

Evolving Images

– Attraction and dispersal on the Tumblr blog *Garden Club*.



Image from Kari Altmann: *Garden Club* (2010-ongoing).

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Abstract

This master thesis analyzes Tumblr – the fastest growing social network in 2014. The users on Tumblr share text, video, audio, and mainly – images. I analyze Tumblr with perspectives from media aesthetics, specifically with an understanding of media as ecologies. Tumblr functions as an environment with blogs as microhabitats and blog posts as inhabitants, and I examine how these constitute and influence each other.

Blogs are at the same time collections of images and ongoing, with constant updates. A central question therefore becomes: how to analyze an object that is both a collection and in constant flux? I have chosen a specific blog for analysis, *Garden Club*, because of the perspectives it offers on Tumblr and image blogging. Already the title presents blogging as related to gardening, and the image collections as similar to plants. *Garden Club* further presents pictures as viral. From this my main questions become: How can images be considered organisms or viruses, and what kind of understanding of Tumblr and image blogging does these perspectives offer?

The part conflicting and part overlapping understanding of pictures as organisms and viruses is explored using two different theoretical foundations. To examine the similarity between organisms and photos on Tumblr I use W. J. T. Mitchell's picture theory. Mitchell considers images through a form of animism, examining them as if they have a will of their own. With perspectives from Manuel De Landa's philosophy I construct a viral logic, which I apply to the spreading of images in the network. This logic is also used to select images for examination. The analysis focuses on the relationship between *Garden Club* and Tumblr, and which factors influence the choice of images to post, and their capacity to spread in the network.

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven analyserer det sosiale nettverket Tumblr – det mestvoksende sosiale nettverket i 2014. Brukerne av Tumblr deler tekst, video, lyd og – hovedsakelig – bilder. Jeg betrakter Tumblr med perspektiver fra medieestetikk, spesifikt utfra en forståelse av media som økologier. Tumblr fungerer som et miljø, med blogger som mikrohabitater og blogginnlegg som innbyggere, og jeg undersøker hvordan disse konstituerer og påvirker hverandre.

Blogger er på samme tid samlinger av bilder som pågående, med stadige oppdateringer. Et sentralt spørsmål blir dermed: hvordan analysere et objekt som både består av en samling bilder og er i konstant fluktusjon? Jeg har valgt en spesifikk blogg, *Garden Club*, på grunn av de perspektivene den tilbyr på Tumblr og på billedblogging. Allerede tittelen presenterer blogging som relatert til hagevirksomhet, og billedsamling lik kultivering av planter. *Garden Club* presenterer videre bilder som virale. Utfra dette blir hovedproblemstillingen min: Hvordan kan bilder anses som organismer eller virus, og hvilken forståelse av Tumblr og billedblogging tilbyr disse perspektivene?

Den dels motstridende og dels overlappende forståelsen av bilder som organismer og virus utforskes med to ulike teoretiske utgangspunkt. For å undersøke likheten mellom organismer og bilder på Tumblr benytter jeg W. J. T. Mitchells bildeteori. Mitchell betrakter bilder med en form for animisme, og undersøker bilder som om de har en egen vilje. Ved å ta i bruk perspektiver fra Manuel De Landas filosofi konstruerer jeg en viral logikk, som jeg appliserer på bilders spredning i nettverket. Denne logikken benyttes også for å velge ut bilder til analyse. Analysen fokuserer på forholdet mellom *Garden Club* og Tumblr, og hvilke faktorer som påvirker valget av bilder som postes, og muligheten disse har for å spres.

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Chapter 0:

Introduction

Research Object

Tumblr

My object of research is the web-based membership service Tumblr. The main activity on Tumblr is posting to web logs, which are shortened 'blogs'. Part of the reason that blogging has become a widespread activity is that it allows people the opportunity to post frequent updates, and to reach audiences with their posts (Halavais 2013:114). The blogging platform Tumblr was started by David Karp in 2007, and in May 2013 it was sold to Yahoo! for \$1.1 billion.¹ Tumblr is open for anyone to join, and as of March 2014 it hosted over 170 million blogs.² The platform was the largest growing social network in 2014³ – making it a pertinent object of analysis.

I will begin my analysis of Tumblr by briefly discussing why this particular platform has become popular in recent years. Considering firstly what the network offers its users, it allows them to post text, photo, links, audio and video. They can choose either to add content, by uploading from their computers or from web urls, or they can reblog – that is to repost content that already exists within the platform. Reblogging distinguishes the platform from other membership services dealing predominately in images, such as Flickr and Instagram. Reposting is part of other social networks, however, including Twitter and Vine. Another distinguishing feature of Tumblr is the great amount of blog customization available to users – in terms of design, layout of posts, etc. As is common in other social networks, the users select which other users to 'follow', which is a way of bookmarking other blogs, to easily access their updates.

1 <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/b/b2131b51-e6ed-48f8-af9f-79584623a44e> (Reading date 04.03.15).

2 About Tumblr: <http://www.tumblr.com/about> (Reading date 27.05.14) As Jill Walker Retteberg notes, it is hard to distinguish which are active and which are inactive, as well as which are user generated and which are simply spam blogs (See Retteberg 2014). The number of actual active users will therefore be significantly lower.

3 <http://techcrunch.com/2014/11/25/tumblr-overtakes-instagram-as-fastest-growing-social-platform-snapchat-is-the-fastest-growing-app/> (Reading date 02.03.15).

In an interview, Karp states that he started Tumblr as a reaction to other blogging tools, wanting something that required little effort to use. He wanted a tool that allowed people to get their thoughts and images out as quickly as possible⁴. As a result, Tumblr has an emphasis on swift publishing, favoring bursts of images rather than blocks of text. One possible explanation for Tumblr usage would be that it follows a current tendency – identified by professor in digital culture, Jill Walker Rettberg – of greater emphasis on images (Rettberg 2014: 14-15). The recent surge in popularity can perhaps also be traced to a shift in how people access the internet. With its short-form, visual-focused posts, Tumblr is particularly suited for mobile devices. More than half of the online traffic in the U.S. came from mobile devices in May 2014, which was an increase of 50% compared to the same time the previous year.⁵

Kari Altmann

My thesis centers on a particular Tumblr user, the American artist Kari Altmann. Altmann's work spans across different mediums, including blogging, as well as working with photographs, digital collages and sculptural objects where she applies contemporary products and technologies as readymades.⁶ She has been exhibited in a range of international shows including *Art Post Internet* at Ullens Center, Beijing; *Extinction Marathon* at Serpentine Gallery, London; *Chrystal Gallery* at Gentili Apri, Berlin; *Collect the WWWorld Retrospective* in Milan and Basel, *R-U-In?S: Underground Economies* at Atelier 35 Bucharest, *Multiplex by vwork.com*, Munich; *Catch-and-Release* by Darsa Comfort, Zurich. Solo exhibitions include *Xomia* at Ellis King, Dublin, UK and *Core Samples* at Extra Extra, Philadelphia. Her work has been featured and reviewed in publications such as Rhizome, Dazed Digital, Vice Magazine Motherboard, Bullett Media, Dummy Mag and Fader. In October 2014 Altmann won Prix Arts' *Award of Distinction* for her practice as an artist in networked culture.⁷

4 <http://techcrunch.com/2011/02/21/founder-stories-why-david-karp-started-tumblr-blogs-dont-work-for-most-people/> (Reading date 04.03.15).

5 <http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Blog/Major-Mobile-Milestones-in-May-Apps-Now-Drive-Half-of-All-Time-Spent-on-Digital> (Reading date 02.03.15).

6 The term readymade is used according to the definition Breton and Eluard give in *Dictionnaire abrégé du Surréalisme*, as an «ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist». See http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/Articles/obalk.html (Reading date 08.05.15).

7 <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/30/announcing-prix-net-art-awardees/> (Reading date 02.03.15)

The artist describes her work in galleries, museums and publications as 'reblogs' of her work.⁸ This deflates the importance of the gallery, as well as the critical and curatorial work made there. Altmann's practice is to great extent motivated by social interactivity online, with the casual gesture of reblogging presented as the primary technique for engaging with information. By prioritizing reblogging, the networked relations become requisite for her art to take place.

Altmann presents herself, and is described in gallery press releases⁹, as cloud-based. In such presentations, artists are commonly located geographically, in cities and countries. By describing herself as cloud-based, Altmann is placed outside of the locations that other artists operate from. The description is therefore a strategy of self-mythologizing. What is the cloud in description referring to? The term *cloud computing* is used to describe the storage of data in central computer systems, which users can access through the internet.¹⁰ The cloud can be understood as a stylized signifier for networked computation. Art writer Gene McHugh describes how Altmann: «considers her work to be located not in individual works (as meaningful as they may be), but rather in her avatar inside the data cloud wherein one views her perform the excavation and molding of her own artistic archive in mutable cloud-space, cloud-time» (McHugh 2011: 111). Altmann has made multiple image collections using Tumblr, and in an online interview she describes them as ways of '*platforming* herself' (Burke 2011). This entails a process of creating identities through separate image collections, and these are allowed to overlap and differentiate.

By locating the artist in 'the cloud', her work is positioned in the software, platforms and infrastructure online, and the activities taking place there. Working within the cloud means that Altmann's work is constantly changing, it is rearranged, updated and edited. In an interview in the book *Post Internet Survival Guide*, Altmann describes the process of selecting material to include in her blogs:

8 <http://r-u-ins.org/> (Reading date 30.05.14).

9 <http://www.americanmedium.net/index.php/styleisthetailorpress/> (Reading date: 23.04.15).

10 Cloud Computing, Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1483678/cloud-computing> (Reading date 30.05.14).

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Any time you're confronted with a heap of data, waste, content, ideas, etc. to sift through I think the natural inclination is to start by creating your own value system as a point of entry. You choose or create some kind of signal and follow it. This can begin in seemingly obvious or frivolous ways that naturally become more complex as time goes on. You have to form attachments in order to invest energy into the outcome, and you have to follow processes of interest, in a way. Maybe you start by looking for a pattern, or a feeling. Maybe you start with some predetermined meme or critical query and just follow it as far as it goes, even if it descends into the drudges. Maybe the path is a complex blend of desires that have no way of expressing themselves yet (...) My 27 tumblr accounts (and counting) are a way of alleviating those sprawling interests, as are the hundreds of directories on my hard drives. What I'm doing with these tracking projects is trying to forge new entry points and paths into the heap that are accessible to others. (Novitskova 2011:129)

Altmann sees blogging as a way of creating systems for arranging the overwhelming amount of information available in social network sites and online in general. She thematizes several of the activities involved in image blogging on Tumblr, such as searching, data management and network relations. In another interview Altmann describes her blogging as the creation of value systems, which are the foundations for sorting through data, and from this patterns of relating content is formed (Burke 2011). Altmann presents the patterns as «mental software which can be adopted, applied and mutated by others». (Novitskova 2011:129)

Altmann's blogging will not be analyzed as it relates to the current status of art, art institutions and art history. Altmann's work is used as a ground for the production of meaning, examining not only the artist and her intentions, but focusing on the plurality of connections produced through networked interactivity. When presenting Altmann as an award winner, The Prix Art jury notes that she considers each artistic medium a «kind of file format, and each artwork as a node in an evolving, collaborative, and networked system in which she is also a node». ¹¹ The perspective I will utilize on Altmann is to consider her less as an artist, and more as a node in the social network Tumblr. I have chosen Altmann over other bloggers, both non-artists and artists ¹² because of the

¹¹ <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/30/announcing-prix-net-art-awardees/> (Reading date 02.03.15)

¹² Including among others Seth Price (sethpriceimages.com) Brad Troemel (thejogging.tumblr.com), Katja Novitskova (survivaltips.tumblr.com) and Iain Ball (productlaneevol.tumblr.com).

reflexivity on blogging and social networks which can be found in her work, specified in interviews with her and in receptions of her practice.

