

The Peripheral Image

by

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There is a curious, and at times absurd, function to the appearance of images at the edge, the periphery, of web pages. The most defining characteristics of these images are not their literal, spatial peripherality, but rather their conceptual peripherality: their de-centered, yet economically central, role on the web. These images are de-centered insofar as they aren't the media ends for Internet users (i.e. they aren't what users are "online" for), and as such they constitute a sort of Internet detritus –thumbnails, banner ads, swipe-up-for-mores– they are image reproduction run grotesque and amok, towards seemingly inconsequential ends, negligible in form and content. Despite this, the information one might glean from their visual language is strikingly relevant in the context of affective economics (the marketing theory concerned with the relation between emotion and consumption) and the peripheral image, as we will see, signifies, and modulates in a very material sense, the exploitation of the cognitive surplus and pre-personal desires of Internet users through curious affective forms. Image as carrot on a stick, leading users into a sort of mis-en-abyme of similarly formulated images and articles that one might follow and interact with to no particular end. In considering the appearance and relevance of the peripheral image we might best understand the

implications of their form as a multivalent material for the study of cultural production, affect, consumer cultures, and Internet platforms.

Perhaps the best place to start is with a brief genealogy of the ambiguous producer-consumer context from which the peripheral image ascends. “Free lunch” is how Dallas Walker Smythe, researcher and theorist of the political economy of communications, referred to what his predecessors had considered to be the principal product of mass media: the news, television, radio programs, entertainment, messages, information, etc. These images and their messages are certainly important for the critical interpretation and response to prevailing norms and hierarchies in images: as Smythe suggests one of the roles of the media is “to mass market legitimacy of the state and its strategic and tactical policies and actions” [233]. But Smythe problematizes the assumption that the principal product of mass media, that which generates its productive capacities, is the visual and aural products provided to the audience. Instead, the production of the audience itself, then sold to advertisers (what he calls the “audience commodity”) is the principal product. For Smythe, who was writing in the 70s and 80s, television and radio programs were the free lunch, the hors d’oeuvres, to whet the appetite of the consumer who would have already, by virtue of investing in and owning a television set, reconfigured their daily lives around the purchase and consumption of commodities presented to them in the form of advertisements (“television as aural-visual wallpaper”[238]). With this, we might begin to understand the role

advertising images take within the infrastructure of commercial mass media. They are the point in which producers access and manage consumer demands, assuring not just the visibility of their product, but the cultivation of a “mood conducive to favorable reaction to the advertisers’ explicit and implicit messages.”[242] In his writing, Smythe refers to the buying and selling of audience power (of consumers’ capacities to negotiate their lifestyles with the consideration and purchasing of advertised commodities) interchangeably with the concept of labor power, as he sees in the activity of the audience a type of work existing in the elusive yet productive realm of the domestic space.

“A constant process of direct experience with commodities goes on and blends into all aspects of people’s lives all the time. Advertisers get this huge volume of audience work as a bonus even before a specific media free-lunch-advertising program appears on the tube face and initiates a new episode in audience work.” [244]

The facetious tone of this passage is not unwarranted. The degree to which the masses interact with commodities through image-advertisements was, and is even more so today, immense and intrusive [Ha, 2008]. A similar cynicism towards this confused relation between audiences and the reproduction of their audience power (and thus the reproduction of their social role in consumer society) is found in Theodor Adorno’s writing on free time in “The Culture Industry”:

“These roles affect the innermost articulation of human characteristics, to such an extent that in the age of truly unparalleled social integration, it is hard to ascertain anything in human beings which is not functionally determined.” [187]

Here, Adorno suggests that the effects of this process of audience creation raise concerns not just about the asymmetries of power in the relation between the producers and consumers of mass media, but that there are also fundamental changes in the desires and mental orientations of the masses in such relations.

