

The New Aesthetic: a posthuman visual culture or a passing fashion?

John Steed, B.A. Art and Visual Culture, University of the West of England

January 2015

Abstract

The new aesthetic is a broad term being used to describe and discuss the increasingly pervasive appearance of the visual language of digital technology and the apparent blending of virtual and physical. It occurs as a consequence of both the functioning and non-functioning of these technologies. It is observed, synthesised and reflected back to us by artists and designers. This essay questions whether this new aesthetic reflects a significant new phase in our visual culture representing a step-change in our synthesis with machines, a new evolution of the cyborg, or whether it is no more than a passing fashion.

Introduction

The term the new aesthetic was coined in 2011 by London-based writer, artist, publisher and digital creative, James Bridle, to describe the increasingly pervasive appearance of the visual language of digital technology and the internet in the physical world, and the blending of virtual and physical. The phrase 'new aesthetics' arose, firstly, as a response to the kinds of images that contemporary machines seem to be producing and, secondly, to the redefinitions of aesthetic awareness that these networked machines seem to be suggesting. (Ballard, 2014)

Bridle argues that such is our constant immersion in the digital image that it is changing the way in which we perceive the world. Can this be a new and emergent visual culture or is the new aesthetic of no greater significance than a passing style?



Figure 1 Anon (no date), 23E22, Manhattan, New York. Available from: <http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 12 November 2014].

What is the new aesthetic?

‘One of the core themes of the New Aesthetic has been our collaboration with technology, whether that’s bots, digital cameras or satellites (and whether that collaboration is conscious or unconscious), and a useful visual shorthand for that collaboration has been glitchy and pixelated imagery, a way of seeing that seems to reveal a blurring between “the real” and “the digital”, the physical and the virtual, the human and the machine’. (Bridle, 2012)

Bridle asserts (2012, TED talk) that the term new aesthetic stands not for the artifacts of... technological progression, but the experience of living in a world where our

cultural objects are spread through all the devices that we have, while our memory is outsourced to the network.' Goodbun (2012) suggests that there is a new aesthetic to be found in our environment which is not directly of human design, but comes out of our interactions with machines, and perhaps, from the machines themselves..."

Bridle states (2012) that this pervasive technology 'gives the real world the grain of the digital, makes things look like they belong in the digital world.' He speaks of "the digital bleeding through to the real world", and argues that digital technology is changing the way in which we perceive the world. To claim this, is to make a claim for the emergence of a new visual culture.

In the frame of the new aesthetic there is a blurring between the physical and the digital worlds. We live in coded spaces – spaces such as airport terminals whose architecture only makes sense within the digital algorithm that enables people to negotiate through them. Digital cameras mediate our lives and, connected with computing software as robot eyes, they learn to see like us, to recognise our faces, our number plates, our behaviour.

Bridle argues that we live within the machine and cites the example of GPS where the handheld machine exists within a net of satellites. With security systems such as *captcha* we have to prove ourselves to robots to be human. As a result of the ubiquitous and pervasive digital media, the machines are learning to see like us and perhaps we in turn are learning to see like the machines. We modify our behaviour to conform to their vision of the world, we change our speed in our cars, we adapt our appearance to be recognised at digital passport gates.

Steyerl (2010) describes the digital image as bearing the bruises of its encounters with politics and the violence of cropping, appropriation, ripping and editing. We recognise this glitchy and pixelated imagery and it is repurposed, recreated and reflected back to us in product design. Take, for example, the opening credits for Big

Brother created by Bristol-based digital creatives SHOP. Glitched images are used as visual code for machine mediation, for life within the machine. Frames from data-mashed videos are elided and corrupted to produce images in the style of the new aesthetic. According to Neil Harris, creative director of SHOP the design comes from an interpretation of the brief that specified portrayal of digital surveillance but the designers were not aware of Bridle's new aesthetic and so not following a named style but taking their inspiration independently from the zeitgeist.

