Sarfraz, Tania, 2025. " Technoaesthetics as Aesthetics of Error: Reading for the Botch." *communication +1*, vol XI, iss I, pp. 1-19.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7275/cpo.2053

Technoaesthetics as Aesthetics of Error: Reading for the Botch

Tania Sarfraz, University of Southern California, US, sarfraz@usc.edu

When Zibahkhana: Hell's Ground (Omar Ali Khan, 2007), a Pakistani remake of Texas Chainsaw Massacre, ends up on Amazon Prime not as a pristine file formatted for the digital stream but as a recording of a DVD, how should we watch it? This paper thinks this question by connecting the literature on poor images with the openings onto error and incompletion provided by Simondon's category of the technoaesthetic. While technoaesthetics has usually been interpreted by commentators on Simondon as a category of fit and connectedness, this paper excavates a different sense of the term—one geared towards ideas of mutation, botchery, and error—and in so doing, assembles an alternate, speculative model for how we might read moiré, glitch, and other uncanny effects of low resolution.

1. How could one watch, and how could one read, the film *Zibahkhana: Hell's Ground*?[1] One of these questions has a shorter answer than the other, though the two (as we'll see) are related.

Originally shot on high-definition video and distributed by Mondo Macabro, *Zibahkhana*—a loose remake of Tobe Hopper's 1974 slasher *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—follows of a group of friends who, on their way to a concert in Islamabad, get stranded in a mysterious place called Jannat Pur (Heven's Gate)—or, as the residents call it, Dozakh Pur (Hell's Gate). Dozakh Pur is indeed a hellscape, with a strange zombifying virus flowing through its water supply. But as the unfortunate friends soon find out, zombies aren't the only monsters in Dozakh Pur. Another horror takes the form of a mace-wielding *khwajasira* named Baby, who spells the bloody end for most of our characters.[2] Director Omar Ali Khan, sometimes known as the "Sultan of Sleaze," is a longstanding independent archivist of cult cinema who also runs an ice cream parlor in Islamabad, *The Hot Spot Café,* the website for which doubles as a film review and merch store for (mostly little known) Lollywood and Bollywood films.[3] It also provided the venue for one of *Zibahkhana's* early screenings. *The Hot Spot Café,* however, is not where one would watch *Zibahkhana* now. For a globally-dispersed audience, short of owning the Mondo Macabro DVD the only way to watch *Zibahkhana* is on Amazon Prime, since it's disappeared off the various pirate websites. But the file on Prime is in fact a DVD rip: the very first image you see is a DVD menu, so that you know what you're seeing is a screen recording. You're streaming a movie on Amazon Prime and what's coming through are the images torn from someone else's screen, a DVD smuggled into the stream.

Zibahkhana's current mass availability is therefore predicated on a corresponding degradation of the image. Digital reproduction has deposited a kind of virtual silt over the surface of the image, making fine details impossible to discern within the pixelated intensities of low-resolution. To watch *Zibahkhana* now is therefore to watch a series of poor images. It is this poorness that this essay attempts to understand, by asking whether it is possible, and if so how and with what consequences, to *read* these artefacts as part of the text—to see what botched forms can tell us about beauty. As visual scars that draw attention to the surface of a text, the artefacts of digital compression can guide our attention to aspects other than those emphasized by coherent textuality. The body of the text is torn open by the

---

[1] *Zibahkhana,* directed by Omar Ali Khan (2007: Mondo Macabro.)

[2] For an incisive articulation of the South Asian social category of the *khwajasira*, genderqueer while being irreducible to that term, see Masood (2019.)

[3] Syeda Momina Masood, "Visions of Queer Anarchism: Gender, Desire, and Futurity in Omar Ali Khan's Zibahkhana." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 75-90.

technical scarring that traverses it. Torn with it are paradigms of aesthetics, hermeneutics, and mediation.

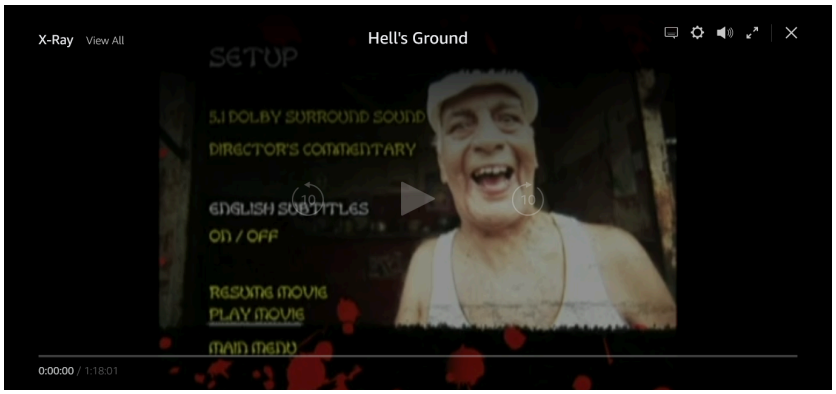

Figure 1—DVD or VOD? Zibahkhana as confounded media.

2. What follows will attempt to follow that tear in the zone between technics and aesthetics, attending to the ways in which *error*, broadly construed, can mediate the relation between those terms. As this essay's master-concept, error will take a few different forms: as perturbation of distributional norms in the form of media piracy, as emblem of global digital hierarchy in the form of the poor image, and as celebrated intervention in the form of glitch. By way of these iterations, error will work as an axle along which theories of mediation can be differently arranged. In the final instance, this essay will contemplate how the emerging picture might articulate with ideas of incompletion and error in Gilbert Simondon and Friedrich Kittler, chosen for the way in which each thinker figures the relation between embodiment, technology, and aesthetics.