Analyzing the patterns and value systems of Altmann, I am not attempting to decipher the artist's meaning behind the project. Rather than analyzing to find the parameters that decide which images are included, I will see what kind of identity and world-view is formed from the material. My interaction with Kari Altmann's blogging thus adopt and mutate the patterns or «software» formed through her project, by selecting particular objects, and using theoretical frameworks to inform my investigation of them. Altmann's position as artist, and the explicit reflexivity of her position, is used as the starting point for exploring Tumblr and its images, yet this does not mean that what comes out of her blogs can be limited to the acts of the artist.

Garden Club

The central blog of my thesis is *Garden Club* (2010-ongoing), one of Altmann's longest running and largest collections. The blog is updated regularly, with Youtube videos, texts and links, and mostly with images. As of January 2014, 1.251 posts had been made on *Garden Club*, averaging one post per day since beginning in July 2010. *Garden Club* shares an approach to image blogging which can be seen as characteristic for Tumblr as a whole: an openness towards what can be included. A small amount of the images are marked as produced by the artist herself, but the majority is sourced, either found through web trawling, or simply reblogged from other blogs. The Tumblr users manifest a lack of respect for copyright, and challenge ownership and power relations, as the images might come from anywhere, often without providing links and crediting the source of the material.¹³

The images on *Garden Club* include a wide range of different subjects: news images, photographs of animals and nature, 3D models, technology demonstrations, celebrity pictures, art documentation, product presentations, advertisement, everyday snapshots and 'screen grabs' from social media, in addition there are videos, links to other webpages, texts from different sources. The

13 For a discussion on the legal aspect of image blogging on Tumblr see <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703421204576327761347965794> (Reading date 24.03.15).

techniques used to source material has been described by the artist as *archaeological*, in the sense that she unearths artifacts and recordings through explorations of databases (McHugh 2011:117). Altmann gathers material that not only displays her particular interests, but encapsulates the interests, style and events of a particular period of time.

Method and Research Questions

Garden Club consists of more than 1200 pictures, with more added constantly. The size and ongoing nature of the project makes it almost impossible to delimit the material. It is therefore necessary to find ways of structuring and navigating the information available. A central question for my analysis of the blog is one of method – how do I make a selection?

The blog is organized – as is the Tumblr default – so that the newest posts are shown on top. There is also the possibility of scrolling through the material, with older images appearing at the bottom of the page, going all the way back to the beginning of the blog. Another way of looking at the material is to select what is called 'archive', which presents the posts of the blog sorted by month. These perspectives offer distinct ways of approaching the blog: 1) As ongoing, focusing on whatever comes in the next post. 2) Considering it as a collection, looking at different months of posts. 3) Scrolling through the blog, selecting images according to a pre-established parameters or on impulse.

The analysis could begin with the starting point of the collection, or where it – although temporarily – has finished with the latest update. Starting from the latest post generates a direction forward from the current, rather than backwards into the collection. In his book *Post Internet*, Gene McHugh analyzes online artistic production seeing them with temporality, understanding them as performative. McHugh presents the work of Altmann as a performance from a virtual body in the online cloud (McHugh 2011:117).

A blog is more than its words and images, it is the sum of them, as well as layout connections, links and the pace of publication (Retteberg 2014:5). My analysis will not begin by moving either forward or backwards in the posts. I will instead start by examining the impact that the network it exists within has on the blog. According to Retteberg to understand blogs they must be followed over time, and she sees blogging as best comprehended through setting up a blog of one's own (Retteberg 2014:5). On Tumblr you can get your own account, and become a follower of *Garden Club*. I have been a Tumblr user for several years, following and reblogging *Garden Club*, with posts from my blog in turn being included into this one. My interaction with *Garden Club* might be seen as a problem, since my own participation in the network will affect the object of analysis. With interaction between bloggers as a central part of the network, it could be argued, however, that such participation is important for gaining impressions of how Tumblr and image blogging functions.

With Altmann's blogging reflecting network participation, an important question for my thesis becomes: what kind of understanding of Tumblr and social networked images is found in the blog? My aim is to treat the blog as a ground for creating different ways of analyzing blogging than looking at single blog posts, limited periods of posting, or considering them performative acts. To do this I will utilize the design elements and the presentation of the blog.

Already the title, *Garden Club*, can be seen as having potential for saying something about blogging. It can be seen as a metaphor, whose purpose, according to James Greary, is «to carry over existing names or descriptions to things that are either so new that they haven't been named or so abstract that they cannot be otherwise explained» (Greary 2011:20). In the book *The Garden as an Art*, Mara Miller, defines gardens as the arrangement of natural objects, with exposure to sky or open air, in which the form is not fully accounted for by purely practical considerations such as convenience (Miller 1993:15). Gardening includes some form of natural element, which might be sand, water or rocks just as well as plants. And the notion of going beyond the practical implies that gardening contains some form of 'excess', or 'meaning' (ibid). Through metaphoric relation to gardening, blogging is not simply random image collection, but instead produces some form of meaning.

Miller shows that gardening has been important as a metaphor for the ideal human life and for relations between human beings, the state or community (Miller 1993:26). She notes that the basis of the metaphors of gardening lies in the similarities between plants and humans: both plants and humans grow, change, age and die, with dependency on the environment for sustenance and support. Could such a view be applied to Tumblr images as well? *Garden Club* images would then be rendered as dependent on their environments, as possibly capable of growing, changing and ultimately dying. In my thesis I will examine how images could be understood as having such capabilities. According to Miller gardens exist in an ambiguous state between the artificial and the natural (Miller 1993:77), which is echoed in the paradoxical proposition of *Garden Club* to see the non-living pictures as organisms.

Another perspective on the pictures of Tumblr is found on the blog as well, presenting them as 'viral'. Etymologically virality is the quality, or the consequence, of viruses.¹⁴ The term virality has specific connections to social networks, where effective spreading of information is often described as so effective that it is contagious (Parikka 2007a). Virality has been described by digital culture writer Tony D. Sampson as the «marketing buzzword» of our current time. In marketing the understanding of the term is, however, based in crude renderings of computer contagion modeling, and business trends (Sampson 2012: 2). The concept of information as viral, is often used without an understanding of how biological viruses actually function (ibid).

The lack of precision in common usage might not necessarily mean that the approach to images as viral is inherently flawed. I will not focus on the shortcomings in previous application of virality, but instead discuss whether virality itself could be useful for understanding images in social networks. Rather than focusing on how the term is – and has been – used, I will discuss how biological viruses function. From the two ways of presenting social network images my main research questions form. My thesis sets out to answer the questions: How can images be thought of as organisms or viruses, and what kind of understanding of Tumblr does such views provide?

14 Virality, Online Etymology Dictionary: http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=viral&allowed_in_frame=0
(Reading date: 29.07.14).

Theoretical Perspectives

Media Aesthetics

I will examine the cultural influence of Tumblr, social networks and image blogging using perspectives from the field of media aesthetics. Professor in media studies, Liv Hausken, describes media aesthetics as an interdisciplinary field, which has grown out of media studies and aesthetics (Hausken 2013: 29). Aesthetics is configured here not in relation to art and art objects, but as a «theory of culturally and historically embedded sensation and perception, conceptually developed from the original Greek sense of the term, as *aisthesis* or sense perception» (Hausken 2013:30).

In media aesthetics the conception of medium is also broadened, moving away from fixed objects or apparatus towards «a concept of mediation as a process». The understanding moves from medium to 'mediality' and 'mediation' (ibid: 31). This directs the focus away from the study of technological artifacts, to media as «concepts, ideas, models for understanding practices, articulations and experiences» (ibid). I am examining the dynamic processes of blogging, and while I focus on a particular blog, my interest is in the logic expressed in the network. This is particular for Tumblr, but it is also part of a larger conceptual framework for informational systems.

W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. Hansen have articulated an environmental or ecological perspective within media aesthetics. This differs from media as technical entity or system, with media instead approached as an «ontological condition of humanization – the constitutive operation of exteriorization and invention» (Mitchell and Hansen 2010: xiii). The environmental interest in media aesthetic consider media as an «encompassing system and environment as combined with a local system that points to the specificities of particular “ecosystems” inside and outside of it, in order to understand what goes on between and in the meeting of these different systems (Hausken 42). Tumblr will be approached as an environment, which contains several smaller environments: the blogs and interactions between them. Central in my analysis of Tumblr will be how the ecosystem and sub-systems constitute and structure each other. I will examine how the social network primes users into certain patterns of posting and spreading.

W. J. T. Mitchell's Theory of Pictorial Desire

The idea of *Garden Club's* images as capable of saying something about image blogging in general is theoretically anchored in W. J. T. Mitchell's image theory. Mitchell is an American professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago. He is a scholar of media, visual arts and literature, and associated with fields of visual culture and iconology.¹⁵ Mitchell has argued that there has been a *pictorial turn* in contemporary culture and theory, where the visual is to be recognized as important and worthy of analysis in the same way as language (Collette-VanDeraa and Kellner 2007: 1).

Through his work, Mitchell enables a view of pictures themselves as sites for reflection on pictures. I will examine how pictures on *Garden Club* reflect their position on Tumblr by using Mitchell's framework from the book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005). In this book Mitchell presents theoretical analysis, as well as specific examinations of visual culture. Central in the book are the ways in which people treat pictures as if they are living things. Mitchell thereby renders them as entities that have their own agency. That way the question of the book title can be considered meaningful, as pictures are seen as capable of holding desires of their own.

The important thing for Mitchell is not to declare an animistic framework of images as living beings, but that despite knowledge of images as non-living, people will continue to behave as if they were (Mitchell 2005: 7-8). Mitchell's project is to *as if* pictures were alive, while at the same time keeping critical distance (ibid:11). Seeing pictures as «life-forms» turns media into the «habitats or ecosystems in which pictures come alive» (ibid:198). By applying Mitchell's theory I will examine how images can be understood as if they are living, and how they relate to their media environment – the social network they exist in, and the users that interact with them.

Manuel de Landa's Assemblage Theory

Mitchell's theory is concerned with the desires of images, which implies that they have a form of agency in meeting viewers. Tumblr predisposes users and images to enter into certain relations, which could be understood as the agency of the network. Using the theoretical framework of

¹⁵ <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/wjtmitchell/> (Reading date 03.03.15)

Manuel De Landa I will further the examination of who holds agency and how this comes into effect in the network.

De Landa is a Mexican-American philosopher, an Adjunct Professor at University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the Gilles Deleuze Chair of Contemporary Philosophy and Science at the European Graduate School. His philosophy builds upon the work of Gilles Deleuze, but is critical towards much of the reception of Deleuze. De Landa presents most of the engagement with Deleuze's philosophy as non-realist, while considering himself as a realist (De Landa et. al. 2005:3). Furthermore De Landa is skeptical of the Marxist orientation of Deleuze (ibid: 4), and seeks therefore not to interpret the philosopher, but to reconstruct a Deleuzian ontology (ibid: 5). To reconstruct Deleuze's ontology he applies perspectives from chemistry, physics and computer simulation to his theories. Central here will be the term assemblage (which I will present later), that Manuel De Landa adopts from Deleuze and Guattari.