The idea of “the audience commodity and its work” as put forth by Smythe, is similarly explored in the writings of Maurizio Lazzarato. Lazzarato refers to the creative and productive capacities of audiences as “immaterial labor,” a “labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity,” a labor that finds itself “at the crossroads of a new relationship between production and consumption” [137]. Like Smythe, Lazzarato is aware of the pervasive nature of immaterial labor. While it is “not obviously apparent to the eye, because it is not defined by the four walls of the factory,” its productive capacities cannot be ignored. Once recognized, immaterial labor makes it “increasingly difficult to distinguish leisure time from work time.”

Immaterial labor is realized in its most complex and integrated form through the Internet. Tiziana Terranova, an Italian autonomist theorist and activist working in connection with other theorists such as Lazzarato, describes the dynamic of labor in network culture via the concept of the “social factory,” which describes a process whereby “work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine” [33]. This assertion corresponds to the labor trends that have accompanied the rise of platform capitalism¹ insofar that most all of the productive value generated by the platforms is derived from the immaterial labor of their user base, from audience power . As such, monopoly platforms are able to employ a fraction of the number of laborers that traditional forms of productive capital do. For example, in 2019 FaceBook payrolled 44,942 employees with operating expenses of 46.7 billion dollars an annual revenue of 95.97 billion dollars. That same year, Ford motor company, a proper “factory” production business, had 190,000 employees, operating expenses of 155.34 billion dollars, and a revenue of 155.9 billion dollars. In effect, FaceBook was able to generate 61% of the revenue of Ford with 25% the amount of employees, 30% the operating expenses, and with considerably large profit margins. So one has to

¹ Here I am speaking to Nick Srnicek’s definition of platform capitalism as the business model which provides hardware and software for others to operate on, culminating in a few monopoly platforms having control over a large portion of the flow of digital production (i.e. Google, Facebook, etc.)

consider where this value added arises from? As Terranova writes “Although the traffic of these flows of knowledge needs to be monitored, the Internet effectively functions as a channel through which “human intelligence” renews its capacity to produce” [38]. What is suggested here, is the relation wherein all activity that enters the major Internet platforms by users, regardless of the creators intentions of their intentions of “producing value,” is registered as information that is productive for platform capitalists. This dynamic, in which all of human intelligence, media consumption, and flows of information on the Internet are made productive, is contingent on how consistent and engaged the audience commodity is, as well as how effectively it is monitored. Thus there is a necessity to both draw upon the desires of users, generating more flows of knowledge, and simultaneously formulating that information into new forms that will repeat such a cycle.

These productive functions of the Internet are evidence of an exploitation that reaches much farther than what was present for Smythe in television and radio. The convergence and integration of most all aspects of life into the network known abstractly as the Internet– (communications, supply chains, personal finances, art, and so on)– all point to this difference between how television media and the Internet function in our private and public lives. There is also the paradox presented by immaterial labor itself: that it occurs during “leisure time” (a concept that seems almost antiquated in the era of the precariat gig worker). Needless to

say, to follow the thread of more outmoded understandings of immaterial labor, of Smythe's audience work, to the more advanced context of the contemporary Internet is necessary for understanding the appearance and form of peripheral images.

“How are advertisers assured that they are getting what they pay for when they buy audience power [235]”? Smythe posits the example of insurance companies as a way of understanding this perceived gamble on the efficacy of advertisements. Life insurance companies cannot be *entirely* sure whether you will drop dead the day that you take out their policy, or if you will pay premiums for several decades, but operating at scale allows the business model to remain profitable. Similarly, “...it matters not if some audience members withdraw their attention; that is expected and discounted in advance by the advertiser... working with large numbers, removes the risk from the gamble.” It is in this moment that we can clearly see a break between the modes of communication that Smythe's analyzes and the current state of machine learning, surveillance capitalism, and contemporary advertising models. The shoddy, but still generally successful, surveys of television viewers that the advertising industry once relied on, have been replaced by more refined modes of collection, classification, and exchange of behavioral data on the market. Audience power is made more legible to buyers and

sellers, and if there is money in enticing and facilitating clicks, then the means of enticement will most assuredly become more exploitative.