Understood differently, the intervention of this essay might be called topological rather than purely propositional. Claims will be made, but the ultimate interest is in reading texts (cinematic as well as scholarly) in a way that reveals other fronts within them. Seen in this light, one of the goals here is then to restitute *reading* within contemporary media theory and use that to consider anew the question of the aesthetic that runs continuously through. Once the question can be asked, "What is *not* a medium?", the work of a hermeneutic requires re-examination. In asking that question, Peters offered the reminder that the expansion of the media concept beyond its traditional bounds should work as an incitement towards "a specific way of thinking about reading."[4] It is in the search for such one such "specific way" that this essay locates itself.

[4] John Durham Peters, "What is Not a Medium?" *communication +1* 9, no.1 (2022): 3.

Reading, in the view that follows, cannot be contained programmatically, cannot be constrained by any working definition of the aesthetic. It has to stretch, autopoetically generate a new form of the aesthetic with every iteration.

3. Media theorist and anthropologist Brian Larkin's beautifully rendered and carefully theorized account of media piracy in Nigeria, given its adjacency with the text that centers this essay (a bootleg circulating on an official channel), can serve as an entry point into our consideration of error. But, as will became clear, it is not only a matter of resonances and similarities but of differences and departures as well—the latter in fact emerging from the former.

Larkin theorizes piracy as an "ambivalent" infrastructural and aesthetic force.[5] If it is corruptive of some aspects of Nigeria's media ecology, it is creative of others—so much so, in fact, that a legitimate media object (Nigerian videos) "could not exist without the infrastructure created by its illegitimate double, pirate media…[such that] piracy has created the aesthetic and technical horizons for nonpirate media."[6] Larkin draws from this empirical observation an insight about the re-ordering of the parasitic metaphor often used in descriptions of piracy, writing that while pirate practices are usually theorized as "a pathology of information processing," the situation in Nigeria demands the recognition that "in many parts of the world, media piracy is not a pathology of the circulation of media forms but its prerequisite."[7] The pathological condition does not befall media systems from outside, but arises from within as their condition of possibility. This is a powerful insight and has rightfully been taken up by other thinkers of pirate practices.[8] One would not wish to diminish its force or value in placing it alongside *another system* of insides and outsides that runs through the piece; the aim is rather to draw out that differential logic from its implicit position. If the relation between the normal and the pathological is *different* in Nigeria than in 'the West,' then the value of this difference for Larkin is the way in which it helps re-order Western media theory, media theory that takes as its grounds Western media objects and processes. A similar move occurs in Sterne, when he follows his citation of Larkin with the observation that "the traffic in MP3s thus brought to elite economies a set

---

5 Brian Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy," in *Signal and Nosie: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); 224.

6 Ibid., 218 & 233.

7 Ibid., 240.

8 e.g. Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.)

of questions that had been more commonly asked in the developing world."[9] A pedagogical, thus hierarchical, relation is imputed: the developing world teaches elite economies how to think their pirate phenomena. Here is a Third World offering correctives and tutelage to the First World. The outside is accorded mastery, thereby to be held the more at bay. Its experiences become the norm with which the West might think its pathologies.

To be clear: Larkin and Sterne *remain valuable* on the planes on which their arguments operate. This is not critique as dismissal, but a reading that plays out on a different plane than the one native to the texts. Its yield is the observation that theorizing piracy often means theorizing *systems* (infrastructural; political-economic; aesthetic) and not *texts*; structure but not singularity. Consider the following passage from Larkin:

> "Pirated images have a hallucinogenic quality. Detail is destroyed as realist representation fades into pulsating light. Facial features are smoothed away, colors are broken down into constituent tones, and bodies fade into one another. Reproduction takes its toll, degrading the image by injecting dropouts and bursts of fuzzy noise, breaking down dialogue into muddy, often inaudible sound."[10]

Beautiful, but look how many unnamed texts have been compressed into this general portrait. Singularity is cannibalized by system. Textuality effaced, overwritten by a pirate aesthetics of another order.

4. If aesthetic texts are *specific*—we brook no argument against the specific love for a text we care about, think beautiful—can their errors be too? Is there a way in which might error bring into relief textual specificity, even an impossible singularity, instead of serving just as an index of a text's place in a world-media system?

One attempt at an answer might be to read *Zibahkhana* in a way that draws out the way in which its outside folds into its inside: the film's compressed, piratically scarred surfaces have everything to do with its internalized reflection on the love of images. Directed by an independent archivist with longstanding commitments to cult connoisseurship, *Zibahkhana* also includes a cinephile as one its characters, OJ. Attending to the scene in which we are introduced to OJ can help bring us closer to *Zibahkhana*'s botched affective economy—its conscious relation to

[9] Ibid., 188.
[10] Larkin, 237.

discourses of error and failure, a textual counterpart to the glitchy textures of its technical inscription. OJ makes his first appearance in the film in true stoner-cinephile fashion, lighting a cigarette as soon as he's awake—and then immediately putting on a DVD of *Zinda Laash* (one of *Zibahkhana*'s key intertexts) for yet another re-play. A poster of *Maniac* (Lustig 1980) hangs over his bed, along with other posters too indistinct to make out in this upload. The camera cuts to a close-up of a bedside table, revealing a cinematic sludge:

Figure 2—Media as sludge.