While Mitchell focuses on the thoughts and activities of humans, understanding images from their relation to us, De Landa's materialist philosophy takes as its starting point the existence of a material world independent of the human mind (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). Important in the philosophy of De Landa is to establish connection with ecologies and environments, by rejecting the priority of anthropocentric perspectives.¹⁶ With De Landa's theory I will shift the perspective to the materiality of the connections forming between users and pictures in the network. This way an ontology of social network images can be created, attempting to consider images as agents in a non-anthropocentric sense.

Thesis Structure

I will start my thesis by analyzing the logo of *Garden Club*. As the first thing meeting the viewer, this element is important in defining and encapsulating the blog posts. To analyze it I will apply the perspectives of Mitchell, to show how the image can be used to reflect on its own position in the blog and on the social network. The second chapter will continue the focus on the design elements of the blog, this time directing attention to a sentence placed below the logo. The proximity of

¹⁶ <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/manuel-de-landa/biography/> (Reading date 03.03.15)

placement in these elements, with the sentence functioning as a form of caption to the picture, means that I could have dealt with them in tandem. I divide them into two chapters, focusing on Mitchell's theories in the first, and De Landa's in the second.

The theoretical perspectives offered by De Landa and Mitchell will be applied in order to generate an understanding of the blog as a whole. This will be used to find ways of selecting which blog posts to look at. In the third and fourth chapter images will be selected and analyzed. My analysis of *Garden Club* thereby starts with the smallest element of interaction, the single image of the blog's presentation and the sentence below. These are used to create ways of viewing the whole project, and from this understanding I zoom in on particular images again.

Summary

Tumblr was the fastest growing social network of 2014. This is possibly a consequence of an increase in mobile traffic, and the suitability this network has for mobile viewing, with its short posts centered on images. Tumblr lets users reblog other user's posts, and offers great amount of customization possible on individual blogs. The cultural influence of Tumblr, social networks and image blogging will be examined with perspectives from the interdisciplinary field of media aesthetics. One perspective of media aesthetics is the environmental, which considers media as an encompassing system, an ontological condition of humanization. I focus on the activities in a particular social network, but seek to generate an understanding of a logic which is an integral part of current media environments.

I will focus in particular on one Tumblr user, the artist Kari Altmann, who uses networked relations as a condition for her artistic production. My analysis will not center on the implications that this has for the status of art, artists, art institutions or its position in art history. I have chosen to focus on Altmann because of the reflexivity on image blogging and social networking that is present in her work. Altmann is seen as a node in a network, and I will examine her blog *Garden Club* as a pattern forming from the interactions between Altmann and other users.

The amount of images available, and constant updating of Garden Club makes a central question of my thesis one of method: how should a selection for analysis be made? Starting from the most recent update and moving forward was seen as one option, while another were to consider it as a collection of past entries. With Retteberg's view of blogs as more than its postings, I have decided to begin my analysis examining the Tumblr network and the blog's presentation, considering what kind of understanding of Tumblr is found on this blog. Starting from the blog's title, this presents a view on blogs and blogging as connected to gardening and to the organisms there. From this my research question becomes: How can images be thought of as organisms, and what kind of understanding of Tumblr does this provide?

To discuss images as organisms I will apply theoretical perspectives from Mitchell, who analyzes the ways in which we treat images as if they were alive. Images are rendered as entities with agency, capable of having desire, and I will see what kind of desire is displayed on *Garden Club*. With images as life-forms, their media environments become habitats, and I will consider how the images relate to the social network and users as their environments.

From the understanding of Mitchell that focuses on the way images are treated by humans I will move to the assemblage theory of De Landa, which allows a perspective on the material relations between pictures, networks and users. De Landa considers the world independent of human thought and language, and with his theory I will create an ontology for social network images which consider them as agents in a non-anthropocentric sense. Perspectives from Mitchell and De Landa will be used to generate an understanding of *Garden Club* as a whole, which will be used to determine which images I will analyze.

Chapter 1:

What Does the Air Plant Want?

Introduction

In this chapter I will explore *Garden Club*, using the blog header (reproduced on the front page of this thesis) as the starting point. The header is a common element of the blog format, functioning as a form of logo, and is the first thing meeting the viewer of the blog. While the rest of the page is updated regularly with new posts, the header remains stable.¹⁷ The header is the same size as the pictures in posts, and it was even published as a regular entry, on the opening day of the blog, July 16th 2010. The dual position of opening post, and logo, as well as its stable presence on the blog makes it an appropriate starting point for analysis.

Starting from the logo means that instead of choosing posts from the blog, I let the structure make the selection for me. This allows me to postpone which posts to engage with, until I have developed a strategy for selecting them. Analyzing the blog header the central questions this chapter will be: what can the logo tell about the content on the rest of the blog, and about blogging in general? The answers formed in this chapter will be used in the following chapters, to generate the strategy for selecting which blog posts to focus on.

The *Garden Club* header features a single photograph with no text or graphics. The main element in the picture is a type of plant. Why is this project centered around vegetation? What kind of connections are there between the social network image blogging and the organisms in gardening? These questions will be investigated using analytical perspectives from W. J. T. Mitchell, and I will mainly discuss frameworks from his book *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005). Here Mitchell sets out to ask the question provided in the title, looking at pictures as if they are living entities. In order to provide an idea of visuality adequate to the ontology of images, Mitchell addresses images as if they have their own agency, asking what pictures want, as if this can be analyzed.

¹⁷ On November 3rd 2014 the header image was replaced with a new logo, featuring the text Garden Club written in an iridescent green colored font. The photo analyzed in this chapter has nevertheless been the logo from 2010 to 2014.

I will explore Mitchell's theory, mainly discussing notions presented in a chapter in Mitchell's *What do Pictures Want*, that has the same title as the book itself. For the reception of Mitchell's theory and the way it has been put to use, I will discuss a presentation of Mitchell's project given by Trine Haagenen at Media Aesthetics Working Seminar at the University of Oslo (2014), and an interview with Mitchell in the journal *Image & Narrative* (2006). Haagenen presents Mitchell's project as the development of a critical ontology, a science of images, and their relations to each other, as well as how they travel across media and materials (Haagenen 2014: 1). My main concern is not to provide an account of Mitchell's ontology, instead I will focus on the core of his idea of images as agents with desire. Mitchell's theory is examined to determine how it can contribute to an understanding of the *Garden Club* logo. The analysis of the logo will open a discussion of this particular picture, with intensions of generating views on both the blog itself and the activities of the social network as a whole.

What Pictures Want

Meta-Picture

The main elements in the blog logo is a plant, a forearm and a hand. The *Garden Club* logo depicts a plant with a central stem supporting a greenish-yellow bud, which is possibly ripe for blooming. The plant's leaves stretch out long and unstructured. There is no caption describing what kind of species is shown, but the leaves and growth pattern suggest that image depicts an air plant.¹⁸ The hand puts the plant on display, gesturing, holding it out towards the viewer. By including the hand, the picture also *shows* the act of putting on display. The hand being pictured against a black background, puts emphasis on the gesture of showing.

By displaying the act of putting on display, the *Garden Club* header functions as what Mitchell in *Picture Theory* calls meta-pictures. These are «pictures about pictures – that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures» (Mitchell 1995: 35). For Mitchell this implies that pictures can be sites of theoretical discourse, rather than objects awaiting to be explained non-pictorially (Grønstad and Vågnes 2006). Meta-pictures facilitate thinking about pictures *with* pictures.

¹⁸ Tillandsia, Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/595831/Tillandsia>. (Reading date: 03.07.14).

In the *Garden Club* logo the act of presenting is shown, and a plant is put on display. Another element is brought into focus by the gesturing hand as well. At the base of the thumb, a red dot is seen, greatly contrasting against the shades of blue-green in the rest of the photo. The gesture makes it possible to see the dot as a central focus point, with the hand presenting the red mark before it shows the plant. The overall tint of the picture suggests the use of direct flash, and the red mark is probably light-refraction from the flash. The red dot draws attention to the production of the picture. The viewer is led to look at the depicted plant, yet the red mark prevents it from losing sight of the photographic technology used in capturing.

As a meta-image the picture shows depiction, it directs focus to the act of displaying and to the photographic technology. The central element of the picture is, however, the plant. Does this have a metaphorical function as well? If so, the metaphor is present already in the title of the blog: *Garden Club*. Gardening is the cultivation of herbs, fruits, flowers, vegetables or trees in a plot of land.¹⁹ Connecting image collection with gardening renders the images as similar to the organisms found in gardens. The metaphorical content of the photographic header could possibly be its organic nature, and the notion that pictures are somehow like living beings.

Imagining Desire

The relation and likeness between images and living beings is central in Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005). In Mitchell's theory pictures are seen as having desires of their own. He sets out asking question provided in the title, looking at pictures as if they are living entities. What an image wants is not the same as what an image producer can express, or what might be elicited in the viewer (Mitchell 2005: 28). The desire of pictures is found in the images themselves, in what *they* seem to want.

Mitchell's premise is that our relation to pictures is double, shifting between naïve animism and adamant materialism (Mitchell 2005:7). Rationally we perceive images as images, but in our treatment of them they are personified, as if they are living beings. According to Mitchell the most common way of responding to the irrationality of animism is by detaching it from our own subject, coupling it to 'the other', whose primitivism makes *them* treat images as living. Even modern secular

¹⁹ Garden, Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/225726/garden>. (Reading date 12.08.14).

societies are according to Mitchell, however, stuck with a magical premodern attitude towards pictures (*ibid*: 30). This is exemplified with, among other things, people's reluctance to deface or destroy a photo of their own mother (*ibid*: 31).

Instead of criticizing the primitivism of others, Mitchell wants to take animism seriously, allowing pictures to be treated as if they actually are living (*ibid*: 7-8). This does not mean that Mitchell sees them as living, he simply thinks that «we cannot ignore that human beings (including myself) insist on talking and behaving as if they *did* believe it» (*ibid*:11). Mitchell describes his theory as «flirting with a regressive, superstitious attitude toward images» (*ibid*: 28-29). Animism is taken seriously only to a certain point – rational distance is still maintained. The point is not to regress into primitivism, but to allow the neglected side of the image discourse to come into fore. His strategy provides a way of getting analytical access to our unavoidable magical attitude towards images (Haagensen 2014: 3). Mitchell shows that naivety and rationality are not mutually excluding, but can be combined (Haagensen 2014: 2).

While Mitchell resists starting with Freudian theory to address the desire of images (*ibid*: 68), his theory is nevertheless based in a psychoanalytical understanding of desire. In psychoanalysis desire becomes a central term with Jacques Lacan's reorientation of Sigmund Freud's doctrine (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988: 482). Lacan distinguishes desire from need and demand, where need is directed towards a specific object which it is then satisfied by, while demand is directed towards other beings. Desire appears «in the rift which separates need and demand; it cannot be reduced to need since, by definition, it is not a relation to a real object independent of the subject but a relation to fantasy; nor can it be reduced to demand, in that it seeks to impose itself without taking the language or the unconscious of the other into account, and insists upon absolute recognition from him» (*ibid*: 483). In Mitchell's theory, pictures are perceived as agents with desire. This desire differs from need and demand, in that images are presented not as real objects, but through constructing a fantasy and imposing this on them. The images are imagined, conceived as active subjects, with their own agencies, different from that of the viewer and producer.

