

A Driving Force. On the Rhetoric of Images and Power

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Poor Power Images in the Work of Hito Steyerl

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Abstract In 2009 German video artist, documentary filmmaker and essayist Hito Steyerl releases her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*. Her definition of the ‘poor’ image as “a copy in motion” can be transferred to contemporary mostly digital images in general. But with the new image technologies the artist diagnoses a replacement of poor images by power images, in the multiple meanings of the word ‘power’. In contrast to the proclaimed shift from poor images to power images the author rather speaks about poor power images. Instead of a replacement of poor images by power images one can observe poor images unfolding their powers while power images show various shades of poorness.

Keywords Poor power images. New media installation art. Image theory. Materialism. Post-representation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Poor Images. – 3 Power Images. – 4 Poor Power Images. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This contribution follows the traces of images through Hito Steyerl’s *œuvre*, within her essays, films and video installations. Images, besides a particular subject, are protagonists and permanent subjects of her thinking in filming and writing. Her works reflect contemporary image economies, surroundings, production and consumption under digital surveillance capitalism.

In the following descriptions and analyses, there will be no differentiation between her filmic and her text based works, which the Author considers as equal artistic concepts by Hito Steyerl.

First, the concept of the poor image will be amplified on the basis of the artist's own work while reflecting the notion 'poor' in relation to images. Afterwards the text is considering Steyerl's newer concept of the power image. Again, examples of her own work are consulted. Observing qualities of poor and power images occur simultaneously the author finally unites both concepts proposing to speak about rather poor power images.

2 Poor Images

Nowadays, the most powerful images are poor images. What does that mean? And first of all, what is a poor image? It is German video artist, documentary filmmaker and theorist Hito Steyerl who first coined the expression of the 'poor image' in her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*, written in 2009. She refers to experimental and noncommercial films which are displaced from cinema in favor of high-end capitalist studio productions in the course of neoliberal triumphant success (cf. Steyerl 2016a, 148).

Already in the first sentence she gives the decisive definition of such images: "The poor image is a copy in motion" (147). Hence, poor images are images, which are post-produced by sometimes uncountable recipients, copy-pasted and then re-distributed via different channels all around the world. Such handling transforms their aesthetic parameters, for example their resolution, format and sometimes even their content. "[C]ompressed, [...], ripped, remixed" (147) by their recipients [users] the 'original' images are damaged, in other words they become poor images. Here it becomes already clear that not only the experimental and noncommercial films Steyerl relates to in her essay, but most of contemporary images can be considered poor images. A great amount of poor images can be found in the realm of spam - the digital waste of our time (cf. Steyerl 2012d, 161). They are favored by digital technology because of the practices and infrastructures which come along with it, but there are likewise press printed poor images, poor images on 16mm like on BetaSP, on VHS as on DVD. With postproduction and redistribution as parameters, all sorts of images (and pictures) that can be technically reproduced are potentially poor images. The easier the post-production, processing, copy-pasting and redistribution works, the more poor images emerge. The poorness of the images becomes visual in their iconic and substantial dimensions:

Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. [...] The poor image tends toward abstraction [...]. Not only is it often degraded to the point of being just a hurried blur, one even doubts whether it could be called an image at all. (Steyerl 2016a, 147)

'Poorness' as a term, which is normally used in a sociological context and in reference to material poverty, for example homeless people, first might seem inadequate to characterize something in the sphere of digital images. Actually, this sociological context is also present in Steyerl's essay as she speaks about poor images as "lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances" (147), as "illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image" (147) and, after Frantz Fanon, as *Wretched of the Screen* (147).¹ With the help of this wording she speaks about images as she would speak about human beings. Their mutual exchangeability that is implicitly suggested, points on the strong relationship between both, images and people: images infiltrate every part of daily life, they influence, help to direct and control the people; while the latter use images online as their proxies. It is this social aspect, that the notion 'poor' brings into the image discourse, which makes it more productive compared to other proposals as "travelling images" (Steyerl, *November* 2004), "invisible images" (Paglen 2016), "viewing copies" (Lütticken 2009)² or "instable images" (Oxen 2021) just to mention a few.