Showgirls (Verhoeven 1995), *The Fly* (Cronenberg 1986), *Zodiac* (Graysmith 1986; source for the 2007 Fincher film of the same name), *The Tingler* (Castle 1959), *Bandh Darwaza* (Ramsay and Ramsay 1990), and *Zinda Laash* (Sarfraz 1967); collectively, these texts sample the slasher, sleaze, and B-movie underworlds of Hollywood, Bollywood, and Lollywood, uniting them in a fantastic shot of visual excess. We can read this shot as the text assembling a context for itself, staging inside itself the terms of its generic context as part of an international circuit of B-movies—the slice of mediascape we might take it to inhabit. At the same time, however, we should also read this shot not as the mimicry of a film made in a context of industrial excess, but the contextual poverty of a film coming out of a precarious film industry. By the time of *Zibahkhana*'s release, the number of cinema

halls in Pakistan had dropped to about 250, a third of the number in the 1970s.[11] The number of films being made had dropped by half. There is, then, a clear sense in which the "the deteriorating cinematic condition and its consequences for Pakistani youth underline the significance of Omar Khan's *Zibahkhana*."[12] OJ, for all his gleeful cinephilia, is also an agent of destruction, one through whom *Zibahkhana* registers its own grief, grieves for itself in itself. The fact that his bedroom is a shrine to be B-movies is not only an index of love, it is also an act of despair; these discs are the only means at his availability to watch the films he loves in a city with increasingly few, increasingly inaccessible cinemas. Those discs, too, are part of the problem; Khan and Ahmad note the arrival of videotape recorders in Pakistan in the mid-1970s birthed a bootleg boom that, while it made previously inaccessible material available for viewing, put another nail in the coffin of Pakistani cinema halls. OJ indeed stands in for the displaced Pakistani cinephile, displaced from public access to the cinematic image through state censorship and the steady incursions of video and television, but in such a way that we can consider him not only displaced from the object of his love (cinema) but also a factor in that displacement (avid consumer of bootlegs). *Zibahkhana's* feral citation of other media therefore registers a confounded affect, rent from within—a state that renders the flux between creative and destructive energies, plenitude and lack, love and hate. This scene's simulation of context is, then, the inverted image of a spectral singularity. The posters above OJ's bed, rendered indiscernible by the screen-capture that allowed this film to circulate online, have become tokens of the intimacy between the film's technical inscription and its textual space.

Those indiscernible posters are *specific* to *this* copy of the film, markers of a singularity always just about to disappear. Unreadable themselves, they ask us to read this film as something other than just one more, predictable instance of global piracy. A technical procedure external to the text, screen-capture, fuses with the affective economy internal to the text. Screen-capture, in this reading, is familial with the film's rent emotions, botched lives, and the cinephile whom the film judges harshly by making him the first among the friends to fall victim to the zombifying virus flowing through Jannat/Dozakh Pur.

---

[11] Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad, "From Zinda Laash to Zibahkhana: Violence and Horror in Pakistani Cinema," *Third Text* 24, no.1 (2010): 156.

[12] Ibid., 158.

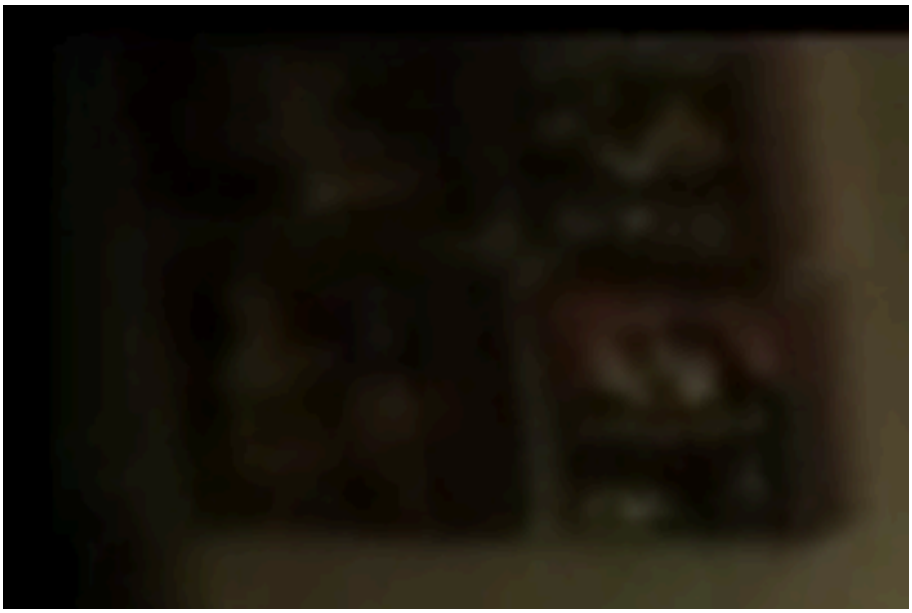

Figure 3—Indistinct posters over OJ's bed.

5. Error, then, can bend aesthetic vocabularies towards the anomalous and the singular as opposed to the coherent and the systematic. This emphasis on anomaly and singularity can be traced through a few further senses of error: glitch and poor images.