The question of what pictures want is connected to issues of race, gender and power relations, as the question itself echoes questions of what the woman or the black man wants (Mitchell 2005: 29).

'What women want' is a question posed by Freud, which he found himself unable to answer (ibid). These questions highlight how women and colored people struggle to speak directly about their own desires (ibid). The women and black are also disallowed to speak, with someone claiming to do it for them. For Mitchell, if images are like persons they are colored and female (ibid:35). He conceives images as subalterns, which are «to be interrogated or (better) to be invited to speak» (ibid: 33).

For Mitchell the questions of what women want and what pictures want are inseparable (ibid: 35). Mitchell seeks an answer in discussions on women's desire long before Freud, focusing on the 15th century author Geoffrey Chaucer and his «Wife of Bath's tale». Here, several answers are presented, and evaluated as wrong, before arriving at consensual, freely given mastery as the correct one (ibid). There is however, another answer, presented by the narrator, which connects what women want to what they *lack* – namely power. In analyzing images Mitchell distinguishes between the «overt signs of positive desire» and what the picture wants «in terms of lack» (ibid: 37). What images lack is not found in «the message they communicate or the effect they produce; it's not even the same as what they say they want» (ibid: 46). In Chaucer's tale several women gave wrong answers, and Mitchell likewise suppose pictures to do the same, wanting to be 'worth a lot of money', to be 'admired and praised' or 'adored by many lovers' (ibid: 35-36).

To find what images lack, Mitchell looks not at what they show, but at what it is hidden within them (ibid). Mitchell's model of the subaltern render images as weak, which is «why their desire is correspondingly strong: to make up for their actual impotence» (ibid: 34). Presenting pictures as subalterns overturns what Mitchell calls the «the reigning cliché of contemporary visual culture» (ibid: 32) namely that pictures hold power over their beholders. For Mitchell, such a critique of pictures is iconoclastic by default, as it attempts to separate the good from the bad, destroying the false image that supposedly hold power over us (ibid: 81).

According to Haagensen, to ask what pictures want risks subjugating them and projecting our own desires onto them. Mitchell's strategy however, carries the expectation that pictures will talk back to us on their own terms (Haagensen 2014: 4). Haagensen traces the possibility of conceiving images as desiring subjects to Mitchell's development of an iconology which fuses Erwin Panofsky's

approach to images with Louis Althusser's understanding of ideology. Mitchell seeks to make visible how iconology and ideology are mutual constituents (Haagensen 2014: 4). Panofsky brings the view that pictures are symptoms of their cultural origin. Althusser sees all practice as ideological, done by, and directed towards, subjects. This understanding lets Mitchell see images as agents (ibid). Pictures become part of ideological practice, where it is no longer the viewer's that put meaning into the pictures, which they passively receive. Instead, images have «their own agendas, logics that they operate outside, and in dialectic relation to, the power and will of the beholder» (ibid).

Vegetative Desire

Tumbling Air Plants

Mitchell's discussion in *What do Pictures Want?* is not only theoretical, he also analyzes images. Both the motif displayed in pictures, and the cultural context that they exist within, is important in this analysis. The question of what images want does not imply moving away from semiotics, hermeneutics or rhetorics. Still, Mitchell maintains that asking what images want is different from finding out what pictures mean or do, how they communicate or what kind of power they have over human emotions and behavior (ibid: 28). Instead of providing a fixed method for analyzing images, Mitchell's strategy can be seen as a way of letting the objects and the meeting with them formulate what kind of terms and theories are required for analysis (Haagensen 2014: 7). The first picture Mitchell analyzes is the recruiting poster «Uncle Sam», which displays clearly focused desire, wanting men of eligible age to assign for military service. The aim of the picture is to «transfix» the viewer with its direct gaze and pointed finger, and then to «move and mobilize the beholder», sending him to a recruiting station (Mitchell 2005:37).

Returning again to the mentioned header photograph, taking cues from Mitchell, I will examine what this particular image seems to want. The main elements of the depiction in the header photo is a hand, gesturing to the viewer, showing an air plant. The image seems to want to be seen, which can be coupled to the position that pictures in general have within the network, Tumblr. While this is a logo for the blog, it also exists as a post, and is as such part of the regular procedures on Tumblr.

As bloggers post, the pictures become part of their own, separate collections, but they are also placed on the Tumblr *dashboard*. This is the default page of all Tumblr users, a central hub whose main element is a dynamic display of posts from blogs which the user follows.²⁰ The dashboard shows the latest entry at the top, with previous ones below. It is updated in real-time, with each new post generated notifications for users, so that they can refresh the page to see them. While old posts disappear at the bottom of the page, they are still retrievable, because of Tumblr's functionality of 'endless scrolling'. As the user scrolls down through the previous posts the page keeps refreshing, automatically loading older posts at the bottom, letting users scroll seemingly indefinitely.²¹

In an essay for the online art publication e-flux, art historian Boris Groys describes a shift in mass culture, which is relevant for the way Tumblr functions. Groys describes the unified space of mass culture as going through a fragmentation, where the «millions of producers now produce texts and images for a spectator who has little to no time to read or see them» (Groys, Boris 2010). Tumblr becomes a structure of constant refreshing and endless scrolling. The users look for more than at images, stopping their scroll only if an image manages to catch the attention of the viewer.

The header picture attempts to stop the scrolling by presenting an exotic plant to the viewer. It is an air plant (Tillandsia), an *epiphyte*, which are plants that do not absorb nutrients from its fundament.²² This means that they require no soil, sand or water, but can spread by wind. These plants have exposed aerial roots, which act as anchors, allowing them to attach to different surfaces, such as mountain walls, rocks, other plants or trees. Since they do not draw nutrients from the surfaces they grow on, they can attach surfaces such as trees without parasitizing them. The tropical climate that a Tillandsia grows in is characterized by warm temperatures and high humidity, and the hairlike scales covering the whole plant allows it to convert this humidity into water and absorb nutrients from the air. The unusual look of air plants lend them to striking displays more easily than plants which are soiled and potted.

20 In addition occasional posts from recommended blogs are shown here, as well as promoted content.

21 The amount of information that can be loaded to the device that the user operates from will more likely delimit the endlessness of this scrolling, rather than the network itself.

22 Tillandsia, Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/595831/Tillandsia>. (Reading date: 03.07.14).

If images succeed in halting the user's scroll, the viewer might punctuate their action by liking the image. This action is encouraged by the social network site, as each post comes with a grey heart icon, turning red upon clicking – as if being filled by the like. As part of Tumblr, images want not only to be seen, but to be liked as well. The image wants the scroll to turn into a touch of recognition and appreciation.

Another important part of Tumblr's design is the reblog function. Reblogging is a process of reposting content that others have added – to redistribute information that already exists within the platform. Air plants are characterized by movement, which is echoed in the way the images on Tumblr move by way of reblogs. As air plants, images temporarily anchor down, the latter being included into the blogs of users, but not to be kept for themselves. The images are allowed to float with the current. While the air plant is able to anchor down in any kind of surface, images connect with any user willing to reblog. Mitchell's theory bases the desire of images in that of humans, he supposes that it could instead be based in animals (Mitchell 2005: 36). In the header photograph the desire is based on the air plant, with its dispersal and temporary anchoring.

What the Image Lacks

The structure of Tumblr gears users towards liking and reblogging to gain followers. The desire of an image to be liked and reblogged can therefore be seen as the overt and positive desire, since this is not something the Tumblr images in general will lack. For Mitchell the process of finding what the image lacks is to uncover something which it tries to hide. To find out what the *Garden Club* logo lacks I will therefore look closer at its motive, paying attention to the surroundings more than the most clearly visible elements.

The hand and the plant of the header photo is set against a black background, with the hand placed next to what is most likely thighs wearing tie-dyed tights. Could it be here that the picture hides what it lacks? The clarity of the hand and plant obscures the ambiguity of the other elements. The only clearly identifiable part of a body is the arm, while the thighs are interpreted out of what is seen. The arm is dislocated from corporeality, floating in darkness. Next to the arm a light blue pattern is placed. The pattern could belong to tights and thighs, but it could be something else. From the top of the picture hangs something which could be hair, or just as well a branch. The closer one

looks, the more the picture loses its clarity. The hand begins to twist in weird ways, with the index finger seemingly having been detached, and then put back on only partially correct. What the depiction seem to lack is a body with stable relations to a background and to its own body parts.

In Mitchell's analysis, image desire often revolves around the body of the beholder. In a conversation Mitchell says that images ultimately «want to be kissed» (Mitchell et. al. 2012). With this he means that they want to take in and be taken by the bodies of the beholders. Mitchell describes a statute of Christ, which gradually fades as the viewers touch it, embracing it with both eyes, lips and heart (Mitchell 2005:39). The «Uncle Sam» picture was shown by Mitchell to similarly desired the donation of bodies and blood, to fight in war (ibid: 36). The *Garden Club* picture seems to want the bodies of the viewer, but at the same time it gives itself to them.

There are elements in the header photo that resist the reading emphasizing a desire for bodily stability. Air plants are characterized precisely by a lack of stable rooting, as they are dispersed by wind, anchoring down only temporarily. As the logo of the blog, the picture is disconnected from the circulation afforded other pictures on Tumblr. The air plant seems not to lack stability, as this is provided by the hand presenting it. This hand at the same time ties it down, holding it so that it becomes unable to move. The plant is surrounded by an empty black vacuum, which severs it further from interaction with an environment. The picture is ascribed a role as a logo, which again removes it from circulation and from connection. What the image lacks is mobility, and to freely exist on its own terms, rather than those ascribed to it by those pinning it down. Hidden in the picture is a lack of autonomy, and a desire to be seen in its own right. Perhaps the picture wants to be seen as an organism, a *picture-organism*.

Can pictures be considered as forms of organisms? Mitchell discusses the distinction between animate and inanimate things, providing a definition of organisms, as «living things that are highly organized, homeostatic (stay the same), grow and develop, are adapted, take energy from the environment and change it from one form to another, respond to stimuli, and reproduce themselves» (ibid: 52). Several of the qualities necessary to be considered organisms are shared by pictures. Growth and development can be seen as parts of the production process, which leads to the homeostasis of a completed picture, with aging and reception history as a form of development. The

point that organisms take energy from their environment is compared by Mitchell with the mental expenditure from the beholder in the act of reception (ibid). In addition to this though, pictures require material substrate, be it photographic film, prints or screens, all of which draw resources from their environments to be produced.

From comparing images with organisms, Mitchell goes on to problematize the concept of organisms in general. He shows that far from being a stable concept, it contains contradictions and uncertainty. The characterization of organisms as highly organized could be used on both organic and non-organic matters. Furthermore not only organisms take energy from their surroundings, so does machines as well. Organisms do not strictly speaking «reproduce themselves when they have offspring – they produce new specimens which are usually the same species as themselves; only clones can come close to being identical reproductions of themselves» (ibid). The problem of whether to classify images as organisms is not necessarily one of how well the analogy fits, but could come from uncertainty in what constitutes an organism in general.

A central problem in defining organisms is that there exists no real definition of life. Mitchell sees a living thing as best described using a dialectical statement: «a living thing is something that can die» (ibid). At least metaphorically, images can be born, live and die. On Tumblr a picture is born as it is posted, with likes as responses to stimuli, reblogs as reproduction, and their disappearing further and further into the backlog of the dashboard as a gradual waning into death. Some modification is required to make the characteristics of organisms applicable to pictures. With media as the «habitats or ecosystems in which pictures come alive» (ibid:198), however, pictures can be seen as living things existing inside the network, much like organisms live in their environments.

