“The Internet is over,” Prince famously proclaimed in an interview with British newspaper The Daily Mirror in 2010. Comparing the entire way in which music distribution and marketing had fallen into the “middling” hands of both networked corporations and downloaders to the grip and branding filter that MTV held over pop music during the 1980s and 1990s, Prince’s declaration was naïve and savvy at the same time. The sheer statistics, the growth, and now diversification of platforms and apps such as Reddit, Instagram, and Snapchat, which circulate memes, stories, images, and commentary on popular music, would suggest that online networking is the main environment for music distribution and consumption. And yet Prince’s characterization of the internet as a control space for audiovisual content, similar to MTV’s tight grip over the marketing of popular music’s image, is interesting. According to Prince, by 2010 the internet was no longer a space for directly networking one’s music with one’s audience, because it had become an environment in which direct connectivity was no longer possible.

Prince is not the only one to have declared the demise of a certain kind of “direct” online connectivity. Fifteen years earlier, in an opinion piece published for Newsweek, Clifford Stoll (1995)—systems administrator and author of The Cuckoo’s Egg (1989), a myopic into his stalking of a KGB hacker—had already bemoaned the chaotic and unedited realm of voices that online interactions had become. Although Stoll saw chaos and chatter where Prince decried the presence of opaque middleware, a similar sentiment pervades their views on the culture and enterprise of going online—the lack of authentic personal contact and connectivity. More recently, Andrew Keen steadfastly criticized the internet for its celebration of narcissism and self-expression and its lack of authentic connection with other minds (2007, 2015). Prince, Stoll, and Keen all represent quite different positions on the massification of networked cultures and economies. But they also indicate that, for at least 20 years, online culture has felt as if it were already an environment in which corporatism, middleware, and other forms of “RL” organization were facets of its terrain. The internet had fast become an environment...
consistently failing to live up to the utopian ideals of its early advocates, such as Stuart Brand and Larry Brilliant, who founded the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), one of the earliest online communities, in 1985.

There are a myriad of other tales about network experience that fall somewhere else, on neither side of the utopian/dystopian divide. During the 1990s, artists and writers were eager to crawl on, slip into, and fall down any cyber-hole that would lead them into shared networked spaces, projects, and discussions. Such falls were often quite literal. For example, in connecting to LambdaMOO (a text-based multiuser online environment and community set up in the early 1990s by Pavel Curtis at Xerox PARC), one entered its topography through a text-based description of a space called “the Closet.” A dark and confined “rabbit hole,” players experienced the feeling of bumping up against hanging coats, boots, and sometimes other online sleeping denizens, before using the @ command to fumble into other “rooms” in the environment (see Quittner 1994). “The Closet” opened out into a “Living Room,” where other players in the community also hung out. Another potential encounter in the “Living Room” was with a “magical” couch that frequently caused players’ objects to fall through it. All such falls, encounters, and spaces occurred via typed text descriptions, @ commands, and dialogue generated by members. I was first shown how to log on to LambdaMOO by the artist, Francesca da Rimini, who, at that time and across much of the 1990s and into the 2000s, fell in and out of various online environments, avatars, and communities and had been part of VNS Matrix. These four women, seriously and with a dash of humor, described their online and digital mission to be “terminators of the moral code, mercenaries of slime” (VNS Matrix 1991).

I never made it out of “the Closet” into LambdaMOO proper—the text commands dictating the modes of interaction and navigation with the MOO space remained obscure to me. And so, in tune with this rambling topology of associations, I fell out of this environment into other online projects, such as the Australian recode list for new media arts and culture, active for a few years in the late 1990s and moderated by Julianne Pearce, likewise a member of VNS Matrix. There are few traces of the recode list online after it perished at the hands of intense debate and disagreements over funding for new media arts in the Australian context as well as the posting styles of net art contributors such as Mez Breeze (Lovink 2002: 204). I later bumped into the fibreculture list after an email correspondence with Mitchell Whitelaw, a theorist, sound designer, and data artist and designer who informed me that, to find the list site, I needed to search for “fibre” not cyberculture. I settled with the fibreculture network, which morphed into an online open access journal, The Fibreculture Journal, still readable and accessible today.