Writings on glitch tend to be joyfully "promiscuous" (to borrow a descriptor from Hank Gerba's affirmative review of Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto.*)[13] As Gerba observes, in Russell's hands—in a move I take to be paradigmatic of glitch theory—glitch serves as "a mode of redress, a movement of subjectivity, and even a new model for a liberatory and intersectional sociality."[14] It is able to be these things by virtue of its *anti-systemic* properties. Computational sociality's deleterious effects flow, in Russell's account, from its processing of individuals into populations, a process she aligns in her book as complicit with logics of *the body,* and to which the glitch stands opposed. Hegemonic social codes work through the cohered category of body, a coherence that Russell renders in the language of abstraction and materiality. In her words, "Noun and verb alike, we use

[13] Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, New York: Verso, 2020.

[14] Hank Gerba, review of *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto,* by Legacy Russell, *Media-N* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 161.

body to give form to abstraction, to identify an amalgamated whole."[15] The call in the face of such a situation is to "step back and look at the world as a body, an assemblage that has been constructed. The body, like the world, is a tool in and of itself."[16] A call we might understand as the desire to respect *singularity* (which is always a limit, never attainable); a desire to release abstraction from the negative valences it has acquired in contemporary emphases on computational materiality (a valence that Gerba also indicates.)

For Russell, glitch art interferes with the cohering powers of machines and allows identity play to re-emerge in the very zones of its capture.[17] My interest in glitch likewise leans on the concept's powers of interference, though in this case glitch is not articulated in distinction from other kinds of computational or aesthetic errors.[18] Keeping glitch close to error can help keep in sight the way in which it draws power from perturbations in image regimes—and in that way, can be brought into conversation with other discourses of botched images, discourses without the necessarily celebratory cadence of glitch. If we were looking for specific bridges between glitch and these other discourses, we might invoke Gerba's conceptualization of a class of images they call the *digital ante-image*—specific embodiments of which include "moiré effects, stroboscopic effects, and aliases," and that arise from "technical interference in digital technologies [that are] often cast as

[15] Russell, 42. (An "amalgamated whole" that is resonant, we might observe, with Larkin's compaction of unidentified texts into a composite snapshot of pirate aesthetics.)

[16] Ibid., 63.

[17] A mode of argument that aligns well with the book's cyberfeminist lineage, given that body of writing's long engagement with the play of embodiment and virtuality (see for instance, Stone 1991.)

[18] Whit Pow has made an intriguing distinction between error and glitch in the context of computer software, noting how error messages are carefully calibrated interactions with the user that work to better represent the limits of the machine. Glitch then stands in contrast to error, operating more fully outside the computer's known parameters, producing "completely uncoded, unseen, and unanticipated visualizations within the computer's interface" (209.) There is no error message for glitch, precisely because it is that which the computer and its engineers could not predict. Pow's call for finer-grained distinctions between phenomena that can seem extremely close (glitch, error, mistake, failure) resonates with Marek Jancovic's incisive observation that the term glitch offers a limited grammar for "the full understanding of media-technological traces," an observation that stems in part from the contemporary commodification of glitch art (59.) Learning from both Pow and Jancovic, while arriving at a distinct conclusion from both, this essay uses glitch as something like a floating signifier: less full than the specificities that animate Pow's usage, while still in play contra Jancovic's preference for the term "trace." *As* floating signifier, glitch here indicates the very gap that stays open between too-much and too-little signification.

merely artifactual, or worse, scorned for their disruption of the otherwise expected result of myriad modes of technical image production."[19]

What, then, are those sibling discourses of botched images? Two, for now: Hito Steyerl's concept of the poor image, and Lyotard's brief reflection on the acinematic. Written in different moments and scholarly traditions, these make for an unlikely pair—even as they meet in a common discourse of limits and interfaces, both concepts that emphasize ontological indecision. The poor image is for Steyerl a class of digitally distributed images that, because their degradation stems from the vicissitudes of global capital, stand as "the contemporary Wretched of the Screen, the debris of audiovisual production."[20] The emphasis in Steyerl's account is on a series of trade-offs set up by the poor image, which becomes in her hands a kind of circuit of exchange. Thus, poor images are apprehensible as a series of compromises between quality and access, resolution and speed, exhibition value and cult value, films and clips, contemplation and distraction. They have no inherent aesthetic or ontological position; they exist on the fault line between various meaning regimes, are internally riven—definitionally incomplete. The poor image offers no ontology, no fixity; its value is not internal to it, but arises rather from the displacements it effects.[21]

An unexpected interlocutor can takes us even further along the vision of error under assembly here. Lyotard only wrote a single essay on cinema—*Acinema* (1973)—but that essay concerned itself precisely with questions of damage, affect, and representation, and did so via the language of surfaces and supports. The practice of montage centers most of Lyotard's discussion in this short essay, with its constitutive drive towards eliminating *error*. "The mistake" names the general class of things targeted for editorial excision precisely because of their useless "intensity," their excess with respect to the demands of narrative assembly. All that is "fortuitous, dirty, confused, unsteady, unclear, poorly framed, overexposed…a scene from elsewhere, representing nothing identifiable…an undecidable scene" must hit the cutting room floor.[22] As a thinker of error and mistake, Lyotard is surprisingly

---

[19] Hank Gerba, *Digital Disruptions: Moiré, Aliasing, And The Stroboscopic Effect* (PhD diss, Stanford University, 2024): 1.

[20] Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-Flux Journal* No.10 (2009): 1.