Mitchell claims that his strategy of enlivening pictures may be an attempt to provoke critique «by deliberately going "too far" with a vitalist/animist theoretical model for images» (Grønstad et. al. 2006). How far does he take this animism? Mitchell draws comparisons between organisms and pictures, but seems reluctant to consider pictures *as* organisms. The idea of living images is not dismissed as a 'mere' metaphor (Mitchell 2005: 54), but Mitchell does not believe that they are actually alive. Instead he simply talks and acts as if he does (ibid:11). Mitchell is disappointed that what he thought would be a provocative theory has received little criticism (Grønstad et. al. 2006).

The reason for this could perhaps be that his project disarms criticism – that rather than going too far, perhaps he does not go far enough.

The reason for not going further with a concept of a picture-organism can perhaps be traced to the distinction that Mitchell draws between images and pictures. While I have, so far, used the terms synonymously throughout the chapter, for Mitchell they are distinct terms. Mitchell states that «you can hang a picture, but you cannot hang an image» (Mitchell 2005:85).²³ To further clarify this distinction I will present a model which Mitchell sets up between the mind and the world. Mitchell draws a line between these two elements, stating that if the world were to be annihilated this would destroy consciousness as well. The opposite is, however, not true, as the physical world can continue to exist without human consciousness (Mitchell 1986: 17). For images the model will behave differently, because images are, in some sense immaterial. Images are «mental things, residing in the psychological media of dreams, memory, and fantasy» (Mitchell 2005: 84).

According to Mitchell images cannot be seen without a trick of the consciousness, which he describes as the ability to see something as 'there' and 'not there' at the same time (Mitchell 1986: 17). Other animals are incapable of performing this trick, as they will mistake the representation for the real thing. Mitchell describes how the living birds, when they «peck at the grapes in the legendary paintings of Zeuxis, they are not seeing images», the animals see «real grapes – the things themselves, and not images of the things» (ibid). This leads Mitchell to state: «If there were no more minds, there would be no more images» (ibid).

The model set up by Mitchell renders organisms as beings that exist in their own right, while images are things of our minds. The immaterial components of images requires a consideration of pictures as not only physical, but as parts of human psychology. Mitchell's framework makes it possible to get an impression of what the picture lacks. For the *Garden Club* header this seems to be the autonomy and capabilities which are reserved for organisms. The mental component – what makes an image an image – seems to put restrictions on the possibility for further examining how pictures function as organisms.

²³ Pictures on computers and online are generally referred to as digital images, rather than pictures. This is perhaps connected to the distinction made by Mitchell. Files may be considered images because of their transient nature, becoming a picture first through print.

Summary

In this chapter I have used the photo header of *Garden Club* as the starting point for discussion. It was chosen because of its stability, and its double function as both logo and blog post. The photograph features an air-plant, held on display to the viewer. By showing the act of showing, the logo functions as what Mitchell calls meta-pictures. These show pictures as sites of theoretical discourse, facilitating thinking about images with images.

As a meta-photo the *Garden Club* header offers perspectives on image blogging, coupling it to gardening, relating living beings to the inanimate matter of pictures. To examine this relation I utilized perspectives from Mitchell's book *What Do Pictures Want?*. Mitchell sees our understanding of pictures as double, combining animism with materialism. While commonly seen as aspects of the primitive other, Mitchell sees this duality at work even in secular modernity. He sees animism not as cause for criticism, however, but wants to gain access to the unavoidable magical attitude towards pictures.

Mitchell's theory of pictorial desire is based in psychoanalysis, distinguishing desire from need and demand. The question of what images want is an echo of one posed by Freud concerning what women want. These questions render women and images as subalterns, who are subjugated and spoken on behalf of. Discussing the position of the subaltern, Mitchell connects what they want to what they lack – which is power. The question of lack becomes important for analyzing images, which display both overt positive desire, as well as lack, which is hidden in the image. Viewing pictures as weak overturns what Mitchell terms the 'reigning cliché' of contemporary visual culture, that images hold power over beholders.

The analytical strategy of Mitchell seeks not only to speak for images, but to act as a medium for images to act through. Following Haagensen, this rests on Mitchell's combination of Panofsky's approach to images with Althusser's understanding of ideology. From Panofsky Mitchell takes the view that images are symptoms of their time, and from Althusser the understanding of all practice as ideological. This allows a view of images themselves as agents, capable of acting in relation to the beholder.

Analyzing the logo from the perspectives of Mitchell I found it desires visibility. This desire was connected to the position that pictures have within the Tumblr network in general. Here pictures are posted to the dashboard which functions as a constantly updated endless scroll, causing the user to scroll looking for more than at pictures. The pictures in this framework want to stop the scrolling, turning it into an appreciative like. The plant in the header photo has an unusual look, increasing its likability. Another important part of Tumblr is the reblog, an act of reposting already existing images. This is echoed in the air plant's ability to travel with the wind, anchoring down only temporarily. Both the user and the image can be said to desire propagation, which increases visibility and popularity.

What the picture lacks was uncovered in the way that the logo removes the picture from circulation, and the plant is held down by the hand. The picture lacks existence on its own terms, and seems to want to be considered autonomous, as a picture-organism. Deciding whether images can be considered organisms was shown as not only a problem of analogy, but also with the uncertainty of what constitutes organisms and life in general. For Mitchell there will ultimately be a difference between pictures and organisms, coming into play in the distinction he sets between pictures and images. Pictures are not simply physical objects – existing in media as organisms in their habitat – but reside in human consciousness. This puts a restriction on how far an examination of the animistic or organism-like qualities of pictures can be taken.

Chapter 2: Becoming Viral

Introduction

In the previous chapter I analyzed *Garden Club's* logo photo, and this chapter I will continue focusing on elements of *Garden Club's* design. I will direct my attention towards the sentence displayed immediately below the *Garden Club* header photo. It is written in all caps, asking the viewer: «WHAT MAKES YOU VIRAL?». The placement of the sentence below the photo makes it part of the blog's logo. In a way it seems to caption the image, so that the question says something about what is shown. The header was previously identified as a meta-picture for image blogging, making the caption say something about not only this one, but networked images in general. The central question in this chapter will be: how can virality inform our thinking about the relation between users and pictures in the social network?

In the previous chapter I explored Mitchell's theoretical framework, showing how pictures could be thought of as agents, and examined whether they could be considered organisms in their own right. Ultimately Mitchell's framework were found to be incompatible with further vitalist examinations of pictures. In this chapter the notion of picture-organisms will be replaced by a view of pictures as viruses.

Virality is often connected to social network, with information considered as viral, as it spreads wildly from host to host (Parikka 2007a). Since the notion of pictures as viral often lacks foundation in how biological viruses function (Sampson 2012: 2), I will discuss not how the term has been used, but examine how viruses function. Since I return to the field from which the metaphor originates, this chapter will contain detailed descriptions of viruses. I will use the discussions of viral functioning to construct a viral logic or structure, which will then be applied to Tumblr images, in order to understand them better.

My main source of insight on biological viruses will be *Viruses and the Evolution of Life* by molecular biologist and biochemist Luis P. Villarreal. Viruses are defined by Villarreal as molecular genetic parasites that use cellular systems for their own replication (Villarreal 2012: 3). A central part of the viral logic is *how* parasitism unfolds. *Garden Club* offers a perspective on this, rendering infection as transformative, presenting viral as something that one is *made into*. Parasitism turns organisms into hosts. Most commonly, even molecular biologists regard becoming a host as negative, with viruses as «environmental or chemical toxins that simply kill off less-fit hosts: a nasty part of the natural habitat that must be overcome» (ibid). According to Villarreal, such a view obfuscate central tendencies in the host-parasite relationship (ibid: xii).

To give a more accurate portrayal of virus-host relations, I will displace the human-centeredness of negative viral influence. Instead I will use an ontological model, found in the work of Manuel De Landa. The ontology is found mainly in the first chapter of De Landa's latest book *Philosophy & Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (2011). In addition I will utilize perspectives from the fourth chapter of the book, which explicitly details viruses. By using De Landa's theories I will explore how a rethinking of the viral-host relation can extend viral impact beyond contagion. Transferring the framework to Tumblr affords an understanding of the relations between users, images and Tumblr, which makes it possible to understand the logic of the network.

The philosophy of De Landa is a development of terms and theories laid out by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Since I am focusing here on De Landa's version of their thinking, my main focus will be on his writings, rather than that of Deleuze and Guattari. Whenever I discuss passages from their work it is grounded in De Landa's interpretations.

Viral Dynamics

The Assemblage

In this section I will use the conceptual model of *assemblage* to present a view of the central tendencies of viral infection. For Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages²⁴ are seen as connections of

²⁴ The term assemblage is often used to describe an artistic technique of creating collages with three-dimensional elements projecting from the substrate (see for instance John Walker's *Glossary of Art, Architecture & Design*, 1992), but gains a different meaning through the works of Deleuze and Guattari.

different parts, in which the components retain their individuality when connected (De Landa 2006: 9). Assemblages are understood in contrast to organic unities. Organic unities are constituted by relations of interiority, while assemblages form connections that have relations of exteriority (ibid: 10). To detach a part from organic unities make them cease being what they are (ibid: 9), while units in assemblages can be disconnected and attached to other assemblages, where they take part in other interactions (ibid). Viruses and hosts form assemblages; connected, while still maintaining separate identities. The viruses can replicate inside host cells, before detaching and forming assemblages with new hosts.

De Landa adds the concept of *emergence* to Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory. This term has its modern origin in the middle of the nineteenth century, when realist philosophers began thinking about differences in the understanding of causality in the fields of physics and chemistry (De Landa 2011: 1). In physics, the classical example of causality is the collision between molecules. This results in simple addition, meaning that «explaining their effects could be reduced to deduction from general principles or laws» (ibid:2). In the chemical interaction between two molecules, however, a new entity may emerge (ibid). This is new in the relative sense of the word, as what emerges is not contained in the molecules that interact (ibid). This does not render the emergent effects unexplainable, but they are objectively irreducible (ibid:3).

To establish De Landa's ontology, and explain the irreducibility of emergence I will exemplify with a simple assemblage. From the assemblage of hydrogen and oxygen, water emerges. Water does not lie latent in these molecules, but emerge out of their reaction. The *properties* of this assemblage emerge from the interactions between its parts, and they are different from those of its components: both oxygen and hydrogen are flammable, but from their coupling emerges water. The properties of an emergence is given by the connections, but can not be reduced to the connected entities, it forms from the connection itself (De Landa 2011:4).

In addition to properties, assemblages cause *capacities* and *tendencies* to emerge. The conditions that assemblages exist in lead their properties to manifest as tendencies. The assemblage of hydrogen and oxygen has the tendency to be liquid at certain temperatures and pressure, and to crystallize into ice, or evaporate as gas in others. The properties of emergences are always actual,

while tendencies and capacities may or may not be actual.

While the properties are actualized as tendencies, capacities are expressed as *events*. These events are always double, as the capacity to affect is related to the capacity to be affected. The capacity that water has to extinguish fire depends on the capacity of fire to be extinguished (De Landa 2011:4). The capacities of an object can remain unused as long as they lack entities to interact with. Capacities require the meeting of an actor and a recipient to be expressed. While the properties and tendencies are given by the assemblages, and are therefore finite, the capacities are potentially limitless, as new entities to interact with emerge (ibid).