This kind of meandering and ambulatory movement of falling and flailing around and across networked sites, conversations, and projects produced an itinerant feel to networked experience. Online experience felt to me like a kind of stumbling upon, falling into, and groping toward. Entry into and knowledge of lists, networks, and environments were both contingent and somewhat secretive—you had to know someone or else discovery was more or less serendipitous. Networked projects and sites were both mysteriously obscure and yet surprisingly open and welcoming. Online engagement was infused with an affective atmosphere that can still be detected when scanning over list archives—a collective sense of exhilaration joined with frustration. Projects emerged out of and attempted to generate a respect for difference in their sensibility, yet equally collapsed easily under the weight of trolling and unrealistic political ideals. Critique and creation co-existed. VNS Matrix, for example, were both infiltrators and critics of spaces they perceived to be already over-determined by sexism, “mainframeism,” and a palpable sense of alignment between the life worlds of geeks,
hacker masculinity, and computation. List networks on network culture were at once
generative and damning of network forces, online governance structures, and emergent
corporate forms of computational and technical capitalism. A generation of “net” artists such
as Heath Bunting, Olia Lialina, and jodi.org made work online that already engaged with
the heterogeneity of networks as simultaneously “open” and proprietary, available techni-
cally to the amateur and hobbyist and imbued with a technical episteme indebted to a cold
war legacy.

A lived doubling of both engagement and critique, then, colored my entry into online
culture and has come to shape my ongoing concern with (an) aesthesia of networks. This is
not to make a claim for these earlier online events and engagements as authentic forms of net-
work experience. In approaching network experience, I want to instead suggest that
networks—as sociotechnical assemblages, as singular and nonlocalized, as standardized com-
municative protocols operating across open architectures—must also be thought in close
proximity to the affectivity of technically inflected experience. The proposition for “an”
aesthesia of networks, then, is to think network technicity in relation to the perceptual and
affective components of network experience as well.

Many of these earlier experiments with platforms for distributed communications gener-
ated a particular kind of aesthesia that is at once nonlocal and intensely embodied. In discussing
the experimental network of artists who gathered and performed using the first online, real-
time multimedia collaborative performance software, KeyWorx, in the late 1990s and early
2000s, Sher Doruff makes a similar observation:

... translocal experience, as an embodied experience, is amplified because your body
is ... you have the sensation of ... how can I say this? The effect of intensities of
translocal performance when it's indeterminate and you're collectively negotiating
and making choices together and you're playing off those choices as a jazz band
would or as a dancers might ... the translocal becomes incredibly, intensely
physicalised, but your feeling of space is nonlocally oriented.

(Doruff 2012)

What online networking experiments initially made palpable was a kind of stumbling into
relation with the differentials of technical speeds, geographical spatial dispersion, and the life
rhythms of differing time zones. Things, projects, and online experiences both flowed rapidly
into one another and moved on just as quickly, building dense intensities and rapid perishings.
In spite of all proclamations about the demise of the internet—whether these have to do
with a loss of immediacy or melancholia about the ceding of political ideals to communi-
cational capitalism—the potential to generate novel technosocial and techno-aesthetic events
continues for contemporary networked experience.

All this is quite different from an aesthetics of the network, which, it could be argued, has
definitively taken command of culture, politics, and life. Such aesthetics instills a global cultural
imaginary of interconnectivity, dominated by a link-node topology, and technically supported
by the algorithmic crunching of the innumerably vast hoarding, querying, and patterning of
data. Such an aesthetics functions less as a formal mode for analyzing contemporary networked
culture than as a silent, operative system that supports and perpetuates Western military oper-
ations, information architecture and infrastructure, the reliance on data visualization as an
unquestioned empirical reality, and the sensibility of sociality as reducible to sets of likes and
dislikes. Arjun Appadurai’s concept, developed in the face of a newly minted global sociality
of the 1980s and 1990s, puts it well:
The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and of culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (“individuals”) and globally defined fields of possibility.

(Appadurai 1990: 5)

This global social imagination has become a “networked” one, seeping through granular and macro dimensions via social practices and military, political, and economic operations and exchanges.

Why name this aesthetics? When glancing at a few key publications, marketing forms, and information domains, it is very clear that a recurring and formalized model of imaging life as a network has taken hold. Throughout the end of the twentieth-century and into the first decade of the twenty-first, the U.S. military has reimagined warfare as “network-centric” (Verton 2003). The Command and Control Research Program of the U.S. Department of Defense published a series of books during this period, culminating in a graphic principle called “power to the edge,” embedding an image of the network as flexible, opening out on to an enemy’s networks, and diffusing control throughout its organizational structure (Alberts & Hayes 2003). In a similar vein, the new image of the contemporary business enterprise is of “agility” (see Hugos 2009). Here, the “hierarchy” of the “boss” at the top of the pyramid controlling the flow of information and decision-making is replaced by an image of a network of autonomously functioning units, coordinated by a chief officer. The units are immediately responsive to the interactions that they have with their customers, an emerging market situation, or (shifting) client base. These interactions between company and customers are viewed as “edges,” the concept taken from mathematical graph theory used to describe the links that join the nodes in network analysis. Customers, then, have become “nodes” in the network of the company itself; the company that is able to be agile and flexible in terms of its edges (here, literally the “edge” that both separates and links company and client) will best adapt to the changing directions in which its market or clients are moving. The image of the network that permeates these new business models imagines only soft differences between corporation and client because the client is as much a part of the networked corporation as is its internal organizational structure.