[21] Even when the concept undergoes a near-total reversal, as with Laura Marks and Yani Kong's (2023) sibling concept of "rich images," which refers to deliberate use of glitch aesthetics in small-file films, the riff continues to moves by way of trade-offs: contemplation vs. distraction, affect vs. representation, difficulty as opposed to ease of interpretation. The degraded image continues to be a site of transvaluation, a switchboard for the terms of aesthetic judgment.

[22] Jean-François Lyotard, "Acinema," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, edited by Philip Rosen and translated by Paisley N. Livingston (NY: Columbia University Press, 1986): 349-350.

fertile—not least because the language of informatics thoroughly infused his thought. We can do a lot with a sentence such as this: "This [i.e. the normative] film is composed like a unified and propagating body, a fecund and assembled whole transmitting instead of losing what it carries."[23] Cinema's represented content is here figured as information that the norms of classical editing constrain into a maximally efficient channel. Digressive narration becomes lossy communication. Of particular interest here is Lyotard's emphasis on *unity* and cohesion. Lyotard's foray into cinema, precisely because it was concerned with the production of the real, thought the consequences for aesthetics of the incomplete, erroneous, and botched. This is why *Acinema* finds its ending in a meditation on damaged filmstrips. The normative aesthetics of cinema, Lyotard argues, presume undamaged celluloid—an undamaged support—atop which the movements of cinematic narration can be inscribed. When mobility and immobility switch positions, we are confronted with an atypical and antinormative, that is to say acinematic, aesthetics. In Lyotard's provocative terms, "if…it is the support itself that is touched by perverse hands…the film strip is no longer abolished (made transparent) for the benefit of this or that flesh, for it offers itself as the flesh posing itself…by way of frustrating the beautiful movement [of on-screen forms] by means of the support."[24] Surface and support negate each other. The movement of affect occurs in either one or the other, at the cost of one or the other's voluptuous presence.[25] We can affirm the botch, but to do so is to negate the flesh on which it forms. Or, to spin Lyotard differently, surface and support form an affective tissue—let's say an *interface*—across which flow the aesthetic generativities of technical damage. To affirm the botch is necessarily to affirm also the flesh that bears it. Botch as limit, scar as switchboard—holding *just* at bay the completion of a coherent aesthetics.

6. A strange thing happens in Simondon's 1982 (unfinished, unsent) letter to Derrida.[26] Early in his construction of the category of the "techno-aesthetic," the philosopher of technology finds himself skirting the idea of *incompletion*. Le

[23] Ibid., 352.

[24] Ibid., 358.

[25] Affect is not Lyotard's concept of choice. And yet, the definition he provides of the titular concept, acinema, is strikingly consonant with affect as built out by Deleuze: "The acinema, we have said, would be situated at the two poles of the cinema taken as a writing of movements: thus, extreme immobilization and extreme mobilization" (365). How not to hear in this an echo of Deleuze's conception of affect, following Bergson, as the bipolar operation of two tendencies, "a motor tendency on a sensitive nerve" (Cinema 1, 87)?

[26] Gilbert Simondon, "On Techno-Aesthetics," translated by Arne De Boever. *Parrhesia* 14: 1-8. 2012.

Corbusier's last building, the Convent Sainte Marie de La Tourette, is beautiful because of its lack of finish, because it leaves visible "the traces left by the formwork in the cement of the chimney."[27] What little roughcasting there is is achieved not with a trowel but a canon blaster, providing a roughness over which the light can play rather than the predictable qualities of "an optically smooth surface." Simondon sees in this the materialization of a phanero-technics, that is, a visibilizing of technics: an attitude that makes co-visible both the material and its supports. Within Simondon's techno-aesthetic feeling, it is through the unworked-over, perhaps even the damaged and the botched, that one accesses (a version of) a category of experience situated between technics and aesthetics.

Simondon's short letter vacillates between the poles of the perfect and the rough, control and contingency, briefly sketched out above. As much becomes evident in Gertrude Koch's reading, not of the unfinished letter (the letter that never achieved its final form) but of a moment towards the end of a fuller work, *On the Mode of Existence of the Technical Object.*[28] Koch, like many others, finds in that monograph evidence for an aesthetics of fullness, fit, and connectedness, an Apollonian harmony underwriting the basic category of the technoaesthetic. Koch's reflection turns on the aged conception of the autonomy of the artwork; routing the concept of autonomy through Adorno, she situates Simondon's technoaesthetics as finally offering a model of the aesthetic unconstrained by the discourse of autonomy. To follow Koch and Adorno, the seeming autonomy of the aesthetic object is a *seeming*, an effect of appearance—that is to say, surface—that works to obscure the labor that produced the artwork. The aesthetic object derives its definition, its bounded identity, precisely from the discursive separation between it and mere tools, objects that possess function and thus are *merely* functional (deprived of the whatever-else of the art object that Koch here calls surplus value). Nearly a century of the Frankfurt School and its inheritors has given this line of argument an excessively obvious shine; Koch's innovation is to restitute from Simondon a new angle on this zone of familiarity—an angle that foregrounds the concept of an aesthetic relationality. What happens in the moment of exposed formwork, for Koch, is an acknowledgement of the building's position in a chain that exceeds and engulfs it; rather than individuated, the monastery is a congealed instance in a process of perpetual unfolding. It is form that has taken hold, temporarily; the formwork is the trace of that unfolding. No longer autonomous in the Adornian sense, the technoaesthetic object possess a connected individuation—one that

[27] Ibid., 2.