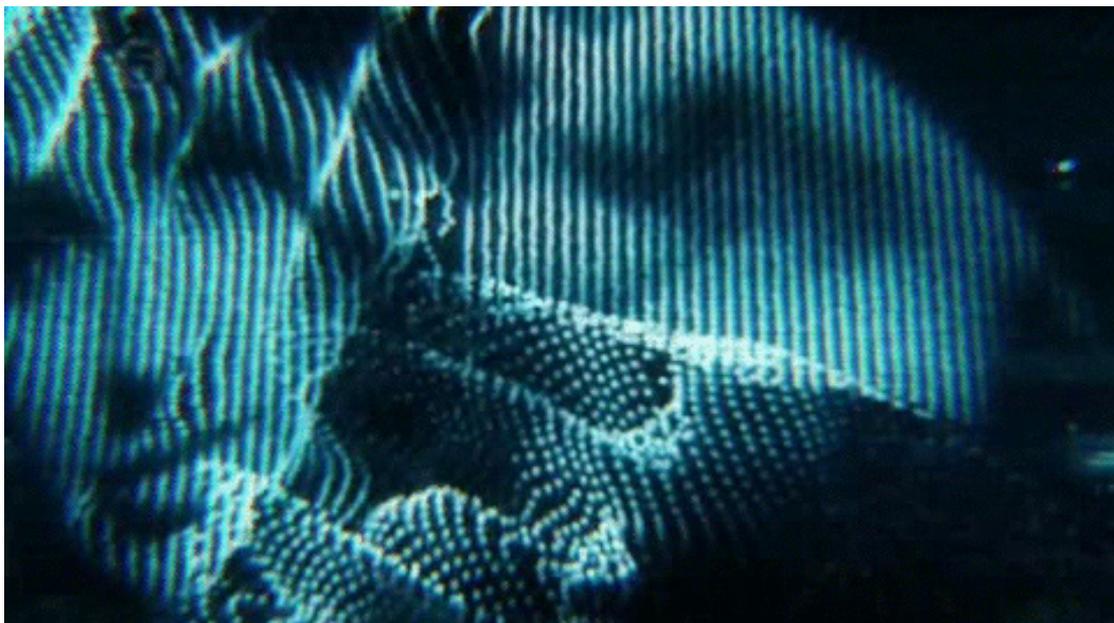


Figure 2 SHOP (2014), Still from the 2014 Big Brother opening credits designed by Bristol-based motion graphics studio SHOP. At: <http://weareshop.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 5 November 2014].

The influence of the digital on perceptions of reality, of the 'digital bleeding into the real', was anticipated in film and fiction fantasies of virtual realities such as *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), *Neuromancer* (William Gibson, 1984), *The Lawnmower Man* (Brett Leonard, 1992) and *The Matrix* (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999). Science fiction has both prepared and shaped approaches to the synthesis of machine and body in the theme of cyborgs as in the Japanese cyberpunk manga *Ghost in the Shell* by Masamune Shirow first serialised in 1989 and later made into an anime (Mamoru Oshii, 1995) The early work of the Japanese artist Mariko Mori depicts the

artist exploring constructed identities that were both familiar and alien as technology blended with the everyday in images where she is photographed dressed as a sexualised alien cyborg within real urban situations. Such works in art and popular culture have prepared the ground and provided a foundation of familiar readymade points of reference waiting to be drawn upon once the digital age became established. Perhaps they have given much of the visual and theoretical implications of the digital such a familiarity that we do not recognise its perforating effects on our visual engagement with the world.



Figure 3 Mori, M (1994), *Play With Me*. At: <http://controlfreakout.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 19 December 2014.]

It is difficult to look at Jerwood Drawing Prize nominee, Laurie Lax's 2014 work *Oblong (Parnidžio kopa)* in which charcoal dust is carefully sifted onto the landscape to form a black oblong on the ground without seeing it as missing pixels in a digital

image. Without the experience of the imperfectability of the pixelated screen this image would be read simply for what it is.



Figure 4 Lax, L (2014), *Oblong (Parnidžio kopa)* [charcoal on sand 290 x 149cm]. At: <http://www.laurielax.co.uk/> [Accessed 12 November 2014]

Perhaps a most unexpected recognition of the new aesthetic is the Tate's open submission call *All Glitched Up* (Tate, 2014) in which deliberately glitched images of selected artworks in its collection are invited to be submitted. The Tate even provided a list of online tools to create these glitched images.



Figure 5 Steed, J (2014), *Glitched Self-portrait*. Created using Pixel Sort¹, postproduction in Adobe Photoshop.

Mood board or a significant visual ideological shift?

