

Aesthetics and Hyper/aesthetics: Rethinking the Senses in
Contemporary Media Contexts

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Certificate of Authorship

I certify that this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Abstract

Aesthetics and Hyper/aesthetics: Rethinking the Senses in Contemporary Media Contexts

This thesis addresses the escalation of interest in the senses, across a range of media technological contexts, dating from the mid 1990s. Much of this discourse has focussed on the experiential, particularly intense, multi-sensory experience of the present. As there are numerous discourses on the senses, technology and affect individually, my concern is to examine some of the intersections between these, in order to reconsider the contemporary significance of aesthetics in media contexts.

I develop a 'hyper/aesthetic' approach to try to think about aesthetic relations with technology in a nuanced way, opening up a space from which to investigate a variety of relations with technology. Walter Benjamin's work on the senses and modern technology is useful in this, as is that of two of his commentators, Susan Buck-Morss and Miriam Hansen. In providing the outlines of a hyper/aesthetic approach in this thesis, I am, in particular, seeking to complexify understandings of audience reception and meaning-making, to return some ambivalence to conceptions of the sensory encounter with technology.

Hyper/aesthetics is a term that draws together ambivalence, doubling, virtuality, unfamiliarity, innervation, and moving beyond, all concepts that are relevant to the senses and subjectivity.

In close readings of case studies drawn from the areas of advertising, computer gaming practices, and new media art, I argue that as well as critiquing their claims to newness, it is also important to attend to the ways in which particular relations with technology exceed or refuse the logic of instrumentality. In particular, these cases consider the emerging aesthetic experiences that technologies of computer gaming and new media art facilitate, and the new subjective possibilities that follow from each.

Approaching these studies hyper/aesthetically enables me to go beyond other accounts in appreciating the more experimental character of some of these relations with technology. I particularly focus on the effects and affects generated by encounters with the unfamiliar, including that which is considered strange, 'unnatural' or 'inhuman', and critically appraise the significance of encounters such as these for the manner in which subjectivity is conceived.