There are poor images all over Steyerl's own filmic work. They appear as poor on various levels: they are poor on a technical, visual, programmatic or conceptual level.

First of all, Steyerl is using a lot of different image techniques and media over the years which in the visual quality lead to quite different results. Her early films on 16mm and Beta SP, still exposed next to more recent works, look jittering and scratchy (from a today's point of view).

Image carriers and devices appear as protagonists in the form of *mise en abymes* in almost all of her works (cf. Ebner 2020, 83). In *Normality 1-X* (1999) for example, she uses grainy and discolored recordings of a surveillance camera. Then she is zooming in and out the printed raster points of a black-and-white photograph in a newspaper [fig. 1]. In *November* (2004), instead, she is filming a TV-screen which produces a flickering interference.

Steyerl often also quotes her own works by integrating footage from older films and videos in recent ones - which can be seen as a practice of recycling the own creative debris.

¹ The philosopher Frantz Fanon describes in *Les Damnés de la Terre* (The Wretched of the Earth, 1961) the dehumanizing effects of colonization. Steyerl adopts his title in changing 'Earth' into 'Screen' to write about the effects of digitalization on images, their 'de-imagination'.

² Sven Lütticken's essay *Viewing Copies. On the Mobility of Moving Images* (2009) is inspiration and reference to Steyerl's essay *In Defense of the Poor Image*. In *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* he deepens, continues and expands the analysis of his earlier essay: Lütticken doesn't examine the generic moving image but videos which are set in motion.

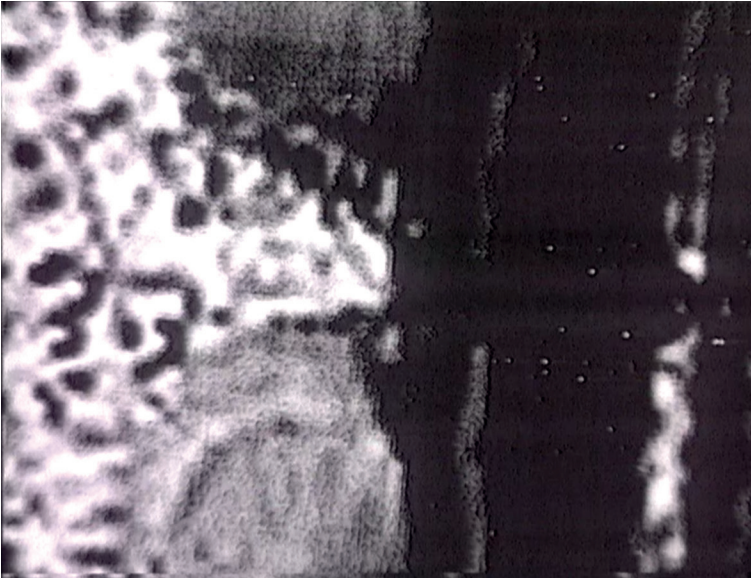


Figure 1 Hito Steyerl, *Normality I-X*. 1999-2001. Video still, Beta SP (colour and sound), 37:11 minutes, 0:20'20". Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. Still

Since COVID-19 when her huge exhibition *Hito Steyerl. I Will Survive* was affected by museums closings, she started to expand into the virtual sphere in translating several works or parts of them into virtual copies of the 'original' (cf. Wessel 2020, 52-67).

Also, with regard to the content, one could claim there are poor images, like the one showing Steyerl herself as a bondage model. When the artist, documented in *Lovely Andrea* (2007), is travelling to Japan searching her picture among thousands of others of the same kind in the archives of questionable Gentlemen, the poorness can be understood more as shadiness.