And at the very heart and/or edge of all this social imagining, we also find the network as aesthetic in the emergence of the eponymous “New Aesthetic.” Infamously pronounced in the vaguest of terms on the social media and blogging platform Tumblr, the New Aesthetic pointed to the commonplace of networked infrastructure such as satellite imaging and drones as a generator of contemporary visual culture and also spoke online from the design(ed) space of blogs and Tumbrls run mainly by people working within the creative industries (Bridle 2011a, 2011b). The New Aesthetic partakes in the social imagining of life as networked inasmuch as it situates itself as the immediate and immediately responsive interface to the media, technologies, and techniques of informatically connected and generated life.

What ties these three dimensions—the military/logistical, the business/organizational, and the creative/medial—of the contemporary network together is the extent to which networking has become less a system or infrastructure and more a sensibility. Of course, the shift to network-centric warfare that has become the U.S. military’s modus operandus involves a carefully calculated set of maneuvers being put into place for personnel. Similarly, the reorganization of enterprise according to “agile” principles and responsivity is a considered one. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which a particular affectivity conditions all three modes...

277
of instilling the network as a sociotechnical assemblage. This affectivity is precisely a diffuse vagueness, the state of being permanently everywhere but in no one fixed location—of ongoing readiness to act, interact, or respond. Such affect is both a condition for and an ongoing effect of the network itself. Brian Massumi suggests that this kind of “readiness potential,” this priming for action and being primed to act wherever and whenever it may occur, is the hallmark of contemporary infra-connected neoliberalism (2014: 13–14). What is “connecting” individuals at a more than one-to-one level (infra in the sense of both below and further on) is not an infrastructure of cables, routers, packets, and switches but a diagram of diffuse readiness in which being prompted, responsive, and participatory is glued together with informatic flows. If the internet is over, then it is because the online world has ceased to exist as a place or medium for analysis and critique. It has given way, instead, to an entire dispositif, to deploy Foucault’s concept (1980) of the heterogeneous ensemble of discursive, institutional, administrative, and technical elements that power exercises in the social field. This dispositif is the agile readiness of networking. In the end, though, we will need to find a different way to speak about how—through this diffuse, infraconnected, logistical neoliberal sociotechnicality—a system gives way to diagrams and aesthetic objects give way to affective sensibilities, processes, and techniques of information. In response to this modulation, I have proposed the concept of (an) aesthesia of networks (Munster 2013).

An aesthesia, I think, might tentatively hold in the same moment an oscillating tension between, on the one hand, numbness, boredom, and the predictability of a template or connectivity and, on the other, the intensive joy of networking as a shared event of translocal relation. It speaks to the diffuse creep of the connective edge that is constantly “liking,” “predicting,” and “capturing” across social media, network architectures, and logistical chains—an advance of nodes and edges that is anaesthetizing. But it also speaks to edging as a process of inventing, often via aesthetic techniques, new modalities of relation that bring us into as yet unknown assemblages with the nonhuman, the more-than-human, and the infrahuman. A network aesthesia, rather than “anaesthesia,” might allow us to not count the already similar, already nodal but encounter what we do not know, sense, or own—the imperceptible. Such an aesthesia also requires us to rethink the movements of networks: a shift away from connectivity toward conjunction and its companion, disjunction.

Indeed, these movements and relations of conjoining and disjoining resonate with the sensibility and affectivity discovered and generated by earlier artistic and medial experiments with distributed networked communications. Now, in what is sometimes circumscribed as a “post internet” context (see, for example, Steyerl 2013), it is important to rethink these affective and intense events of memes, media, projects, and collectivities by carefully attending to how networks involve processes and flows of both continuity (conjunction) and cuts (disjunction) rather than the reified image of expansionist connectivity. In order to get at what networked life is like for us as individuated humans, we should proceed from the processual aspects of the experiences of networks, many of which involve technical, nonhuman operations such as recursion, redundancy, and nonlinear dynamics. Yet, far from sinking into a sea of complex technical jargon and protocol—although, even so, holding on to some technical precision—I propose that we can approach these operations via the decidedly nontechnical theories of experience found in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writings of William James.

