

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE POOR IMAGE

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Steyerl's, *In Defence of the Poor Image**, conjures a poetic animal who's habitat is the digital world—the internet.

It might be worth making a few remarks about the DNA of this kind of image. Steyerl is discussing the magical properties of the JPEG image format, and to a lesser extent it's temperally-shifted cousin MPEG. JPEG stands for Joint Photographers Experts Group—it is the photographers that are responsible for the poor image of today!

Personally, it's hard for me to see a photograph in terms of a poor image, but the pervasive nature of the JPEG format has made inroads into almost every aspect of pictorial representation, printed or not.

What I find interesting is the specific ways in which this format affects what we see, and how a set of arbitrary decisions made by the group have governed all visual representations using this format.

I bit of history: Until the late 80s internet still images used non-loosely formats. These formats did not preclude poor images, or digital reproduction artefacts, but they did tend to minimise generational loss. They tended not to degrade visually when re-saved.

Around this time people were getting frustrated waiting for web pages to load. The *World Wide Wait*, as it was called, and a way was needed to get pictures of reasonable size and quality across a phone line and into a computer more quickly.

The Joint Photographers Experts Group approached the problem by asking the question: What are the most important visual aspects of the image? Or in other words: What parts of the image does our eye notice most?

I'm over-simplifying but basically the answer was: "The edges". All JPEG images that are made poor by generational loss, by resampling or other copy and paste actions by people or machines, retain to their bitter end, edge detail. They also give up easily, and you could even say offer as worthless, subtle changes in large areas of colour.

JPEG wants to throw away information when it is created. When it is displayed it wants to imagine that information back again. It is its own dynamical system of generative loss. The technology that displays a JPEG may generate an image based on a range of standard or arbitrary methods. This is a machine's visual imagination at work.

It's visual cortex is alive with crispy lines, unsharp masked to mars-ravine splendour, tapering symmetrically into lego-blocked, scale-defying, chessboard skies—a world away from the alchemical processes that educated the photographers in the, now empty, darkrooms.

* Hito Steyerl (Nov. 2009). "In Defense of the Poor Image". In: *e-flux* #10. URL: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/> (visited on 03/21/2014).



Figure 1: Three kinds of artefacts. Digital video still frame.

Coming Home From Tomorrow Part 1 of 3 (June 2010). URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhr8AB4lv8k> (visited on 03/21/2014).

I can't think of a more widely known example of people saying to machines: "You just make stuff up. You tell us what we are."

The format is all pervasive, digital telephony, video conferencing, audio playback give you: poor phone call, poor video chat and poor audio. In each case machines imagine how we look, sound and move, often with humorous and frustrating results.

Finally I present a challenge to the reader to correctly identify the three different format artefacts present in the image above; spanning perhaps 30 years, a conglomerate of machine representations.