The most iconic poor image Steyerl produces is the one in *Strike* (2010). Armed with a hammer and gouge, the tools of a sculptor the artist attacks a black Samsung screen. Her strike does not only bring the screen to strike in preventing every further flow of images, but at the same time produces a new powerful image of a colorful abstract structure [fig. 2].

The images' poorness - in some cases owed to the "Eigensinn des Technischen" (obstinacy of technique)³ (Oxen 2021, 39), in others induced - is always intended by the artist. But it is not poorness just

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the Author.



Figure 2 Hito Steyerl, *Strike*. 2010. Video still, single channel HD digital video, sound, flat screen mounted on two freestanding poles, 28 seconds, 00:00'21". Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. Still

for the sake of poorness. All the various filmic practices and means of post-production which lead to aesthetics of poorness always imply a critical conceptual and programmatic approach.

There are filmic instruments like the one of the wipe Steyerl applies in *Die leere Mitte* (1998) producing poor images with the fading out of the first image slowly being replaced by a new one [fig. 3]. In here she excavates the layers of history: with their destruction the buildings of one historical period are replaced by constructions of the next dominant ideology. Like on the wipe she also reflects on digital renderings as a “design of killing” (Steyerl 2017a, 9). Such renderings become “powerful political symbol[s]” (12) when the visual replacement of one image by another is followed by a ‘real’ cleansing of the physical space and the people who lived there.⁴ Her video *How not to be seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV file* (2013) shows such rendered future inhabitants as grey shadows as the ancient inhabitants after the realisation of a gated community won't be able to afford the rent anymore.

⁴ Steyerl refers to the reconstruction of the destroyed Kurdish city of Diyarbakir with the help of a 3D render video. For her such renderings function as projections into the future (cf. Steyerl 2017a).

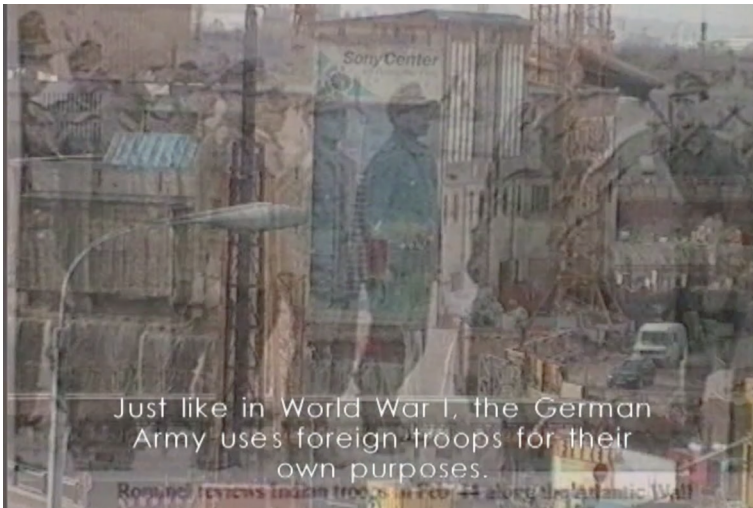


Figure 3 Hito Steyerl, *Die leere Mitte*. 1998. Video still, 16mm transferred to digital video (colour, sound), 62 minutes, 00:43'34". Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023

For her even the cut is not only a cinematic term, but also an economic one generally indicating reductions (cf. Steyerl 2012e, 177). Equally, the way of combining and organizing different elements can be interpreted in a deeply political and economic way insofar a montage “organized according to the principles of mass culture will blindly reproduce the templates of its masters” (cf. Steyerl 2012b, 86). The artistic filmic montages of Steyerl consist in disrupting the medial sequences and chains of productions of images while at the same time her assembling technique creates strong visual contrasts and hierarchies inside of the individual work such as between popular culture and high theory, kitschy animations and historical documentary images. Meanwhile the work as a whole appears as poor, meaning trashy again.