'Intuitively, one feels that this could be important. Smartphones, tablet computers, drones, CCTV cameras, LCD screens, e-readers, GPS, social networking, recognition algorithms and scores of allied technologies and concepts are rising to super-ubiquity around us. They are wreaking untold changes on the behaviour of nation states, corporations and individuals. Yet all this is happening in a cultural environment broadly evacuated of ideology, apart from the exhausted fairytales of neoliberal consumer capitalism.' (Wiles, 2014).

In his talk to the *Web Directions South* conference (Bridle, 2012a) Bridle spoke of how he started to notice images like the photograph of a cushion on sale in a store with a pixelated design and he remarks that this:

¹ <http://www.clintonmckayart.com/pixelsort/>

'is a strange thing – a look, a style, a pattern that didn't previously exist in the real world. It's something that has come out of digital. It's come out of a digital way of seeing that represents things in this form. The real world doesn't or at least didn't have a grain that looks like this but you begin to see it everywhere when you start looking for it. It's very pervasive, it seems like a style... and we have to look at where that style comes from and what it means.'



Figure 6 Bashford, B (2011), Photograph of pixelated cushion referred to by James Bridle in 'Waving at the Machines', his closing keynote speech to the Web Directions South 2011 conference. At: <http://www.flickr.com/> [Accessed 20 November 2014].

Is the new aesthetic anymore than a term that describes a certain style or fashion in images? Is this the early recognition of a new visual culture describing the relationship of art world trends to networked connectivity and socio-technological change, or is it more superficial, without a robust coherent discourse, that is merely concerned with the surface of things – or will what is heralded as a 'turn' harden into a series of stylistic or generic tropes? Is it more than a superficial grouping of images with a coincidence of visual appearance?

Bridle responds (2013) to critical reaction to his ideas that 'has only looked at the surface, and has – sometimes willfully it feels – failed to engage with the underlying concerns of the new aesthetic, its own critique and politics'. This criticism he states 'concerns itself only with images'.

Adam is not at all convinced that there is anything new in the new aesthetic (Adam, 2012). He likens it to a 'digital Art Deco', 'a decorative design style drawing on machinic aesthetics' without engaging with the political, social and cultural possibilities of industrialization. Contemporaneous with Art Deco, the art world saw the brief flowering of two schools also inspired by the technology of the day: Futurism and Vorticism. A hundred years later has the wheel turned again? Art Deco, Futurism and Vorticism are reflections of the anxieties of their times – the new aesthetic may also be an artifact of our contemporary neuroses as we struggle to come to terms with the significant societal, political and economic upheavals resulting from the explosion in digital technology. Anxieties that we seek to tame with pixelated cushion covers.

However the exploitation of the new aesthetic by designers as a style in media and fashion does not imply that it does not have greater significance in visual culture. Conversely it may indicate that the tropes of this aesthetic resonate within society and indicate an underlying truth – that these images reflect a shared set of values and beliefs that until now have not been articulated in academic circles.

Bridle claims (2012a) that the new aesthetic 'is the natural way that someone who has grown up with eight bit video games sees the world. This is the grain, the resolution of it.' To claim that this digital grain is the natural way for the world is to be seen is to make a claim for the new aesthetic that goes beyond the observation of some visual commonality or trend but asserts a shared meaning, culturally and sociologically. In other words, it is to assert the existence of an ideology, possibly a

new or emerging visual culture. But can this assertion be substantiated? The term new aesthetic has been discussed widely but as yet there is no conceptual framework to underpin it.

Bridle talks about 'seeing like the machines'. Are we truly seeing like the machines? If this can be said to be true then this indicates another step away from the Renaissance ideal of humanism to the plurality of perspectives of the posthuman, perhaps even to that synthesis of man and prosthesis, the cyborg.

Bridle made no great claims for the new aesthetic when he introduced the term on the blog for The Really Interesting Group on 6 May 2011:

'For a while now, I've been collecting images and things that seem to approach a new aesthetic of the future, which sounds more portentous than I mean. What I mean is that we've got frustrated with the NASA extropianism space-future, the failure of jetpacks, and we need to see the technologies we actually have with a new wonder. Consider this a mood-board for unknown products.'