Let's look at the relation between users and a certain, albeit depreciatingly relevant², market form of peripheral imagery: clickbait. Imagine a company that sells ergonomic phone cases. This company chooses, reasonably so, to advertise on the Internet. They are presented with a number of advertisement strategies, but the core distinction is choosing between targeted ad space (websites or platforms that use behavioral data to target advertising to particular demographics based on their perceived needs) or un-targeted ad space (websites or platforms that display advertisements indiscriminately to heterogeneous audiences). They choose the targeted space since they "know" their audience will be a relatively tech-savvy, efficiency-oriented consumer. As a result, their advertisement can be concise, deferential, and simply demonstrate what the commodity is and how well it will fit into the targeted consumer's lifestyle.

But what of the companies that do not sell we might traditionally consider a fungible commodity or service, but rather, audience power and attention itself? This is the model by which a great deal of online publishing generates its revenue.

² Writers such as Tim Hwuang and Paris Marx have suggested that due to a lack of transparency about ad valuation from platform capitalists, the current Internet advertising model might be a bubble waiting to burst.

Looper, Mashed, Grunge, TMZ, and BuzzFeed, all operate on the model that they will generate viewership, and with it value, through the audience’s potential to engage with advertisements that they display on their pages. Publishers will purchase ad space to generate more “viewership,” to prove to *other* publishers and companies that *their* site is a valuable space to put ads in as well. This dizzying process is referred to as “traffic trading,” a term used to describe an increasingly speculative model websites use to grow—or depending on who you ask, manufacture—the size (and legitimacy) of their share of audience power. A central figure in facilitating such a process is Reggie Renner, CEO of Static Media and ZergNet. On their website, ZergNet is described as an “editorial recommendation platform”³ which provides “genuine, highly engaged users”.



Figure 1. Graphical flow chart indicating the ZergNet business model.

³ In a 2014 article interviewing and covering Reggie Renner and ZergNet, there is discussion of the associations banner advertising widgets had with porn and gambling sites, a stigma Renner wished to shy away from.

One look at the ZergNet landing page— a mess of articles with titles such as “The Truth About Donald and Melania’s Marriage is Out in the Open” or “The Tragedy of Paris Jackson Is Just Sad, Really Sad”—and you might come to question how engaged users really are when clicking through these titles. Or perhaps a better question, how engaged these users are in *actually*, eventually purchasing some sort of material service or commodity at the end of this trail of clicks? How is this making money for anyone? The truth of the matter, is that “real” engagement, that is, a viewer clicking and then buying something, is hardly the question for traffic traders. At the end of the day, in order to make money, publishers need only to have figures on their viewership. They need to be able to say, “I have an audience that is x large and sticks around for y amount of time” and that because of these figures, you can trust that placing an advertisement on our site will send some of our viewers to you. It is this set of incentives and business relations that set the stage for the production of clickbait. As such, the images used in clickbait advertising, reflect and formalize, while also making viable, this complex invisible system of traffic trading. “In the process of buying an ad, there can be tens or dozens or hundreds of intermediaries and no one would ever know. In fact, the advertiser might not know – and the consumer on the other end definitely doesn’t” [Marx].

Psychologist and economist George Loewenstein's "information-gap theory" sits at the root of how this type of peripheral image captures audiences. In "The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation," he writes that "when attention becomes focused on a gap in one's knowledge. Such information gaps produce the feeling of deprivation labeled curiosity. The curious individual is motivated to obtain the missing information" [87]. In clickbait, the composition, the text, as well as the image, are designed to provoke a sense of deprivation that can be satisfied only by what lies *beyond* the image itself. Unlike say, an artwork or an advertisement, what lies beyond the peripheral image is not some purported endowment of a more enhanced understanding of anything, but rather, more instances of deprivation. In this sense, the peripheral image is not a visible object of reflection, but rather, an opaque interface that appears to perform networked demand management. The image and its processes serve the functional role of capturing, recuperating, and then trafficking idle attention in order to generate positive "engagement" figures.