After constantly discussing and reflecting on today’s production, infrastructure and processing of images also, her choice of words in her description of the poor image spells her deeply materialist take of digital images, their becoming and acting.⁵ As already the notion

5 In the manner of historical and dialectical materialism Steyerl not only foregrounds the production conditions, material basis, the acting and developing of digital images but also tells stories of single objects like the one of the bullet which killed her friend Andrea Wolf, or follows the trace of stones in urbanism and architecture.

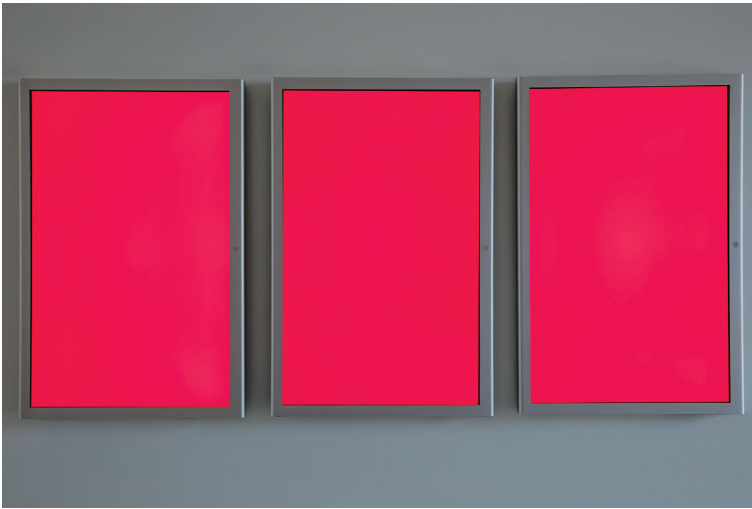


Figure 4 Hito Steyerl, *Red Alert*. 2007. Installation view, triptych, three 30-inch HD Cinema Displays, three Mac Minis, mounting system, connected hardware, three videos, silent, 30 seconds each. Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2023. Still

‘poor’ does, such emphasis of the material dimension of the digital image provokes an irritation during reading: because even if the immense infrastructure on which this technology is based and the ecological footprint it produces are well known, one still links the digital to immateriality.

Besides her essay about the poor image, her video *In Free Fall* (2010) conveys this material dimension of circulating digital images in a visual way. There, she is following the biography of the image as an object, precisely the ones of plane crashes in action films.⁶ After crashing the carbon parts of the wreckage, the aluminum is recycled into blank CDs, on which new films of plane crashes are recorded while producing new wreckage for further CDs, and so on. Also, Steyerl’s installations give a very literal expression to this material dimension of the image when she transfers single elements of the exposed video as physical objects into the exhibition space.

To follow Steyerl’s concept of the poor image, the Author suggests with Nicolas Oxen to come from a process-related ontology of the digital image, not from a being but a permanent becoming (cf. Oxen 2021, 7). Afterwards her choice of materialist expressions for her description of contemporary images becomes even more

⁶ Steyerl refers to Sergej Tretjakov’s *Die Biographie des Dings* (1929) here.

comprehensible. Furthermore, it goes together with Steyerl's earlier theory of the *dokumentarische Unschärferelation* (documentary uncertainty relation). In her essay of the same title, published in 2008, she observes a fundamental functional change concerning the image: from representation to expression respectively form. With the rise of digital technology and the loss of indexicality, the relation between reality and its images changes. With the flood of post-produced, layered, poor, grainy and low-resolution images, uncertainty is the only certainty one can still have towards images (cf. Steyerl 2008, 9).

This end of representation finds one decisive expression in Steyerl's screen triptych *Red Alert* (2007) consisting of three upright computer screens broadcasting nothing but red pixels. The powerful color of these energy fields signals a permanent state of emergency without mediating any reason [fig. 4].