[28] Gertrud Koch, "Animation of the Technical and the Quest for Beauty," in *Machine* (Minneapolis: Meson Press, 2019.)

visibilizes at every point the existence of others (hands, minds, machines, forces) along the chain of its current being. So Simondon can write, exploding the premises of autonomy so anathema to Adorno, "This is an example of a techno-aesthetic work: perfectly functional, successful, and beautiful."[29]

Other commentators harmonize with Koch on this point. Yves Michaud, for instance, in his careful condensation of Simondon's aesthetic thinking, describes it as fundamentally aimed at "restoring continuities."[30] As Michaud indicates, the aesthetic in Simondon is purposive, and that purpose is harmony. Such valences, which bubble up within the language of technoaesthetics, should prompt us to ask whether an alternate sense of *autonomy* has not been set up in place of the old. Everything coheres; everything *means*; extensive relation, connection, and fit edge out unmeaning and accident. Without straying too far into the commitment to univocity that underwrites Simondon's oeuvre, we can note that the resonances between the technoaesthetic feeling and an ordered world make even Koch uneasy. Tellingly, then, the passages immediately following her reflections on the excessive coherence of technoaesthetically ordered beauty shift to the sublime. "Most of technoaesthetics," we're told, "Are looking for the sublime in technology."[31] After all, technology in a typical understanding cleaves off from nature; the gulf between the technological and the natural registers itself as sublime horror, the sudden slamming realization of an awkward lack of fit between human sensorium and indifferent world. So then where, within the technoaesthetic, would one find a sense of the sublime? Can the two categories align? In answering this question Koch shifts scales, invokes the representational field of science fiction and dystopian cinema; their scenes of technologically-produced destruction render the horrifying gap between human and machine, stage the gulf which technoaesthetic beauty closes. But these two senses are incommensurate. There is something odd, something that sticks, in Koch's passage from power lines over a canyon to action sequences in a film. The technoaesthetic, in its Kochian interpretation, cannot really accommodate that category of dizzying alienation we call the sublime, because as it unfolds in Koch's reading (or in Michaud's, for that matter), the technoaesthetic is a *truly new* paradigm, one that extends its project of univocity into the aesthetic categories themselves. Where the Kantian schema turned on the concept of distance—the sublime as the definitional distance between world and human

[29] Simondon, 2.

[30] Yves Michaud, "The Aesthetics of Gilbert Simondon: Anticipation of the Contemporary Aesthetic Experience," translated by Justin Clemens, in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, eds. Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) :121.

[31] Ibid.

sensorium—Simondon's technoaesthetic works nearly exclusively through proximity. It is beauty without a contrasting sense of the sublime. It is in these moments of perfect fit, of the scaling down of distance between embodied sensorium and its external environments, that Koch's reading of Simondon veers into a sense of closure so strong it verges on a new version of autonomy. This is certainly not autonomy in its Adornian guise, where it meant denial of relation and the self-sufficient identity of artworks, but it is a version of the concept nonetheless because it turns on *coherence* and commensuration. Aesthetics as *system.* Meta-stable and coherent, traversed by forces that undermine Adorno's autonomous artwork while installing, in its stead, a vision of an ordered world in which, indeed, all things are media.

7. But we don't have to read Simondon in exactly that sense. We could release other parts of the unsent letter, even if to do so is to read Simondon at an acute angle from himself. Le Corbusier's "preference for the incomplete" may finally be underwritten by the suturing of such incompletion with *intention*: incompletion by design. But this does not prevent it from nonetheless remaining a manner of incompletion. The reflections on the Matra a little later in the letter can help us out here. "The Matra reminds one a little of a monster," writes Simondon. "It looks like an organism that has barely left the larval stage."[32] This botched car is a mutant object, a straying away from the functional norm. In evolutionary terms, such straying—such random accidents—fold back into the world of function; the genetic mutant, though marginalized by the set from which it has strayed, has the potential to found a *new set,* a new order of being. This is the potential of the accident. What is the relation of the accident to the technoaesthetic?

"Mutants have their own techno-aesthetic," writes Simondon, and in this kernel we should find evidence of the warrant for the existence, in some form, of such a relation.[33] In other words: the error that perturbs the ordered beauty of the technoaesthetic world cannot be folded, without perturbation, back into that same world. It exists outside the set, thus instantiates another set. Meta-stable, the Simondonian folded world will eventually incorporate that change within its structured self. But at least for a moment, for the duration of a flicker, the mutant carries the charge of the accident, the unpredictability of "incomprehensible incompleteness."[34] This charge disorders aesthetic experience; it disorders the neat folds of the technoaesthetic itself. Simondon's invocation of the aesthetic is

[32] Simondon, 4.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Denise Ferreira da Silva, foreword to *All Incomplete*, 5-11. Co-written by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, (Minor Compositions, 2021): 6.

irreducibly material. Bergsonian in inspiration, what we'll later come to recognize as Deleuzian, the vision of aesthesis that runs through this letter solders it quite firmly to the body via such ideas as "fundamental perceptive intuition," "something orgasmic, a tactile means and motor of stimulation," "a type of intuition that's perceptive-motoric and sensorial," "a certain contact with matter." This ancient path is well-trodden, and it can lead—an understanding of aesthetics wedded to the body can lead—in innumerable welcome directions. It can also, and this is where this essay stakes itself, cohere the body and its sensory schemas via assumptive logic: aesthesis grounded in embodied response must *assume* some model of embodied response.

