire of the aesthetic (the beautiful, the sublime etc.) and complements recent aesthetic notions such as «cuteness,» «zaniness,» «glossiness,» or the «vernacular web» (Dale et al. 2017; Ngai 2012; Groening 2016; Lialina 2009).

On the level of *form*, messy images can be delineated in contrast to glossy images (for example, due to their «dirty» aesthetics), but also emerge in the midst of glossy environments (e.g. by means of grotesque over-filtering). On the level of *circulation* – in viral, memetic processes, in social media feeds and search engines – messy images can constantly form new relationships, de- and re-contextualize meaning, form associative chains in serial arrangements, and multiply references.

At the same time, their tendency toward a chaotic ontology and structure provokes numerous kinds of sorting operations on the level of the *platform* ecology (e.g. deleting, listing, tagging, etc.; Citton 2017). Personalization, recommendation, and search algorithms aim at producing relevance and clarity within a nexus of overabundant imagery, while content moderation attempts to regulate circulation (Gillespie 2018; Roberts 2019). At the same time, however, these efforts not only restrict, but may also contribute to, the visual disorder. Thus, they testify to the unmanageable life of networked images.

Finally, at the level of *reception* and perception, messy images can function as thumb stoppers in the flow of images. They can attract or repulse attention, they offer cognitive and affective, stimulating or deadening stimuli. This raises the question of the conditions under

which messy images can develop a critical function within the hypernormalizing social media cultures and within «platform capitalism» (Srnicsek 2017) and furthermore question the dominant visual regimes.

For this issue, *Montage AV* invites the submission of articles that analyze phenomena, styles, taxonomies, and political discourses of messy images as well as the functions, effects, and genealogies these images have in recent social media cultures. Further questions could include: Which contemporary phenomena are emblematic for a networked culture of messy images? Which media and forms constitute messy images (web videos, photographs, apps, GIFs, memes, graphics etc.) – and in what way? How are they disseminated? How do the specific media environments of the social web affect the formation of images? Which historical precursors and models of messy images point to interconnections that may contribute to the understanding of contemporary media cultures? Which theories and methods are suitable for researching these messy image phenomena? Furthermore, we welcome the application and reflection of «messy methods» (Law 2006; Mellor 2001) and fuzzy epistemologies that may stimulate productive knowledge effects.

We welcome short texts beyond the classical research paper, as well: commentaries, satires, roundtables, and interviews. Questions and submissions can be directed to Laura Katharina Mücke, Olga Moskatova, and Chris Tedjasukmana (laura.katharina.muecke@univie.ac.at, olga.moskatova@fau.de, tedjasukmana@uni-mainz.de).

Please submit full papers by **November 1, 2021** (please also note our [stylesheet](#)).