For her as a documentary filmmaker, this functional shift from representation to expression and form does not mean to give up neither the documentary nor its images. Instead, and for not leaving the field to cynical constructivists (cf. Steyerl 2008, 11-12), she suggests to search "the truth [...] in its [the image's] material configuration" (Steyerl 2012a, 51). This means to take the image as a fossil, in which various commercial, political and social tensions condense and leave their traces behind (cf. Steyerl 2012a, 53). Then the image's "poverty is not a lack, but an additional layer of information, which is not about content but form" (Steyerl 2012c, 156).

3 Power Images

Studying Steyerl's oeuvre, her concept of the poor image appears consistently, both as theory in several essays and lectures, as well as visual means in her films and videos. Serving as a key to her artistic work, the concept of the poor image contributes beyond this reading to an understanding of the global contemporary image world, in which poor images can be discovered everywhere and every time. Even more surprising: around twenty years after publishing *In Defense of the Poor Image*, Steyerl suddenly explains in an interview in 2022: "Es gibt sie so nicht mehr" (there are no poor images anymore) (Haberer et al. 2022, 249) but that instead "power images" took their place (cf. 249).

Today, because of their number and ubiquity, the power 'of' images can easily be understood as power 'over' their recipients. Yet, what exactly is a power image?

Here, the double meaning of the English notion of 'power' as 'energy' on the one hand, and 'might' on the other is brought to bear. Concerning the former, power as energy, Steyerl mentions the capitalization of images, which comes along with new image technologies

as NFT, neural networks and CGI-renderings (Computer Generated Imagery), with video surveillance, gaming, streaming services such as Netflix (cf. Haberer et al. 2022, 249) and recently text-to-image models. These “images are literally electricity” (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 226). Not only

image consumption, which relies on the consumption of energy to circulate them, is growing at an astonishing rate. [...] image production will also account for a great deal of global power consumption. (226)

She explains “Our machines are made of pure sunlight. Electromagnetic frequencies. Light pumping through fiberglass cables. The sun is our factory” (*Factory of the Sun* 2015, 00:02’08”), sounds the steely female voice over of Steyerl’s *Factory of the Sun* (2015). Meanwhile a “Pseudo-expert” (supposed expert) (Riff 2015, 190) proclaims: “Speed of Light Doubled! High Frequency Trading up 400%” (188). When software-based trading and crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin proof the equation of power – precisely electricity – and money, while likewise digital images consist of electrical signals, Steyerl can create a new formula: “electricity is money is image” (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 226).

In the context of power as energy her critical reflection and articulation of the social conditions in the contemporary image world turns into a contradiction: in accordance to her growing success, the artist’s own video installations become bigger, more and more elaborated and therefore quite energy intensive – they are literally orgies of energy.

In a lecture with Trevor Paglen, *The Autonomy of Images* (2018), the artists also talk about the latter, power as might. After Steyerl’s formula “electricity is money is image”, the one who controls the images has the power. AI algorithms in form of sensor- and imaging systems are already installed everywhere in today’s urban environments and people’s devices, where they serve to analyse and generate images. Accumulating as much information as possible, AI depends on the planetary infrastructures, which are monopolized and controlled by only a few tech-giants such as Google, Amazon and Facebook (cf. Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 224-5). These machines “see through the forms of power that they are designed to enhance and to reproduce” (221). But the majority of images is not any longer made by and for ‘human beings’, but by and for ‘machines’ (214) – they surveil and control the people.

After criticizing images as tools of permanent surveillance, Steyerl offers another perspective on images as camouflage in giving five lessons in her video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational.MOV file* (2013). As representation already came to its end, images as filmic means can be used to escape the contemporary data-capitalism of surveillance, she suggests in here.