That path would return us to Russell's amalgamated whole. But the mutant—the random error that so wants to *escape* predictable order and open new paths—cannot easily be incorporated into that whole. Mutants have *their own* technoaesthetic. In this reading, this will mean instead of assumed sensory schemas, an aesthetics of incompletion, botchery, and error. Such a reading wants to stop *just short* of embodied aesthesis, just shy of dependence on the body as theoretical category—so as to figure it, instead, as a seam (call it an interface) along which we might attend to the play between aesthetics and hermeneutics.

8. Who owns the senses? Kittler's answer, fraught in its polemical force, returns us via that very force, that irritation, to the political charge of theorizing the body. In establishing media *as* the real, as the mechanisms that determine the very threshold of perception, the ornery McLuhanite not only followed in the tradition of theorizing the human senses but also of setting up a tension between aesthetics and hermeneutics, where the expansion of one came definitionally at the cost of the other. This plays out in a striking way in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986.) Because they are the condition of possibility of our knowing the real, media can have nothing to do with immaterial interpretive acts. Aligned with presence, the fully material object-world of media can have no need of the parsing of some second-order symbolic code; "in contrast to the arts, media do not have to make do with the grid of the symbolic."[35]

Arresting enough on its own, this statement gains in surprise when considered in light of the broader isomorphy the text sets up between bodies and media—like media, "the bodily real…of necessity escapes all symbolic grids."[36] Bodies, then, are media and media are bodies—and both inhabit the real without, ironically,

[35] Friedrich A Kittler. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated and with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 9.

[36] Ibid., 12.

mediation. Aesthesis is replaced by modulation; as eyewash, the senses submit to mediatic manipulation, the control of perception by means of its external and non-somatic organs. And yet, despite the military self-assurance of this account, it retains a surplus. Media remain at odds with themselves, not quite fully or reliably aligned with the real of which they are the condition. Something is able to puncture the sense-less vacuum of Kittler's media forms, leaving an impression of a different order than the merely symbolic representations to which their (no longer aesthetic) content gives witness. Media, though outside the symbolic, remain traversable by "the noise of the real—the fuzziness of cinematic pictures, the hissing of tape recordings."[37] Film grain and tape hiss: what are these here but the sensuous traces of the body of the real? Kittler's speedy engagement here with the artefacts of a medium's materiality ascribes to them a strange set of functions—functions that, seen askance, stand in for a version of the aesthetic in this account. This is what allows a sentiment such as this to occur: "Pushed to their margins even obsolete media become sensitive enough to register the signs and clues of a situation. Then, as in the case of the sectional plane of two optical media, patterns and moirés emerge: myths, fictions of science, oracles…"[38]

What's remarkable about that sentence is its elevation of ordinary machinic error to the status of the occult. It is as this occult-by-way-of-error that all the traditional stuff of aesthetic experience (myths, science fiction, oracle) re-emerges; aesthetics becomes a matter of *extra*sensory perception. Having shed their ability to act as transfer points between world and self—that is, to participate in aesthesis—media shift the plane of operation *beyond* the senses, to the very "noise of the real" manifested in the material irruptions of the medium. This is a different kind of transmission than that of the merely symbolic representational field; as the very presence of the real itself, it becomes a kind of aesthetic experience the reception of which has more in common with a séance than with a film. Technical glitches receive aesthetic value by their very degree of distance from any code that might inscribe them—at least, any code we might understand as semiotic.

These particular moments from Kittler are quite well-known. Framed as an expulsion of aesthetics from media theory, they have had the paradoxical effect of rendering it more urgent than ever. In Gerba's insightful condensation of trends in contemporary digital media aesthetics, the emphasis post-Kittler (and even earlier, if we think of Susan Buck-Morss's account of anesthetic modernity) has been on constructing ever-subtler bridges between aesthetics and media—bridges that operate, crucially, via the analytic of the body. As Gerba writes, "it is precisely the

[37] Ibid., 14.
[38] Ibid., xl.

micro-temporality and sub-perceptibility of computation which makes it capable of modulating the aesthetic terrain upon which sensibility, perception, and technical media relate."[39] But if there are gains to be had via this turn to sensibility and perception, there are also considerable risks—as theorists of glitch, for one, know well. Taking those risks seriously, and learning from the discourse of limits and switches (as opposed to ontologies) that lies latent in writings on botched images, this essay has traced the power of the limit and the interface in approaching otherwise the relations of aesthetics and mediation. Here, it's worth recalling the assertion with which Simondon opens his letter: "If our fundamental aim is to revitalize contemporary philosophy, we should first of all think of interfaces."[40] The function of the interface here is not so distinct from Kittler, despite all the distance that separates these two thinkers—especially if we recall once again the Convent at Arbresle, whose exposed roughcasting made it attain an "interference between art and nature."[41] Kittler and Simondon thus unwittingly converge in this shared sense of the erroneous and the incomplete—the exposure of material and the technical glitch—as opening an interface or skin between entities (sign and sense, art and nature) readable on the botched surface.