An ad tech company like ZergNet boasts millions of clicks each month, and while we may question the veracity of such figures, it is clear that the form and function of these images ought not be ignored. Thus, for Renner, and other's whose models are reliant on CTR's (click-through-rates), what is required is an appearance that engages some immanent (as relating to the mind; the subjective)

and pre-personal desire with a swiftness and intensity that is perfectly unconcerned with anything (e.g. “real” engagement) except the moment of affective capture. Here I am relying on a definition of affect laid out by Eric Shouse in “Feeling, Emotion, Affect”:

“An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential... affect is the most abstract because affect cannot be fully realized in language, because affect is always prior to and/or outside of consciousness” [Shouse]

This feature of the peripheral image partially, but nonetheless, significantly distinguishes it from other advertising imagery in that the primary formal device invokes affect over feeling. Shouse distinguishes between feeling, emotion, and affect noting that feeling is, “a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences.” Historically, advertising has engaged with *feeling*, while the peripheral image engages with affect. Daniel W. Smith (not to be mixed up with Dallas Smythe) writes of this earlier trend in consumer economies writing:

“...at the drug store, I almost automatically reach for one brand of toothpaste rather than another, since I have a fervent interest in having my teeth cavity-free and whiter than white, and my breath fresher than fresh - but this is

because my desire is already invested in the social formation that creates that interest.” [74]

This instance deals with previous experiences and the interpellation of cultural values. Affect on the other hand, offers a unique problem for the question of interpretation. If peripheral images are invested with such “pre-personal” qualities (non-reflexive and non-articulated), then what of the relation between affect and our conscious, reflexive, articulation of desires? Are these “unformed and unstructured potentials” called affect of ourselves? That is, are affects the social formation of the capitalist order of producing desires, as in the case of Smiths desire for “whiter than white” teeth, or do they precede any such political and economic system and are simply exploited in the capitalist order? How should one handle or think about affects? Shouse’s exploration of affect continues, echoing Smythe’s questioning of the media’s “principal product”:

“What does all of this mean for individuals who are interested in media and cultural studies? It means that describing “media effects” in terms of the communication of ideology sometimes results in the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this therefore because of this) fallacy...the importance of affect rests upon the fact that in many cases the message consciously received may

be of less import to the receiver of that message than his or her non-conscious affective resonance with the source of the message.”

Mark Andrejevic further explores this “return to affect” as a result of the decline of “symbolic efficiency,” a mistrust for what is said in favor of what can be detected[13]. He notes “this growing feeling... that affect is central to an understanding of our information-and image-based late capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have floundered...belief has waned for many, but not affect. If anything, our condition is characterized by a surfeit of it” [Massumi, 52].

This surfeit of affect is activated and formalized through peripheral images that hope in their exceedingly affective punch to be activated by users of heterogenous beliefs, for affect precedes these beliefs. They come to embody certain homogenized forms of desire that are replicated and used to keep the audience commodity connected and online. See, for example, the image below, a thumbnail from a YouTube video of “Oddly Satisfying” material.



Figure 2. Thumbnail from 'Oddly Satisfying' video.

The image is split vertically, showing two scenes. The first shows a human hand pressing an orange into a disc sander, while the second shows a human foot stepping into, and creating an impression upon, a ground surface of clay. A New York Times piece on “Oddly Satisfying” images discusses how “physical objects being manipulated in certain highly specific ways: melted, smoothed, extruded, carved, sliced, dissolved...” [Matchar] all elicit inexplicable responses of satisfaction and contentment, despite there being a lack of conscious relatability or informational content. This instance, and many others like it, can be understood as encounters with the “irreducibly bodily and autonomic nature of affect” [89].

So what are we to make of these connections between affect, images, audiences, and Internet platforms? Putting affect to work through images is not unethical in and of itself. But the peripheral image might be understood as distinct in the depth of its consumer exploitation of. It is a tool used to reproduce asymmetries of power between platform monopolists and the audience commodity over how and where the flow of mass Internet users spend time on the Internet. Despite this, one might glean some compelling formal strategies from peripheral images, understanding them as techniques that, in a process of *détournement*, might be put to work towards new ends.