In the realm of contemporary images, power as might works also through another fundamental functional shift Steyerl observes: from representation to projection. After the end of indexicality computational photography, as already mentioned, is programmed after specific, for example “moral, aesthetic, technological, commercial and bluntly hidden parameters” (Steyerl 2017b, 32). Unfortunately, their programming follows the particular ideology of their programmer and thus at least leads to deeply political, often racist and even fascist (cf. Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 219, 226) results. Thus, the images to be generated do not “depict reality so much as produce it in the first place” (Steyerl 2016b, 182). They do not record anymore but project things and actions (cf. Steyerl 2017b, 33). In other words, images have the power to create whole new realities, they are power images. This functional shift of images from representation to projection explains the entrance sentence into another of Steyerl’s videos: “These are documentary images of the future. Not about what it will bring, but about, what it is made of” (*This is the Future* 2019, 00:00’05”).

While in this video the interframe image prediction holds the positive vision of a garden hidden in the future, Steyerl’s video *November* (2004) instead tells a very tragic story of an image becoming reality: it is the one showing her friend Andrea Wolf as a female guerilla successfully riding into the sunset on a motorbike after having defeated all the bad guys she met. Later on, Wolf in fact became a female fighter in the Free Women Army of Kurdistan, where she was violently killed by Turkish militia. After her death she is adjudged a martyr and as such becomes a travelling image, a powerful political icon.

In consequence, while before the relationship between images and political, social and religious power still was a representational one, nowadays

the relationship between images and power has become even more direct. It’s not even mediated by money, but images are, quite literally, power. (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 225)

Because of these financial and energetic efforts, which are spent into images, Steyerl suggests to rather speak about “power images” (Haberer et al. 2022, 249) from now on instead.

4 Poor Power Images

Hito Steyerl diagnoses the end and disappearance of the poor image while the power image takes its place. Looking behind the seemingly advanced image-techniques, as Steyerl uncovers herself in her latest essay *Mean Images* (2023), it becomes obvious that those power images in contrast nevertheless stay poor images (on various levels).

Firstly, the image output of machine learning networks as renderings are composites without any indexical relation to the real world, which “no longer refer to facticity [...]. They converge around the average, the median; hallucinating mediocrity. They represent the norm by signalling the mean” (Steyerl 2023, 82), she writes – confirming her theory of the “documentary uncertainty relation” also for such images. In consequence, the results calculated on probability are blurry, meaning poor again – not to speak of the multiple glitches mainly concerning heads (the “Janus problem”) and human hands (to many or to less fingers) (cf. Timm 2023). The same for all sorts of 3D-rendering-techniques producing blind spots and missing parts that are simply invented and added after.⁷ Despite their speculative mode of operation, already precedent 3D-technologies were integrated in political and military decision making. For example, *PowerScene* virtual reality program was applied during the Bosnian peace negotiations to shape the spatial composition of the country without respecting the territorial complexity (cf. Steyerl 2017c, 194-6). Most of the energy- and cost-intensive results of these new techniques – like for example the derivative images text-to-image models produce noise. Regarding their visual quality, such new power images resemble a lot the ‘old’ poor images in her essay from 2009 – while increasing in their quantity.

Also, Steyerl’s own newer videos do not only analyse the ‘rhetoric of images and power’, but present this rhetoric as poor visual language. Although, the artist always uses the latest high-tech for her visuals, the results like in her early films and videos still look low-tech – and this is not based on an inability to handle their programming, but happening on artistic purpose one can presume.⁸ Steyerl herself frames her ongoing conversation with Trevor Paglen

⁷ Steyerl applies a 3D scanner and printer in her work *The Kiss* (2012) to point to the blind spots and missing parts that are simply invented and added by such technologies.

⁸ Concerning the use of new image generating technologies Steyerl explains: “Für mich ist es sinnvoll mit Leuten zu kollaborieren, wenn ich eine Grundvorstellung davon habe, was sie machen – das heißt, wenn ich die Programme zumindest rudimentär bedienen kann und um die Parameter weiß. Ich habe mindestens Grundkenntnisse in den Techniken, die ich anwende” (For me it is expedient to collaborate with people, when I got basic notion of what they are doing – which means, when I know how to operate the programs at least rudimentary and know about the parameters. I got at least basic knowledge about the technology I operate) (Haberer et al. 2022, 241).