A mood-board is hardly a new aesthetic, but the idea has taken hold. Bridle states (2012, TED Talk) that we 'don't have a language to describe the process by which our culture is mediated by these [digital] technologies.' There is little to be found about the new aesthetic in peer-reviewed academic journals but it is being talked about. Bridle describes the new aesthetic as a 'theory object' and a 'shareable concept' – the home of the discussion is appropriately the web. The question I am asking is whether this networked discussion will emerge as a mainstream understanding of a significant change in the way in which we perceive and understand the world.

The word 'aesthetic' may be understood to mean simply a 'look' – this appearance of things can result from design or unintended consequences of other systems. It can

also mean a philosophical concern with perception and knowledge. 'In this sense aesthetics is inseparable from, and perhaps unites, epistemology (philosophy of knowledge) and ontology (philosophy of being). In an important way, the question whether we can identify a new aesthetics is then not just a stylistic question of appearances, but is also a philosophical question concerning technologies of perception and production in the world.' (Goodbun, 2012)

I am concerned to investigate whether the new aesthetic is more than a trending style, a matter of superficial appearance but has a philosophical and metaphysical depth. There is also a political and economic context that makes this possible new aesthetic of particular pertinence to the present. Goodbun writes:

'The point is that digital production technologies have become fundamental to the processes of global capitalism, in terms of production, in terms of finance, in terms of media, in terms of surveillance, and indeed, are also increasingly central in anti-capitalist movements and post-capitalist alternatives. To reflect upon a possible aesthetics of digital technology at the beginning of the twenty-first century is then in large part to explore the contradictory internal relations of global capitalism itself.' (Goodbun, 2012)

Betancourt writes (2013) that the new aesthetic has emerged as a symptom of the reorientation of production from human labour to automation. He writes of the 'aura of the digital' in which analogue is regarded as inferior to digital. 'Digital' has become synonymous with progress. The analogue subordinates to the lure of the digital. The 'aura of the digital' is born of the authenticity, the realism, even hyperrealism, of its reproduction and its perfect reproducibility. Perhaps we see echoes of humanity in the glitches of the new aesthetic image, an apparent machinic fallibility in a technology that is increasingly denying us our fundamental place within capitalist society, that of contributing our human labour.

The contemporary interest in redundant technologies and retro fashion may be seen as a resistance to the digital encroachment onto the 'real'. This return to the analogue is evident in modish interest in chemical photography, handmade craft-based products, artisanal bread and craft beers. If this is so, then these niche markets only serve to prove the dominance of the digital. The new aesthetic may, in part, be a representation of a digital past, a nostalgic response in a time of rapid technological development. The glitches and pixelation associated with interrupted computation and disrupted transmission can be seen as historical as we move into a world of high-definition cinema and 'retina screens' on our computers and handheld devices (Berry, 2014). What is being identified as new in the new aesthetic may instead be a fearful conservative glance back over our shoulders.

'Aesthetics is, by definition, how beauty is perceived and valued in a human sensorium. Aesthetics is therefore an issue of metaphysics. Perception, beauty, judgment and value are all metaphysical issues'(Sterling, 2012). Writing in *Convergence*, Ballard asks whether a robot can waste a day watching clouds. Sterling dismissed the anthropomorphising of the machines that Bridle writes of in his descriptions of the new aesthetic when he describes the machines wanting to see like us and share our world. 'A sincere New Aesthetic would be a valiant, comprehensive effort to truly and sincerely engage with machine-generated imagery — not as a freak-show, a metaphor or a stimulus to the imagination — but *as it exists.*' (Sterling, 2012). The problem is that it is unresolved.

If digital technology is changing the way in which we perceive the world, then this presents the possibility that the visual landscape can be a malleable construct. Baudrillard hypothesised that with the rise of post-industrial consumer capitalism we have entered 'the age of simulation' (Smith, 2010). With the arrival of high definition digital imagery we may have entered an age of hyper-reality. Contrast the physical world, that has been comprehensively mapped and captured by Google Streetview,

surveillance satellites and image-capturing devices carried around in our pockets, with the private virtual worlds of immersive virtual-reality gaming and 3D CGI-generated movies that perhaps provide a temporary retreat from the relentless documentation and filtering of the 'real' world. With the emergence onto the market of the technologies behind Google Glass and the virtual reality headset Oculus Rift we may be seeing the beginnings of a blending of digital and 'real' experience. For Baudrillard 'reality' is a cultural semiotic construct, a reality that changes as developments in science and technology successively overturn earlier ideas of what constitute the real are abandoned. In contemporary society, global mass culture mediated by digital technology posits its own referents, its own reality. In this context, a visual landscape that is at once real and digital is conceivable.