Viral Assemblages

Using De Landa's terms on viruses, they have structural traits which give them properties.²⁵ From these properties the capacities and tendencies emerge. Connecting viruses with hosts, such as mammals, these have characteristics such as mammary glands, hair and fur (Villarreal 2012: 298), whose capacities may make them susceptible to parasites that have the capacity to infect through such means. To maintain viral transmission a population needs to be large and interconnected, which means that when populations of organisms increase, their susceptibility to *acute infections* rise (Villarreal 2012: 14). This has been the case in the context of modern human (post-agricultural) populations: «the advent of human civilization, with rise in population density, has allowed for the maintenance of acute viral diseases» (ibid:14-15). Acute infections are followed by periods where *persistent dynamics* are established. In these situations all survivors (in an area) will have been infected, gaining immunity to the virus, making it endemic to the population (ibid: 14-15). This population can expose other populations to the viruses, however, and depending on the capacities of the new encounters, the virus might give rise to acute infections again.

Villarreal proposes that persistence is perhaps the most basic viral approach (ibid 363). Rather than something resorted to when there are no more hosts to infect, Villarreal sees it as «the expected and

²⁵ Viruses contain nucleic acid, which are stored in simple sequences of four possible nucleotides, A, C, G and U. Each member of the set has the tendency to form pairs, creating polymers – which are large molecules of DNA or RNA (De Landa 2011:48). The DNA or RNA stores genetic information unique for each virus (Virus, Encyclopedia Britannica: <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/630244/virus> (Reading date: 24.09.14)). Virtually all viruses form shells around the nucleic acid, called a capsid (ibid). The shape of a virus may be helical (such as the intertwined double helix of DNA molecules), icosahedral (a three dimensional, 20-faced structure), geodesic dome (a spheric or partial spheric shell structure), pleomorphic (varying shape according to environmental factors), sponge or resembling robotic spiders (ibid).

normal outcome of the infection» (ibid). Viral studies have largely focused on acute-disease forming viruses which affect mammals and birds, and in particular those that are commercially significant or medically relevant to humans (Villarreal 2012: 302). The central tendency of viruses has therefore been under-acknowledged (ibid: xii).

The conceptual framework of assemblages allows a reorientation, from the disease formation of infectivity to the more neutral capacity for viral-host connectivity. The viral-host assemblage has the tendency of acute spread or dormant persistence according to the conditions they form under. Since persistence generally do not cause disease, the viruses can spread through the organism's body harmlessly.

Image Assemblages

On Tumblr the users and images can be understood as forming assemblages as well, which cause properties, capacities and tendencies to emerge. The properties of Tumblr images are given by the technologies and softwares that cause them to emerge, such as computational devices, the network platform with its image sharing, and the .jpg compression of image files. Images are uploaded to the network, and through the properties of the social network, they get capacity for connection with users. The images get the capacity to be reblogged, and the users the capacity to reblog.

Reblogged images are posted to the dashboard, so other users can enter into new assemblages with images. Tumblr pictures will have the tendency to form acute, rapid replication if they continue to meet large and interconnected populations of users. As images are reblogged they re-enter the top of the dashboard, and this can be seen as a requirement for an image to maintain acute dispersal. After the dissemination has reached maximum, the reappearance rate of the image diminishes, requiring longer and longer scrolling from users in order to be reached. This leads to decreased visibility, declining reblogability, until the picture finally loses their capacity to form new connections, becoming dormant in the user's collection.

As users can enter someone's collection and reenter images into circulation, they maintain the potential to cause acute dispersal anew. The reblogability of pictures greatly increase with inclusion into *momentum blogs*, which are blogs with posts that pop up on large amounts of dashboards.

Given the enormous amount of posts made to Tumblr²⁶, the persistent dynamic is probably the main tendency of the images in the network.

Non-Living Agency

The Viral Fitness Landscape

Villarreal presents the stability provided by the persistent viral tendency as offering the greatest impact on hosts (Villarreal 2012: 302). Since viruses lack metabolism, requiring other cells for energy, nutrition and replication, they are normally not considered living, and are therefore not counted into evolution (Villarreal 2012: x). For this reason, most evolutionary biologists disregard the impact that viral persistence can have on hosts (ibid:373). To counter such a view I will examine how non-living viruses can partake in evolutionary formation.

To discuss the capacity of viruses to generate structure I will again utilize the conceptual model of assemblages. An important feature of the term in this regard is often lost in translations of Deleuze's work from its original French to English. The word *assemblage* already exists in French, but it was not used by Deleuze, instead he used the word *agencement* (Phillips 2006). «Agencement has the same root as agency: agencements are arrangements endowed with the capacity of acting in different ways depending on their configuration» (Callon 2006: 14). The word *agencement* puts emphasis on matter's ability to *act* as much as the capacity it has for connectivity.

In the work of De Landa, agency is connected to the capacity for «actual connections in which one event produces another event» (De Landa et al. 2005:6). Central in De Landa's philosophy is the ways in which coupled systems generate structures (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). In De Landa's accounts of emergence, matter's capacity for structure formation is investigated utilizing a construction called *the possibility space*. This is a «concrete space of possibilities with a definite structure» (De Landa 2011: 17). The space contains all possible tendencies and capacities of emergences, even before their actualization. This does not mean that the space is transcendental, it does not exist independent of the material world, but is rather an abstract system, which requires some form of material to be expressed (ibid:20). It could alternatively be described as a diagram,

26 Over 103 billion as of February 2015, see <https://www.tumblr.com/about> (Reading date 10.02.15).

which is involved in problem-solving activity and «may be instantiated in even simple material and energetic systems» (De Landa 2000: 34).

Using the possibility space, De Landa creates a model of how viruses impart structure. The structure formation starts with viral replication, which occurs spontaneously, with errors and mutations (De Landa 2011:49) The difference arising from mutations instigate a *process of selection*, where some replications are favored over others (ibid: 48). The selection process introduces a *gradient of fitness*, from most favored replicators to least favored. By arranging these replicators so that each molecule has neighbors differing by one mutation, evolution is visualized spatially, as a «*continuous walk* from one neighbor to the next driven by events producing one mutation at a time» (ibid: 50, italics in original). Arranging the replicators this way, and assigning them with fitness values creates a *fitness landscape*. In this landscape local *optima* is formed, either as peaks of gently sloping hills if the neighbors are of similar fitness, or as cliffs if the fitness between neighbors vary greatly (ibid: 51).

In order to precisely characterize the topography of peaks and valleys one would need exact fitness values for the Viral genetic storage molecules, the RNA. Without such knowledge, *approximations* of the fitness landscape can give a sense of how the landscape is formed, whether it contains a single global optimum or many local, whether neighborhoods are cliff-formed or smooth (ibid). Evolutionary walks are performed by clouds of viruses that move over the fitness landscape, competing with other clouds (ibid:52). The topography of the landscape facilitates or obstructs evolutionary walks towards optima (ibid: 51). The cloud will cluster around a local optima, but as evolution proceeds parts of it may happen upon nearby optimum of higher fitness. This will cause the cloud to melt and recondense at the new optima (ibid:52).

De Landa presents viral evolution, not simply as random mutations, but as a *search for form*. The selection pressure exerted on the clouds of viruses acts as a kind of «searching device», that explore the possibility space (ibid). When a cloud moves in a fitness landscape the overall movement is not aimless, it is «not a search with a goal, of course, but a groping in the dark that is nevertheless better at finding local optima of higher fitness than a random walk» (ibid: 53) Mutation rate is a crucial factor behind the searching capacity: if the rate of copying errors is zero, the cloud will not form,

but if it is too high it will evaporate (ibid). The clouds with capacity to search the fitness landscape will «tend to lie near the error threshold, that is, to have as many mutations as possible without suffering disintegration» (ibid: 53). Viral populations show a tendency towards lying near the error threshold (ibid).

The Tumblr Fitness Landscape

The virus is typically not considered an organism, and the picture is likewise a non-living entity – an object or a file type. In the previous chapter I discussed the metaphorical ways in which pictures can be endowed with life-like qualities. Here I will explore how the images of Tumblr can have the capacity for agency – in the form of structure generation – by using the possibility space as a framework.

Each post is included into Tumblr by a user, with others responding to them through liking and reblogging. As any kind of images²⁷ can be posted, differentiation occurs, where some images are favored over others. It is possible to distinguish which images are favored, since all Tumblr posts are assigned with visible counts of likes and reblogs. These note counts function as fitness values for the possibility space of images on Tumblr, making it possible to consider the posted pictures and their notes as fitness landscapes. The high note images are the peaks, and the low notes ones are valleys. Around the peaks there will be several images that are less fit, so the landscape is characterized by gradual slopes. Given the amount of users, posting multitudes of pictures, there will be several local optima, rather than one global.

The likes and reblogs generate pressures, which over time instigate change in the image fitness landscape. These selection mechanisms create a searching device, which performs – just as biological viruses – a search without goal, but it nevertheless means that the formation of a Tumblr fitness landscape is not a random process. This lack of randomness is not accounted for by decisions made by the users themselves; it is not their individual choices and search for images that constitutes the searching device. Instead the populations of pictures and the activities performed by users make the searching device emerge.

²⁷ Excluding those that break Tumblr Community Guidelines, and unlawful content. See Tumblr's guidelines here: <https://www.tumblr.com/policy/en/community>.

The scope of the emergent searching device lies beyond the perspective of individual users. In order to gain impressions of it, however, the users simply need to post images or scroll through Tumblr and see what has high fitness. This makes it possible for users to attempt following their impression of what is selected for, or to refuse to participate according to the network's logic. Whether someone chooses to follow or reject their impression of the selection pressures is ultimately irrelevant for the formation of a searching device, as it does not require any users in particular, but emerges out of the interactions taking place between all of them. This means that both images posted and the users posting them become subjugated by the searching device, requiring adherence in order to attain reblogability and momentum.

Optima are close to perfect matches, with other pictures forming dynamic populations of variations. The variations were presented in the previous section as a requirement for evolutionary change, and on Tumblr it means that the fitness landscape can be subject to change. High note counts may cluster around local optima, before melting and recondensing at new ones. The searching device has certain plasticity, although this does not mean that reblogability and momentum can be gained without adhering to the searching device.

Viral Organization

Interconnected Life-Forms

So far I have discussed how viruses impact their hosts, showing this to be forming assemblages with hosts and establishing a persistent dynamic. Furthermore, I have investigated how and what kind of agency viruses can have, which were understood as their capacity for generating structures, through the formation of a searching device. In this section I will explore what kind of influence viruses have on hosts, discussing the evolution of host organisms from the vantage point of viruses. To do this, however, requires an understanding of how viruses can fit into what is normally considered the 'tree of life' despite being non-living (Villarreal 2012:361).

Viruses require cells of other organisms to gain the properties of life, which makes it possible to see the virus and the host as an assemblage which causes life to emerge. The same can be said, however, for organisms in general, where cellular genes or proteins are not by themselves alive,

instead life arises out of their cooperation (Villarreal 2012: xi). According to Villarreal, life has an «emergent, complex and cooperative character», and it is «made from the same fundamental building blocks that make a virus» (ibid). The double-stranded DNA molecule – which carries the blueprint for life – could be the invention of viruses, made in order to protect their genes from attack (Zimmer 2012:93-94). Rather than accidental to life, viruses can be theorized as incremental in the origin of life.

The tree topology itself presents another problem for seeing viruses as taking part in the evolution of organisms (Villarreal 2012: 373). In the description of Deleuze and Guattari, the tree begins at points, branching out into dichotomy, constructing order (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/1987:7). Since viruses cross species' barriers, the persistent viral influence break such hierarchical structuring. Viral influence therefore requires a different topology (ibid: 361).