Figure 5 Hito Steyerl, *Power Plants*. 2019. Stainless steel scaffolding structures, LED panels 3,9mm pitch, multichannel video loop (12 video motifs, colour, silent), LED text panels, installation dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin; Paris; Seoul. © Hito Steyerl / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn, 2021

as “discussing images and whatever is left of them” (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 213). This points to the fact that even this energy- and cost-intensive images are still rags and debris (cf. Steyerl 2016a, 147).

As a live simulation of CGI dancing figures, *SocialSim* (2020) for instance, even though based on high-tech computational programs, offers low-tech aesthetics: the officers’ faces and hands look clunky and lumpy rendered. Their awkward, almost morbid ‘dance’ movements, which are regulated by statistical data about instances of police brutality resemble more a stumbling, trembling, and hobbling. Also, the related narrative video exhibited next to the simulation assembles various sorts of images of different sources, like video gaming, images generated by an Artificial Intelligence, data visualization techniques,

chatrooms, found footage, and extracts of others of her work. Despite the cool aesthetics of this technologically dominated installation, the whole work looks kludgy and amateurish in a way. Even the sound is 'poor': while being trained to pronounce "social simulation", the employed neural network is stuttering- this is how the work's title occurs, *SocialSim*. Again, instead of showing a perfect flow of data Steyerl undertakes wild experiments in "amplify[ing] the process to the point where it becomes grotesque" (Lista 2020, 116) in order to excavate and deconstruct the functions of the basing technique.

Secondly, the new image techniques "rely on vast infrastructures, of polluting hardware and menial and disenfranchised labour, exploiting political conflict as a resource" (Steyerl 2023, 84).

The task to get the bias out of image automation is favourably outsourced to "underprivileged actors, so-called microworkers, or ghostworkers" (90). Most of these people are disenfranchised refugees, who are forced to accept often traumatic labour and demeaning working conditions. Here it becomes clear, that the 'new' power images also [re]produce poorness in a social dimension. Beside these postmodern slaves, also the general users are integrated in the machine learning industries. They deliver the training data for AI for free, for example with the uncountable images they are uploading every day. This everyday work almost everybody has to do to be able to navigate online doesn't produce the same precarity as the hidden labour behind Artificial Intelligence, but is nevertheless unpaid.

Such immaterial "Arbeit in postfordistischen Zeiten" (labour in post-Fordist times) (Riff 2015, 167) is subject to Steyerl's *Factory of the Sun* (2015). Likewise the un- or underpaid workers behind the hidden layers of neural networks, the gamers of her unplayable game of the same name are "Zwangsarbeiter in einem Motion-Capture-Gulag [...] wo jede [...] Bewegung [...] in Sonnenlicht umgewandelt wird" (forced laborers in a motion-capture-gulag where every of their movements is transformed into sunlight; Riff 2015, 175).

In one of her latest essays Steyerl relativizes the specious powers of Artificial Intelligence (she likes to call "Artificial Stupidity") (Steyerl, Paglen 2020, 219) like the promise of a god-like super-intelligence and the magical visual effects they sometimes produce. In opposition to her statement about the disappearance of poor images the power images turn out to deliver destructive powers producing social, financial, material and ecological poorness.

After discovering a certain poorness in all of the results of the employed power image-techniques, the other way round a re-lecture of Steyerl's essay about the poor image already mentions the subversive power of poor images. Even though her description of such images does not turn out favourable at all, Steyerl's essay, as its title already declares, is a defense. In referring to the pleading *For an Imperfect Cinema* (1969) by Juan García Espinosa as a counterpart

to the perfect and therein reactionary and elitist cinema of “high-end economies of film production” (Steyerl 2016a, 148), she foregrounds their democratic and emancipatory potential.