We are now immersed in a global digital age, but it is still novel and it is difficult, if not impossible to get any objective perspective on the cultural impacts of this technology. We may not yet have the language to discuss and understand it. It may be that the very question that is central to my investigation may in time appear specious. Benjamin wrote of how it is inevitable that ideas will be usurped and may become redundant. He wrote about how technology changes social conditions attitudes and that the general willingness to accept a reproduction in place of the original also signifies an unwillingness to participate in the ritualistic aesthetics and politics of earlier times. Perhaps any discussion concerning a 'New Aesthetic is irrelevant as we can only discuss it in the language, ideas and sensibilities of pre-digital times.

Conclusion

The new aesthetic began as a title for a tumblr blog in 2011. Since then it has been the subject of much discussion on the internet and more recently in academia. What began as a virtual scrapbook of images is beginning to coalesce into articulated ideas and concepts. Perhaps there is an underlying suspicion that the global

explosion of computer technology and global ubiquity of the robot eye, coded space and the digital screen must be having effects on humanity beyond those social, economic and cultural; deeper cultural and ideological shifts that come from an ever closer synthesis and interdependency of human and machine. Do we as posthuman cyborgs perceive the world differently? Do we see like the machines and do the machines see like us? It is too early to say.

But is this pervasiveness of images an indication that we are indeed, perceiving the world differently? Does it reflect a significant new phase in our visual culture representing a step-change in our synthesis with machines, a new evolution of the cyborg? We are far too close to the events to say. Although we can ask the question, it may be that the question itself will come to be seen as irrelevant rather like trying to discuss the significance of photography in the language of painting.

The world has seen art and design movements based on machinic aesthetics before. Think of Art Deco, Futurism and Vorticism – all had their time – they fed off the anxieties of their age – the new aesthetic may also be an artifact of our contemporary neuroses as we struggle to come to terms with the significant societal, political and economic upheavals resulting from the explosion in digital technology. Anxieties that we now seek to tame with pixelated cushion covers.

References

- Baudrillard, J (1983) *Simulations*. Translated from the French by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman. Semiotext(e), New York
- Ballard, S (2014) *Cloud-watching robots: Douglas Bagnall's machine aesthetics*. Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
- Benjamin, W (2008) *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. Penguin, London
- Berry, D M (2014) *Critical Theory and the Digital*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York
- Betancourt, M (2013) *Automated Labor: The new aesthetic and Immaterial Physicality*. Theory Beyond the Codes, Ctheory, 2May. Available: <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=717> [Accessed 23 November 2014]
- Bridle, J, *The New Aesthetic* (blog). Available at <http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/> [Last accessed 29 April 2014]
- Bridle, J (2011a) *The New Aesthetic: Waving at the Machines* (video talk), booktwo (blog), 5 December. Available from: <http://booktwo.org/notebook/waving-at-machines/> [Last accessed 28 April 2014].
- Bridle, J (2011b) *The New Aesthetic*, Really Interesting Group, 6 May. Available at <http://www.riglondon.com/blog/2011/05/06/the-new-aesthetic/> [Last accessed 29 April 2014].
- Bridle, J (2012) *#sxaesthetic (Report from Austin, Texas, on the New Aesthetic panel at SXSW)*, booktwo (blog). Available at <http://booktwo.org/notebook/sxaesthetic/> [Last accessed 29 April 2014].
- Bridle, J (2012) *A new aesthetic for the digital age* (video lecture), TED talk, 5 July. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z84EDsnpb4U> [Last accessed 11 September 2014]
- Bridle, J (2013) *The New Aesthetic and its Politics*, booktwo blog, 12 June). Available from <http://booktwo.org/notebook/new-aesthetic-politics/> [Last accessed 8 September 2014]
- Bridle, J (2014) *We fell in love in a coded space* (video lecture), Lift Conference, 5-7 February. Available at <http://videos.liftconference.com/video/4823292/we-fell-in-love-in-a-coded> [Last accessed 29 April 2014].
- Bridle, J (2014) Beyond Pong: why digital art matters, The Guardian, 18 June. Available from <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/18/sp-why-digital-art-matters>
- Charlesworth, JJ (2012) *We are the droids we're looking for: the New Aesthetic and its friendly critic.*, JJ Charlesworth (blog), 7 May. Available at <http://blog.jjcharlesworth.com/2012/05/07/we-are-the-droids-were-looking-for-the-new-aesthetic-and-its-friendly-critics/> [last accessed 03/04/2014]
- Goodbun J (2012) *The Politics of the new aesthetic: electric anthropology and ecological vision*. Creative Applications Network. Available at