James’s vocabulary for theorizing experience is scattered with images and processes that are well suited to thinking through network relations as diffuse generators and shapers of contemporary experience. For him, experience is loosely wrought; hanging together through
relations of proximity between things and beings as these bump up together, pass into one
another, settle, and transition (James 1912: 43–56; 1977: 256–269). James’s emphasis on
relations as the most immediately felt or sensed aspect of experience lead him to comment
on how conjunctions and disjunctions operate as events that qualitatively contour relations:
“If I ask you where some object of yours is, our old Memorial Hall, for example, you point
to my Memorial Hall with your hand which I see” (James 1912: 79). Here, “with,” “my,”
“your,”—but also the concepts of proximity and distance with which James is dealing when
he discusses both seeing and remembering Memorial Hall—are not subjects, objects, or points
to be measured and connected. They are all relations that fundamentally impinge on, modu-
late, and organize even the seemingly simplest of experiences. In such an everyday experience,
we can see the germs of a process-oriented mode of engaging with the world functioning
on a different plane than connecting the nodes. In more recent aesthetic, philosophical, and
political theory (for example, Lapoujade 2000; Massumi 2011), this emphasis on conjunctions
and disjunctions as the critical operators that bring together the political, social, and cultural
spheres with the mico-dimensions of perceptual and affective experience is known as
“relationality.”

The link-node image is one in which “nodes” are given substantive status—they are treated
as objects or subjects, such as “friends” on social media, that have already formed and just
need to be added to the network. A process-oriented approach that takes relations as the real
generators of experience instead suggests that “nodes” are only produced by and through
their relations. A “friend” in a social network is therefore something much more fleeting, in
a state of ongoing composition across a range of both technocultural forces and microsocial
comings and goings. A process-oriented approach to networking offers us a way out of the
hold the link-node network image has on contemporary social imagining. Attending carefully
to the materialities of such relationality—rather than to the scale-free (see Barabasi &
Bonabeau 2003: 52) and somewhat anchorless link-node model—is key to contemporary
networked cultures.

An aesthesia of networks—or, more plainly, networking as experience—joins the
heterogeneity of humans and nonhumans into arrays that are constantly deforming and
reorganizing through dynamic recursions, tending toward both repetition and difference. We
find ourselves loosely “concatenated,” to borrow a Jamesian term (1977: 221), with both
other humans and informatic machines, enmeshed in an architecture that is dependent on
forces internal and external to specific networks and results in the generation of massively
redundant, criss-crossing routes between and across networks as well as older formations, such
as the sovereign state and the assembly line. An aesthesia of networks is a proposition for
thinking and feeling through networked cultures, art practices, new publics/socialities, and
emerging formations of networked capitalism that are made possible via the operations of
complex, relational life today.

How, for example, can we understand the deformations that the moving image and moving
image culture undergo in networked culture, without ignoring the complexity of the
conjunctions or relations the moving image now has? Such conjunctions include, but are not
limited to, cinema’s relations with different media delivery and distribution platforms; the
engagement of amateurs and fans with images, merchandise, and the cultivation of audiences;
the global uptake of the moving image in local contexts; and the differentials of labor for the
film industry that such globalization has generated. Cinema has not only materially transformed
but become a wholly different kind of movement—literally from moving image to streaming
data. And this shift—material, formal, and operational all at the same time—opens a complex
reassembly of the political economy of images, of new publics and modes of producing the moving image—indeed, of new kinds of labor that provide the condition and engine for making streams of images. To account for such relationality, a conception of the network as an online or even offline set of links and nodes simply will not wash.

Instead, we should look to artists in tandem with sociotechnical and process–based thinkers, all of whom are particularly good at touching upon the complexity of such experience and rendering the conjunctions and disjunctions of networking as dilatory and contracted openings. Take, for example, Kevin Lee’s *Transformers: The Premake (a desktop documentary)*, an online video originally posted to Vimeo in 2014 (Lee 2014). Here, Lee creates a whole new possibility for a networked genre—the desktop documentary—that emerges as a conjunction of disjunctive online visual culture sources, environments, platforms, and techniques. Trawling through 355 YouTube videos shot by fans and amateurs (including himself) of the shooting and production of *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (dir. Michael Bay 2014), Lee unleashes and contours a set of problems around media, labor, and affective capitalism in funny and poignant ways. Not only do these YouTube clips reappear in Lee’s documentary, but they are also composed into his process of actually searching for and watching online videos. They are composited against and with other online platforms, such as Google Maps, to provide a kind of postnarrative “plot”—made possible by the ubiquity of tracking provided by network metadata—of where, when, and how fans captured material about the making of a Hollywood blockbuster.