As outlined here, the peripheral image prompts a number of questions about labor, consumption, the Internet-at-large, and the modulation of affect. But the tension between commonly held attitudes towards the peripheral image and its dubious form illuminates something that perhaps does lie *beyond* the peripheral image, that is, a certain continually rising discontent and malaise with the entire order of image-based capitalism. In further exploring and applying these affective image modes, artists, users, consumers, what-have-you, might attempt to heighten this tension, elevating the absurdity and deficiency of this system, prompting or perturbing the gratuitous flow of attention through peripheral images, towards new ends entirely. We can take what we learn from the peripheral image and its work in

order to challenge and revitalize our own habits, desires, and relation to images on the Internet. Or perhaps, at the very least, one might begin to question just how much autonomy one truly has over their mental movements online.

Considering the process of this work, where it spawned from, how it has developed, and what I hope for it to do is difficult because the project is not the objectification of a final thought or concept, but rather, *is* the concept. The peripheral image, the culmination of my research, writing, and brain melting Internet browsing habits, should be understood predominantly as a concept, not as the form or aesthetic choices of my writing. Because this idea is a piece of my mental activity, shared through language, to be read, thought about, discussed, misunderstood, and modified, the artistic response to my research doesn't have such a clear end as say, a sculpture in the gallery space. Looking at some early notes from discussions with Michael Bell-Smith, I did have intentions of expressing some of the nascent concerns regarding the peripheral image through artworks. Some initial projects included establishing a quasi-consulting firm (lifeworld.fun) that would provide assistance and advising to those dissatisfied with contemporary life, slimming attention spans, consumer desires, hustle-gig-economy fatigue, etc. through experimental therapy sessions and informational

pamphlets. This project still interests me, but was perhaps too much about the false promises of “life hacks”’s self-help entrepreneurs, and the contradictions of using profit motivated solutions to profit driven problems.

Another important thread that set the stage for what would soon become the peripheral image was a generalized concern I had with the amount of mediated information we intake. Prior to these last two semesters, I had been making work expressing ambivalence towards any suggestion, or possibility of one successfully confronting, comprehending, and criticizing the infoglut. There was, in the phrasing of Hito Steyerl, simply “too much world.” My immediate response was a sort of cynical acquiescence to the unsatisfying shape of that world and how I experienced it. At the same time I observed a youth Internet culture so aware of its own performativity, that there was a sense that the only way one could navigate online social spheres was by taking the piss out of one’s own massacred sense of self while dragging as many people in to this modality as possible. At that time I was thinking about the convoluted problems of image and self through the paradigm of authenticity, and as writers at publications like Real Life would later reveal to me, such a paradigm is paramount to a series of disappointments and presumptuous assertions about which subjectivities are “the real deal” and which are not. While I was dissatisfied with my mode of working, as well as the uninspiring and lazy conceits of Internet culture at the time, I was still motivated

by the same infinitely complex questions like “what is an image?” and “what problems does the capture, framing, modification, and networked reproduction of reality present?” In response, I started considering the possibility of, for some time, not making images at all, but rather, collecting the types of images I found noteworthy and thinking about them more closely.

Around this time the whole world went in to a lockdown initiating what I have been casually referring to as the “incubation period,” a time in which *everyone* was online scrambling for information about what was going on “out there,” a time in which both “free time” and mediated information intake converged and expanded. In this time, my archival procedures were more active, and simultaneously there was just *more* material, material that seemed increasingly absurd and incomprehensible in nature. But the process of collecting was still too close to my earlier unsatisfying approach, only now my process ended at simply collecting images and privately considering their inanity. Was I even making work anymore? I was performing some sort of uncritical cyber-ethnography in which the methodology was masochistic nocturnal Internet derives, with observations amounting to something like “Well this can’t be right!” I felt one step removed in my relation to the images, in that my experience with them was always pestered by an ambient criticality: I wasn’t “directly” experiencing them, I was “taking notes”. And yet my consumption and neurotic organization of these images and other

mediated information became a directionless habit just as tiresome and all-consuming as any other casual Internet surfer's.