<http://www.creativeapplications.net/theory/the-politics-of-the-new-aesthetic-electric-anthropology-and-ecological-vision/> (accessed 15 November 2014)

Grau, O. (2003) *Virtual Art, From Illusion to Immersion*. The MIT Press, London, ,

Grenville, B. (ed.) (2002) *The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture*. Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver

Halberstam, J. and Livingston, I. (1996) *Posthuman Bodies*. Indiana University Press, Indianapolis

Haraway, D. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. Free Association Books, London

Jacob, S (2012) Looking for the new in the New Aesthetic. *Art Review*; Dec, Issue 64, p44

Kasprzak, M and Hyde, A (2012) *New Aesthetic New Anxieties* (book downloadable at <http://v2.nl/publishing/new-aesthetic-new-anxieties>)

Kholeif, O (Ed) (2014) *You Are Here: Art After the Internet*. Cornerhouse, Manchester/ SPACE, London

Lorusso, S and Schmieg, S (2012) *56 Broken Kindle Screens*, Available at <http://sebastianschmieg.com/56brokenkindlescreens/> [Last accessed 29 April 2014].

Popper, F. (2007) *From technological to virtual art*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass

Rossi Braidotti , "Cyborg, Companion Species, and Nomadic Subjects," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2006 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 23(7–8), pp.197–208

Simms, K (2003) *Paul Ricoeur*, Routledge, London

Smith, M. and Morra, J. (eds.), (2006) *The Prosthetic Impulse – From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA

Smith, R (ed) (2010) *The Baudrillard Dictionary*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh

Steyerl, H (2010) A Thing Like You and Me. *E-flux* (website). Available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/a-thing-like-you-and-me/> [Last accessed 22 December 2014]

Sterling, S (2012), *An Essay on the New Aesthetic*, *Wired*, 4 February. Available from <http://www.wired.com/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic/> [Last accessed 30 March 2014]

Tate (2014) All Glitched Up (Tate website). Available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/special-event/open-call-submission-all-glitched> [Last accessed 29 October 2014]

Turner, L (2012) *The New Aesthetic's Speculative Promise*, *Notes on Meta Modernism*, 2 July. Available at www.metamodernism.com [Accessed 30 March 2014].

Wiles, W (2014) *The machine gaze: As the boundaries between digital and physical dissolve, can the New Aesthetic help us see things more clearly?* Aeon Magazine. Available from <http://aeon.co/magazine/world-views/will-wiles-technology-new-aesthetic/> [Accessed 15 May 2014].

Zylinska, J. (ed.) (2002) *The Cyborg experiments: the extensions of the body in the media age*. Continuum, London

Table of figures

Figure 1 Anon (no date), 23E22, Manhattan, New York. Available from: <http://new-aesthetic.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 12 November 2014].

Figure 2 SHOP (2014), *Still from the 2014 Big Brother opening credits designed by Bristol-based motion graphics studio SHOP*. At: <http://weareshop.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 5 November 2014]

Figure 3 Mori, M (1994), *Play With Me*. At: <http://controlfreakout.tumblr.com/> [Accessed 19 December 2014.]

Figure 4 Lax, L (2014), *Oblong (Parnidžio kopa)* [charcoal on sand 290 x 149cm]. At: <http://www.laurielax.co.uk/> [Accessed 12 November 2014]

Figure 5 Steed, J (2014), *Glitched Self-portrait*. Created using Pixel Sort², postproduction in Adobe Photoshop.

Figure 6 Bashford, B (2011), Photograph of pixelated cushion referred to by James Bridle in 'Waving at the Machines', his closing keynote speech to the Web Directions South 2011 conference. At: <http://www.flickr.com/> [Accessed 20 November 2014].

² <http://www.clintonmckayart.com/pixelsort/>