Lee recomposes all this content and its various networked platforms and processes via screen-casting software. This approach captures and remakes all his searching, querying, and downloading into a relentlessly smooth stream, and it brings this labor together with the aggregates of creative fan labor (Deuze 2007: 57) manifest in the YouTube clips themselves. All these amateur clips of the making of the *Transformers* movie, as well as Lee’s “premake,” appeared online before the release of the Hollywood film in cinemas. This timing is crucial. Lee’s desktop documentary foregrounds this “pre-production” not as simply medial background to contemporary cinema but rather as the affective surplus labor produced in advance and retrospectively parasited in the generation of audiences for the Hollywood release.

And yet, of course, this pool of audience, marketing, and advance excitement is unpaid, uncredited, and under–valued in the political economy of the studio film system. Such affective labor is nonetheless increasingly necessary for the circulation of any media in a mixed economy of online/offline production, circulation, and distribution. While a number of social and cultural media theorists have drawn attention to questions of free and material labor (for example, Terranova 2004; Scholz 2013: 1–10), Lee’s film takes us into the intensive/affective and extensive/spatial experience of networks that is the materiality through which affective/creative/cognitive capitalism functions.

*Transformers: The Premake* is not simply a critique of how the fan labor of capturing and uploading snippets of upcoming film releases feeds global media franchises such as Hollywood cinema. The compositional techniques deployed by Lee both trace standard online geotagging/mapping visualization practices and provide a sense of the rhythms and intensities that translocally straddle and propel networked aesthetics. At 5’22” into his video, Lee scrubs across a map of the U.S. populated by clusters of fan videos assembled according to sites where the actual *Transformers* movie was being shot. We move from Monument Valley in Utah, with only one fan video, to Texas, with eight fan videos, then to Detroit, with a thriving cluster of 115 fan videos. Skipping quickly from Washington state (with only one fan video), we are suddenly propelled halfway across the globe to Hong Kong, where production on the movie gathered 52 fan videos in its wake.
On the one hand, we get the sense that the art of Hollywood filmmaking travels smoothly across global spaces with little care for the specificities of the places in which it lands—these are all just cities that offer the producers tax breaks and concessions. On the other hand, the spatial montage of fan videos laid out as a grid within each city gives a sense of the city itself being filmed through the pulsing, polyrhythmic activities of its citizens and fans on their mobile phones. We scrub across to Detroit’s mosaicked grid of fan videos, and the cityscape feels momentarily animated, alive across the flickering of moving images. This is quickly juxtaposed against its ruined urban infrastructure, as Lee selects two fan videos among the grid and zooms in to reveal *Transformers* being shot in a landscape of burnt-out, vacant blocks. That urban setting is the reality of a city that has been ravaged by the shift from an industrial economy to a networked service industry. Even the movie industry will not save it. While not for a moment idealizing the vitality of all the creative labor undertaken by fans, *Transformers: The Premake* nonetheless refuses to cede its affectivity to the appetite of the Hollywood franchise. Something remains: a kind of glimpse into the ways in which imploded cities might nonetheless hold intensities and vitalities—still generate other modes of living through the rhythms and everyday media practices of their inhabitants. Lee both pools the videos together and assigns them to city sites; he draws us into the rhythms that pulse across and between each city grid, across a global network. He plunges us into the quirkiness of a single fan’s capture of the production of *Transformers*.

In my analysis of online videos that go viral, I suggest that:

Something elusive moves and moves us; something not quite quantifiable is generated when these videos are uploaded and then circulate through networks. Something that is felt, shared, and spread through online audiences and networks. Something that does not yet have substance, even so, has force. As these viral videos go viral, they become an element at work in the individuation of networked affectivity. They enable a collective (heterogeneous) capacity to affect and be affected in online networks.

(Munster 2013: 103)

A similar, infectious affectivity inhabits Lee’s *Premake*. Although the affectivity of fan labor generates a pool of marketing potential for the Hollywood system, it also creates a perspective on cities, habitation, and everydayness in networked cultures that reveals an eye for quirkiness among audiences/citizens. This quirkiness, together with the polyrhythmicity of YouTube media and practices of social imagining, ensure the networked imagination cannot simply settle for an image of connectivity. The “join”—the passing of one experience into or across to another—is the process that shifts us from a “network” to qualitative networking. There is still an open proposition at work for inflecting the qualities of relations, for contouring the rhythms, refrains, and passages toward aestheasias of networks.

Further Reading


References