9. The non-canon-busting, fairly straight-laced media text that has flickered in these pages can also lead us to a closing. There, in that text, any simple semiotic reading could not travel very far from its 'merely contingent' technical inscription. The film is through and through a text of botchery. The van our characters travel in, which they call the Jattmobile after Maula Jatt—the hero of Pakistan's most iconic action film series—and which serves as a kind of embodiment of archiving (leading Gwendolyn Kirk to call it a "time machine,") is spectacularly destroyed first by then zombies and then by Baby.[42] Also splattered, if not shattered, are a record player and gramophone during one of Baby's bloody rampages. And Baby herself provides rich support for the generativities of the botch, for hers is a form that anarchically flowers through the destruction of the coherencies of the normative forms that surround her. In a key scene (taken up at greater length by Masood), we're shown a family photo album the pages of which document Baby pre- and post-transition. Those faded and scratched photographs nicely align Baby with visual degradation,

[39] Gerba (2024), 27.
[40] Simondon, 1.
[41] Ibid., 2.
[42] Gwendolyn S. Kirk, "Working Class Zombies and Men in Burqas: Temporality, Trauma, and the Specter of Nostalgia in Zibahkhana." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 5 no.1 (2014): 148.

binding the visual, somatic, and normative registers of error in a manner reminiscent of Russell's alignment of glitch with trans joy.

In a film such as this, external imprints of damage are not just damage of another order; the gambit is to not just hold separate the marks of technological degradation incurred in the process of screen-capture on the one hand and the gory fates of diegetic (human, technological) bodies on the other, nor even to read the latter as metaphorically indicating the depredations of archiving from which the former arise. The film itself bleeds over the edges of its textuality; this particular copy of *Zibahkhana* is an entity that fundamentally includes the artefacts of low resolution that mar its surface. Through the act of screen-recording, the film's material envelope, its technical inscription, has been brought into intimacy with its 'inside,' the otherwise autonomous and self-contained film text. Such a reading finds in the visual silt of this copy of this film material *and* symbolic registrations of the workings of the aporetic space (worldly; digital; aesthetic) through which it has moved. The incoherencies of a form flailing to take hold are *generative* modes of being, living, and reading—reading becomes botched and wounded, like *Zibahkhana*'s immiserated characters.

Figure 4—Murdering the automobile-archive.

Figure 5—Murdering some media.

Are we now at a technoaesthetic sublime? Returning to Koch, it was through the gap between technological and natural experience that something like the sublime could be registered within the technoaesthetic. Here, following a different track, the rent affect we call the *sublime* comes oozing at us out of the loss of coherent textuality. This is one way we can think what the 'techno' can do to the 'aesthetic.' Filmic fuzz and tape hiss need no longer index the occult, once we acknowledge a limit (always traversed, impossible to fully traverse) between the symbolic and the somatic—the way a scar can render the texture of skin better than unbroken flesh. If models of the aesthetic premised on body schemas run the risk of assuming coherent body, the force of a botched and non-somatic aesthetic is its escape from system (it doesn't try to scale across objects; each instance of error must be read for anew) and, correspondingly, the lodging of mistake in meaning itself. To read for the botch is to let meaning glitch.

Bibliography

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Translated by Barbara Habberjam and Hugh Tomlinson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

Durham Peters, John. "What Is Not a Medium?" *communication +1* 9, no.1 (2022).

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. Foreword to *All Incomplete, 5-11.* By Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. Minor Compositions, 2021.

Gerba, Hank. *Digital Disruptions: Moiré, Aliasing, And The Stroboscopic Effect*. PhD diss, Stanford University, 2024.

Gerba, Hank. Review of *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto,* by Legacy Russell. *Media-N* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 161-164.

Jancovic, Marek. *A Media Epigraphy of Video Compression: Reading Traces of Decay*. Springer International Publishing, 2023.

Khan, Ali and Ahmad, Ali Nobil. "From Zinda Laash to Zibahkhana: Violence and Horror in Pakistani Cinema." *Third Text* 24, no.1 (2010): 149-161.

Kirk, Gwendolyn S. "Working Class Zombies and Men in Burqas: Temporality, Trauma, and the Specter of Nostalgia in Zibahkhana." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 5, no.1 (2014): 141-151.

Kittler, Friedrich A. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated and with an introduction by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Koch, Gertrud. "Animation of the Technical and the Quest for Beauty." In *Machine*.

Minneapolis: Meson Press, 2019.

Kong, Yani and Laura Marks. '"You Can't Look into My Eyes." The Aesthetics of Small-File Cinema." *The Photographers' Gallery: Unthinking Photography.* 2023.

Larkin, Brian. "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy." In *Signal and Nosie: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria,* 127-242. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

Lyotard, Jean-François. "Acinema." In *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, edited by Philip Rosen, 349-359. Translated by Paisley N. Livingston. NY: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Masood, Syeda Momina. "Visions of Queer Anarchism: Gender, Desire, and Futurity in Omar Ali Khan's Zibahkhana." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 10, no. 1 (2019): 75-90.

Pow, Whiteny (Whit.) "A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors." *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 1 (2021): 197-230.

Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto.* New York: Verso, 2020.

Simondon, Gilbert. "On Techno-Aesthetics," translated by Arne De Boever. *Parrhesia* 14: 1-8. 2012.

Sterne, Jonathan. *MP3: The Meaning of a Format.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Steyerl, Hito. "A Thing Like You and Me." *e-Flux Journal* no. 15 (2010).

Steyerl, Hito. "In Defense of the Poor Image." e-*Flux Journal* no.10 (2009).

Stone, Allucquère Rosanne. "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?" In *Cyberspace: First Steps,* edited by Michael Benedikt, 81-118. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

Michaud, Yves. "The Aesthetics of Gilbert Simondon: Anticipation of the Contemporary Aesthetic Experience," translated by Justin Clemens. In. *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, edited by Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, and Ashley Woodward, 121-132. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Zibahkhana. Directed by Omar Ali Khan. Mondo Macabro: 2007.