At the center of all of this tumult was a few questions. How does the logic of the online platforms we use proselytize our habits and desires? What role do images take in this processes? How is it that some of the most irrelevant images, that is, ones that have nothing to do with our passions, discontents, politics, or interests become some of the most widely “seen” and generated?

It occurred to me that to better understand my position in the infoglut, and to start to respond to these questions, that I would have to do away with the tendency towards, or preoccupation with, discreet encounters with images. With such a move, I was looking to rectify my inability to properly “read” or comprehend every image that I saw in the infoglut. It occurred to me then that a focus on the accumulation of encounters with images– and their aggregate forms (i.e. viewing habits, media diet)– would be the focus of my work, however banal, dubious, and unspectacular they may be. At this juncture I had also encountered Dallas Walker Smythe's work on the “audience commodity” for the first time, which gave me a political framework for interpreting these aggregate forms of viewing that I describe. It was an exploration of the political economy of television that was written in the 70's but had incredible foresight into the mechanics of mass

communications. His writing gave me a lucid materialist account of how value was truly created in mass media: by creating an audience.

With this framework, I began to look at the role of images I saw on the Internet in a different way. I began to think of them not so much as things people were really “seeing,” but rather as transistors—signal boosters—which took attention and minds, flows of electricity, and moved them around, amplifying, re-routing, resisting, but always moving. Out of such thinking came the consideration that these images were distinct from image elements of the past in how they were seen, produced, distributed, and what the particular role they served in the reproduction of the social relations of our time.

The questions I hoped to explore were clear. I was reading and writing a lot, and knew that there would be a strong textual element to my project, but it was not for a few months that I would decide on the text being the work itself. Considering my focus on the forms of images, it felt inappropriate to have such a text heavy treatment: asking and answering questions about appearances of images with textual analysis. But as the development of the peripheral image as a concept became more complex, moving to elements above and beyond simply the form of the images themselves, a longer piece of writing seemed to be the best mode of articulating my position.

With this came questions of how to present the text. Should the writing and images be printed and presented in a book? A blog? One of the more recent platforms for email newsletters (e.g. Substack)? And what would these containers for the text do to the text? There were two items I felt were necessary for this choice: first, there needed to be a way for readers to tie image forms to passages of text seamlessly, and secondly, I needed a mode that would allow for me to modify, build out, and update the initial concept over time. I chose to deal with the first question through a website and the application of image tooltips which allowed for the display of images when readers hover over particular passages. This allowed for a mode of reading that was both linguistic and visual, similar to the way that we “read” our social media timelines. The second question of mutability was not imposed because I was unsure of my ideas. I felt and still feel strongly about their place in contemporary discourse. I felt, rather, that creating an infrastructure that allows one to apply new information, is a practice closest to the reality of one’s own subjectivity. Much of what I have come to call my “practice,” has been borne out of long meandering journeys through the Internet, theory, research papers, comment sections, Twitter commentary, etc., and allowing these journeys to challenge my sense of historical scope and offer new tools for interpreting the Internet and beyond. With this constant flow of input, it is hard for me to come to

terms with the idea of a permanent, immutable, inscription of a concept as reflexive as the peripheral image on to paper.

I am unsure of exactly how this project of the peripheral image, which has taken form through website and newsletter, will live on in the minds of others. It is my hope that the various access points I have used in relation to the peripheral image (affect, audience power, and advertising) will allow for a more robust engagement with it, allowing it to move between artists, cultural theorists, Internet hobbyists, and so on. For I see in the peripheral image a logic of the current moment embodied: the “return to affect,” the logic of platform capitalism configuring the most private domains of desire, and the dubiousness of trying to be or get something “seen” for the sake of being seen. The peripheral image is both shallow and telling of a situation of great depth, a contemporary contradiction.

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