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari provides an evolutionary counter-model with the *rhizome*. The rhizome is characterized by connections and heterogeneity, with any point connectable to others, following principles of multiplicity (ibid: 8). In the rhizome the single line is of less importance than the structure as a whole. While the lines might break, others will take their place (ibid: 9). And while trees form genealogical descent, rhizomes are anti-genealogy (ibid: 21) This model for evolution no longer follows «arborescent descent going from the least to the most differentiated, but instead a rhizome operating immediately in the heterogeneous and jumping from one already differentiated line to another» (ibid: 10). The rhizome renders evolution as non-linear, rather than an advance up a ladder of progress (De Landa 2000: 15).

With the rhizome, evolutionary formation becomes not only the result of random mutations, hereditary descent and competition, it is generated through horizontal transversals. Viral, bacteria and other parasites «permanently colonize their hosts, adding viral genes to host lineages.» (Villarreal 2012: 361) The virus makes copies of their genes, which are then reinserted back into their host's genome. As the virus is passed from parent to offspring, it affects the evolution of the host species. in a process which is «cumulative, resulting in ever greater host complexity» (ibid: 373). Through persistence and genome colonization, viruses add genetic identity to organisms. Organisms show lasting evidence of viral footprints (ibid: 373). Deleuze and Guattari describes the

virus as capable of making the host and the parasite momentarily resonate together and form a novel circuit of intertwinedness (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 10).

Viewing organisms as assemblages and evolution as rhizomatic leads to a destabilization of our understanding of organisms as unified organic wholes. De Landa states that despite the tight integration between the organs in for instance the human body, «the relations between them are not logically necessary but only contingently obligatory: a historical result of their close coevolution» (ibid: 11-12). This renders the organs of the body as incidental in the formation of the body, in the same way as the co-inhabiting micro-organisms. The micro-organisms, in turn, become as crucial for the formation of bodies as the organs.

In *The Origins of Sociable Life*, sociologist Myra J. Hird describes humans as a «becoming with», «where relation predates identity» (Hird 2009: 130). Becoming human is a process of transversal gene transfers, with the segments of DNA which separates humans from primates having started out as viral infections (Zimmer 2012: 50-51). Biologically, human beings can be considered super-organisms, functioning as ecosystems of mutually dependent life-forms (Velasquez-Manoff 2012:15). While usually seen as parasites to organisms, viruses seem to have a major role in the evolutionary formation of organisms.

Micro-Networks

I have shown how images and users are subject to the structuring mechanisms of the searching device that emerges out of their interaction. In doing this I have discussed perspectives from virality in an attempt at understanding reblogability. Unlike the previous chapter, this investigation has not been metaphorical. De Landa claims that any sort of variable replicator connected to a sorting device will generate the capacity for evolution (De Landa 2000:138). According to De Landa both organic and cultural change involves replicators and the formation of new structures do not «involve a metaphorical use of biological concepts», as the «analogy to cultural accumulations is not from organic evolution but from a general model of evolutionary change, of which organic evolution is but one instance» (De Landa 2000:141). Villarreal sees viruses as «essentially systems that store, copy and express information» (Villarreal 2012:29), these basic attributes also «apply to man-made systems of information, including computer programs» (ibid).

The viral images do not function *like* biological viruses, rather they form parallel systems, sharing the same logic. The point here is not how viral images resemble viruses in their spreading, but rather how both pictures and viruses are nonliving entities, which have the propensity for life, but must enter into assemblages in order to utilize this potential. These assemblages will then generate life-forms through rhizomatic, non-linear evolution.

Networks are in general heterogenous connections of multiple directionalities. On Tumblr users form connections with anyone through liking and reblogging posts. As the users like and reblog each others images they generate rhizomes. Every reblog connects the user not only to the image that is reblogged, but also to the user it is reblogged from, and the other posts by this user. Any post could be reblogged multiple times, connecting everyone who has reblogged it with each other as well. This means that the size of the rhizome increases exponentially, rapidly becoming too large for individual users to assess the scope of it. The individual user becomes a single line in a large meshwork, where their specific connection is of less importance than the formation of the rhizome.

In the previous section I was concerned with how the rhizomatic structure renders a different view of what constitutes the organism. With Tumblr functioning rhizomatic, what impact does this have on the individuality and the selfhood of users? This is not the experienced self, but in the description of media theorist Jussi Parikka, selfhood as an information pattern, where the «the individual becomes merely a host to the parasitic invasion» (Parikka 2007b: 266). In an essay for the online magazine of critical theory, *New Inquiry*, Rob Horning traces a shift in the understanding of the self. According to Horning, widespread social media use leads to an undoing of the idea of the individual as a unique interior, to a decentered, «data self». This is defined as the self «posited by the synthesis of data captured in social media» (Horning 2013). For Horning the data self is a step towards ceasing to conceive identity as «personal property» (ibid).

Another essayist on *The New Inquiry*, the artist and writer Brad Troemel describes the relationship between images on Tumblr and understandings of property. Troemel distinguishes between image fundamentalism and liberalism. The former understands images as having inseparable ties with their place of origin, while the latter considers them as free to travel in the market to reach the widest audiences (Troemel 2013a). The Tumblr users belongs to a third category, which Troemel calls the

«image anarchists». Image anarchists differ greatly from the other types, as «image fundamentalists and image neoliberals disagree over *how* art becomes property, image anarchists behave as though intellectual property is not property at all (Troemel 2013a, *italics in original*). Tumblr users post pictures from any source, without necessarily giving credence either to the original creator or the source it was taken from. Images on Tumblr are often completely severed from any kind of context or authorship outside of the network.

The rhizomatic, non-individual quality of the micro-networks is not necessarily acknowledged by users. This can be seen in how users may save popular images to their desktops, and repost them on their blogs, rather than like and reblog them. According to Troemel this is «not a lie about creation but a lie about curation («Look what I found,» not «Look what I made») to put one's taste and image-hunting abilities in the best possible light — to make them seem original» (Troemel 2013a). Such activities do not, however, decrease the importance that micro-networks play in forming image collections and networked relations. While some users might consider collections as expressive of individuality, they are nevertheless tokens of interconnectivity. The rhizomatic structure of Tumblr decreases the influence of individuals. Compliance to the searching device decides the richness of the interactions, and these interactions are keys to gaining momentum.

As users reblog and get reblogged, actively pursuing approximations of the searching device, their capacity for momentum increases. Users repeatedly engaging with particular other users, or particular image types will have the tendency to form micro-networks within the network. The capacity that single users have to impact the fitness landscape of the network will be restricted to their adherence to the searching device. It is probable that the micro-networks, through their magnitude of numbers has the capacity to impact the searching device to a greater extent. The users forming the micro-network begin to follow each others patterns, and in doing this increase their own chance for spreading, but also have greater impact on the fitness landscape. The micro-networks will function similar to the whole network, with fitness landscapes forming, and searching devices accommodating its shape. On Tumblr there will most likely be several micro-networks, which lead to a multitude of optima.

Micro-networks will have the same rhizomatic structures as the larger scale, network-wide rhizome. If the entire network could be mapped as lines of connections between nodes, the micro-networks would be visible as clusterings of connections. How many such micro-networks there exists on Tumblr will depend on what kind of perspective it is viewed from, and where boundaries between them are drawn. This makes the analysis of micro-networks a question of defining how such boundaries should be drawn. It is unlikely that micro-networks are structured according to unifiable, single, or self-evident principles. It is more likely that each micro-network will form around a multitude of different imagery and users, which becomes visible only through careful examination.

Summary

In this chapter I discussed what virality can offer to understanding of Tumblr pictures. Rather than examine the way the metaphor of virality is put to use, I was interested in discussing whether the term itself could be applicable. In order to do this I constructed a viral logic, which was applied to Tumblr images. My application of viral logic to images was not based in the metaphorical likeness between images and viruses. Instead both were seen operating according to abstract structures, the fitness landscapes, functioning in parallel. Both viruses and images were considered as non-living entities, gaining central features of life such as the capacity for replication, through assemblage.

Viruses are normally considered carriers of pathogens. Using the framework of assemblages, adapted from De Landa's reading of Deleuze and Guattari, I displaced this negative understanding, focusing instead on how parasites and hosts affect each other. Assemblages are connections of exteriority, with the parasite and hosts connecting, while still maintaining individuality.

From the interactions in assemblages properties emerge. These manifest as tendencies, and generate capacities. The capacities are actualized as events, such as the capacity that a virus has to infect and the capacity that a host has to be infected. According to the conditions they exist under the properties form certain tendencies. The virus-host assemblage has the tendency to form acute infections, or – most often – to become persistent. The images on Tumblr have the capacity to enter into assemblages with the users, with the tendencies of acute dispersal or laying dormant in collections.

A central part of Deleuze's notion of the assemblage that is often lost in its translations to English is the emphasis put on matter's ability to act, by use of the term *agencement*. For De Landa agency is connected to the capacity for structure formation, which is examined with the conceptual construction of a possibility space. This is an abstract, but non-transcendental space. It contains all tendencies and capacities of emergences, in a state of 'yet to be realized'.

For viruses the abstract possibility space was shown to be a fitness landscape. As viruses replicate, copying errors give rise to selection processes. By arranging these as gradient of fitness they form a fitness landscape of peaks and valleys. The selection pressure gives viruses their capacity for structure formation, by causing a searching device to emerge. This searching device traverses the fitness landscape, searching for optima. On Tumblr the note count assigns fitness values to each post. Some posts are favored over others, causing fitness landscapes to form. The selection mechanisms generate a searching device, emerging out of the interactions of the Tumblr users. Adherence to this searching device becomes a requirement for gaining dispersal for images and momentum for users. The searching device is not observable for users, but through posting and seeing what becomes popular, they can get approximations of it.

Biological evolution, and image blogging were seen as rhizomatic structures. The rhizome is a structure of multiplicity, directedness and non-linearity, where the single connection is interchangeable. The rhizomatic and assemblagic view destabilizes notions of organic unity, viewing connectivity as vital for the evolutionary formation of life and organisms. On Tumblr the reblogs and likes generate lines of connections – micro networks with rhizomatic structures. As any post can be reblogged multiple times by different users, the complexity and size of the rhizome increases exponentially for every interaction. The single user have little capacity to impact the fitness landscape, choosing either to adhere to the searching device or to reject connectivity. The rhizomatic formation of micro-networks, however, generates forces that can impact the fitness landscape.

The following chapters will analyze *Garden Club* utilizing the perspectives discussed here. Chapter three will focus on the fitness landscape approximations found on the blog, and chapter four analyzes the blog as rhizomatic micro-network.

Chapter 3:

Fitness Landscape Approximations

Introduction

In the previous chapters I have shown how the structure of Tumblr – with its endless scroll and constantly updating streams of posts – makes users look *for* more than *at* images. The populations of users in the network generate a searching device. This causes selection pressures to form, where some images are reblogged, while others are not. In this chapter I will examine the searching device and its selection pressure, looking at what characterizes the images that are reblogged.

The selection process generates gradients of fitness, where fitness is defined as the capacity that an image has for replication – its reblogability – ranging from low to high. Fitness will be used in different contexts throughout this chapter, and it will be understood as the capacity that something has for replication. The gradient of fitness can be visualized as a fitness landscape, which is a virtual space containing all possible images in the network. The fitness landscape has assigned fitness values (on Tumblr this is the note count), forming peaks and valleys with graduating slopes. Images that have accumulated large note counts will be *approximations* of peaks or optima in the virtual fitness landscape.