[T]he economy of poor images, with its immediate possibility of worldwide distribution and its ethics of remix and appropriation, enables the participation of a much larger group of producers than ever before. (150)

Again, this subversive potential becomes visible mainly on the icon-ic and material level – which means in their poorness.

The condition of the images speaks not only of countless transfers and reformattings, but also of the countless people who cared enough about them to convert them over and over again, to add subtitles, re-edit, or upload them (151).

Obviously the connection between the power and poorness of images is nothing new, just changed direction. The early poor images, experimental and noncommercial films, on the one hand developed subversive powers after their expulsion from cinema: resurrected as copies, they created “an alternative economy of images” (151), connecting “dispersed worldwide audiences” (152). The new high-tech images on the other hand reveal more and more destructive powers leading to various shades of poorness.

It is Steyerl’s *Power Plants* (2019) that represents these poor power images in all their ambiguity very literally. The colorful flowers growing on LED-Screens are generated by a neural network based on inter frame calculation. They bloom just to collapse back upon themselves in a second, again and again. Fed with documentary images of vegetable growth in time-lapse, their curious morphing is to ascribe to Steyerl’s experimental programming [fig. 5]. While totally blurred in their ongoing morphing, these ruderal plants nevertheless possess fantastical social and ecological powers as they “grow in the wake of digital disruption, political breakdown and pathological austerity” (Gad 2019, 11).

One of them “[v]ertreibt [...] Trolls und Melancholie, macht Kunstwerke feuerfest und beugt Grünwaschung vor” (drives out trolls as well as melancholia, makes artworks fireproof, obviates greenwashing), another “[m]acht Mietsteigerungen rückgängig” (withdraw rent increase) or “bindet Gift aus sozialen Medien” (bind the poison emerging from social media) (Babias 2019). The power plant as a symbol of industrial waste of energy in the realm of art (and thanks to this English play on words) transforms into a CO₂-provider, a ruderal vegetation growing on ruined ground. At the same time Steyerl’s *Power Plants*, based on inter frame prediction algorithms, is an electricity-hungry work. As such her critical reflection and articulation on the one hand turns into a contradiction. On the other her

Screen-Plants explicitly represent the ambiguity and paradoxical nature of contemporary poor power images.

5 Conclusion

Considering the dystopian dynamics concerning images she is working on, the healing and emancipatory powers of poor images, one can find in Hito Steyerl's work, might seem naive, idealistic or in case of her works which are based on energy intensive inter frame prediction algorithms even hypocrite. Nevertheless for Steyerl, as an artist working with and on moving images, apparently the potential of images still predominates. Like before with poor images, now she is working on and particularly with power images. She is not giving them up, but instead, as shown above, not only accepts them in their poorness but integrates them as such into her own practice and work. She decided

to process [...] the paradoxical nature of images and practice[s] a different kind of image processing before the operational images process us themselves. (Ebner 2020, 90)

In awareness of the pluralistic commercial and political interests, which [trans]form images into ambiguous objects and their areas into battlegrounds (cf. Steyerl 2016a, 150), she chooses an affirmative handling, searching for moments of rebellion and possibilities of resistance in the cracks of the poor power images and in the gaps of their endless streams. With the help of post-producing practices as appropriation and montage, she transforms the tools of postmodern systems of control into means of an artistic reflection and critique. At the same time, entering and distancing from these powerful technological tools she creates her own specific often humorous critical space. Florian Ebner calls the artist's decision to stay with the images, despite their poorness, destructive power and dystopian evolution, a "(negative) redemption of images" (Ebner 2020, 81).

In contrast to the artist's assumption of a shift 'from' poor images 'to' power images and because of the delineated paradoxical simultaneousness of poorness and power, which are mutually dependent on each other, the Author suggests that there is no 'from' to 'to', no replacement of poor images by power images, but only 'poor power images'.⁹

⁹ The Author develops the theory of the poor power images in the first part of her dissertation about *Conditions of Becoming in the Work of Hito Steyerl*, yet unpublished.

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