Examining high note images of any Tumblr blog will display the optima of that blog, but also give insight into parts of the network's general fitness landscape. Each post on Tumblr comes equipped with a note count, showing the amount of likes and reblogs it has received. The note count of each image will determine which part of the fitness landscape it approximates, from valleys to gradual slopes to peaks. According to one account, a peak of the network is 190 million notes²⁸, and there is at least one blog dedicated to reblogging posts with over 50 thousand notes.²⁹ To get an impression of the peaks and the slopes of *Garden Club*, I have set a range from 1000 notes and upwards as the

28 <https://recordsetter.com/world-record/notes-single-tumblr-post/13484> (Reading date 21.10.14)

29 <http://50thousand.tumblr.com/> (Reading date 29.10.14)

most widely reblogged pictures. This singles out 112 posts (by the end of October 2014)³⁰, and these will form the basis of my analysis.

Analyzing posts will also be an enquiry into the motivators behind the searching device, and I will try to find reasons for the prominence of some image tropes over others. To begin with I will analyze the images applying perspectives from media aesthetics. According to Liv Hausken this entails a «a critical reflection on cultural expressions, on technologies of the senses» (Hausken 2013: 30). I will examine how software used in recording and sharing, as well as the functionalities of the network impacts on what becomes popular.

My research questions in this chapter will be: What characterizes the approximations of optima on *Garden Club*, and why has the searching device selected for these images? I will focus mainly on the top three posts – the three best approximations found on *Garden Club* – attempting to identify what characterizes them. These posts range from above 200 000 to more than 1 million notes (as of October 2014). The posts will be compared with the slopes, in order to get impressions of the frequency of the traits identified, and to distinguish what sets the peaks out from the slopes.

Garden Club Attractors

Impoverished Celebrity

The third most popular post overall is a Vine loop, showing a five second video loop (a still from which features on the next page). Since the content of Tumblr is geared towards movement through the network, it would be expected that this creates a preference for formats which are immediately visible. Supposedly this would mean that formats demanding that users stop their scrolling before deciding whether the post is of interest would have less reblogability. Does the popularity of the video loop negate this presupposition? Youtube videos posted to Tumblr require users to stop their scrolling, and start the video, while the Vines play automatically as the users scrolls. Sound can then be added by clicking on the Vine. The Vine works with rather than against the network's propensity for movement. As the eyes of the user may be drawn towards the movement of the video loops, they may have a great chance of seizing attention than stills.

³⁰ The total is 115, but the pictures have been removed from three posts, replaced with a message from Tumblr stating that they violate their community guide lines.



Still from the Vine loop, captioned «Willow Smith made this Vine about her brother bruh», and «wait im crying». It is posted July 4th 2014, reblogged from Hontou. It was originally posted on Vinebox, a blog posting «The best Vine gifs and videos». As of December 10th 2014 the post has 210, 099 notes.

The Vine is captioned «Willow Smith made this Vine about her brother». It shows the actor and singer³¹, Willow Smith (daughter of actor Will Smith). Smith performs a two-way conversation, posing as herself, and by pulling the hood of her sweater over her face she plays the part of her brother, Jaden Smith. The video begins with a shot of Willow introducing us to a scene by saying «when me and Jaden go out to eat». Hooded, imitating her brother, Willow mumbles rushed and aggressively straight to the camera: «Willow, the government's coming». In the next shot she looks once again at the camera, saying assuringly: «Jaden, we're fine». The next shot shows her hooded, responding: «They know what we know, we have to go now». The final shot lasts less than half a second, showing Willow with a quizzical, or perhaps frightened look on her face. After this the

31 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willow_Smith (Reading date 24.03.15).

video restarts automatically.

Several of the most popular images of *Garden Club* feature recognizable individuals – celebrities from some field. One possible approach for considering the popularity of this Vine by Willow Smith, could be her status as a celebrity. The interest in the fifteen year old Smith over other celebrities can perhaps be traced to the demographics of Tumblr, which according to recent surveys has the youngest user base, with a main demographic between 16-24.³²

The great interest in celebrities at all is probably the result of mass media exposure. In a seminal essay, «The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception», philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer considers popular culture as a factory producing standardization. This standardization is instigated and maintained through manipulation of the receiver (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/2005: 95). Ideological forces create standardized products, manipulating viewers and conforming their interests. The popularity of celebrities could be seen as consequences of ideological forces manipulating and standardizing interests.

Focusing on the the materiality of the recording and distribution technologies used, problematizes the idea that the popularity could be a result of standardization. The image is not an excerpt from one of Smith's music videos, movie acting or television appearances. While professionally produced images of celebrities are often styled photoshopped to perfection, the Smith Vine has an accidental and rough quality. It is presumably made with a mobile phone, making the image quality grainy. The video is recorded by Smith herself, which causes the picture frame to wobble while she talks. The background and light conditions appear coincidental, with a glaring white screen in the background drawing visual attention away from Smith. The accidental presentation in the video gives the impression that minimal planning went into the execution of it.

In an essay published on e-flux – an online platform for art discourse – artist and writer Hito Steyerl describes an occurrence which encapsulates the aesthetics of this Vine. Steyerl calls the digital image that circulates online a *poor image*. What characterizes the poor image is a series of transformations: quality becomes accessibility and contemplation is turned into distraction (Steyerl

32 The age demographics come from Global Web Index surveys from 2013 and 2014, found here: <http://www.businessinsider.com/tumblr-and-social-media-demographics-2013-12> (Reading date 03.11.14), and here: <http://www.globalwebindex.net/blog/tumblr-instagram-audiences> (Reading date 24.03.15)

2009). The poorness of an image is rooted in the hardware used to capture the images, such as the mobile phone used by Smith. It also comes from the software, with Steyerl writing that poor images are «poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly» (ibid).

Given the demographics of Tumblr, more users will have smart phones with cameras than professional photography equipment. This creates an affinity towards poor images among the users of the social network. The ease of production and swiftness of distribution afforded by poor images should make them commonplace within the Tumblr's fitness landscape. Steyerl writes about circulation and production of «poor images based on cell phone cameras, home computers, and unconventional forms of distribution», whose connections «reveal erratic and coincidental links between producers everywhere, which simultaneously constitute dispersed audiences» (Steyerl 2009). The users of Tumblr can and will post Vines themselves, so the Smith video caters to an audience of participants.

The poor image is a «visual idea in its very becoming» (Steyerl 2009). If we consider the professionally shot images of celebrities to be strong images, these function as finished products for consumption. Poor ones, however are processual, and are as such particularly appropriate for platforms such as Tumblr. In this network the pictures can be considered unfinished, with the users participating, fulfilling them by interaction. Smith's presentation of the video ('when me and jaden go out to eat'), and the seeming lack of planning, gives the impression of an event unfolding as it is viewed. This further urges the users toward realtime responses of liking and reblogging.

The dispersal and reactions within the community are parts of the visual idea in its becoming. Since Tumblr keeps track of reblogs, likes and comments added, it is possible to see how users respond to the Willow Smith Vine. The users express the pertinence of the video to their social life. One user comments that this is their friend and themselves during lunch time. The Vine shows behavior comparable to what users engages in themselves, removing Smith from perfection and glamour, presenting relatable everyday life experiences. As a poor image, and visual idea in its becoming, the celebrity Vine seems not to be the standardized result of ideological pressure from the cultural industry, but to generate multiplicity and creativity.

Shifting Trends

Among the 112 high note pictures of *Garden Club*, around 20 % are centered on style and clothing, and the second-most reblogged image of the blog fits into this category. It is a loop in the .gif format (a still from which is shown on the next page). The .gif rotates endlessly, showing a woman walking on a catwalk, against a grey background. The model in the .gif walks towards the viewer, and while doing this she lifts her hand to the collar of her dress, and rips the top half of the dress off. Rather than ruining it, the rip completely transforms her dress. It as if she pulls a string, and a different dress unfolds itself from the first one. The model renews her appearance by the quick pull of her hand, turning a short turquoise and bronze colored dress into a long black one.



Still from a .gif image loop, captioned «Hussein Chalayan Fall 2013». As of December 10th 2014 the image has 622, 061 notes. It was posted to Garden Club on March 3rd 2013, reblogged from Hontou, originally sourced from Dqdbpb.

An important part of the popularity of this image is likely the swiftness and surprise of the change, lending the moment a touch of magic. Ingenuity has gone into crafting the piece of clothing, so that this change can be performed. The model performing it also displays elegance, as it is difficult to distinguish exactly how and what takes place in the transformation. The skill of execution is

enhanced further by the repetitive format of the .gif. The format has a hypnotizing effect, repeating the movements indefinitely. The viewer can watch the dress unfold, again and again, without necessarily getting any closer to apprehending how the change happens.

In an essay, Troemel further accounts for the popularity of fashion images within social networks. In Troemel's descriptions all image blogs are style sites, where bloggers use the platform to further their online persona (Troemel 2011: 56). Actual ownership is of less importance here than the knowledge of style markers, making reblogged images effective ways of purveying personal identity in social networks (ibid: 57). The image of the model changing her dress encapsulates a feeling evoked by Troemel, who notes that «you can probably only wear an outfit per evening – what a drag». Tumblr, on the other hand, allows people to constantly and swiftly utilize style markers to change their appearance (ibid).

Cute Puppy Dog

Animals are central elements in 14% of the widely reblogged images on *Garden Club*, and nearly half of the pictures contain animal-human interactions. The most popular post on the blog overall, shows a dog (displayed on the following page), and has garnered over 1 million notes (by October 2014). According to philosopher of science, Donna Haraway, dogs and humans are companion species (Haraway 2003:9). As companion species, dogs and humans have a special kinship, which might explain the prevalence of this type of animal over others.

The dog is a pup, placed on someone's lap, held out on display for the viewer. The dog's front paws are awkwardly positioned between its back legs. Its bowed posture makes it seem submissive, yet relaxed. The placement and the positioning of its limbs gives it a sense of helplessness, which is met with the care-giving potential of the person holding it. Part of this picture's popularity can be ascribed to how the sense of helplessness generates affection towards the animal. The dog is, simply put, cute.



Image without caption, posted to Garden Club, July 4th 2014. As of October 28th 2014 the post has 1,063,066 notes. It was reblogged from Hontou the original entry from Bedroomfloor (which has since been deactivated).

Haraway describes the fixation on cuteness as a «projection in the Western world that makes domestic canines into furry children» (ibid: 11). Central in the spread of such visions of animals is companies such as Disney. The propensity towards cuteness is not limited to the western world, however, it is a central part of Japan's entertainment industry (Allison 2003: 383). Cuteness became a business strategy in the 1960s and 70s in Japan, when marketing of goods and toys from television cartoons began (ibid: 386). Around the same time as toys such as *Hello Kitty* became

popular, «a national fixation developed around the cuddliness of 'real animals'», with two pandas becoming «something like national mascots» (ibid). The Japanese term for cuteness is 'kawaii', which connotes «sweetness, dependence, and gentleness—qualities they associated with comfort and warmth, and also with something loosely connected to their childhoods.» (ibid: 387) The immense popularity of the Garden Club puppy dog aligns not only with what Haraway describes as a Western projection, but with a cross-cultural cultural orientation towards cuteness.

Evolved Attractors

The top three images of *Garden Club* give approximations of the Tumblr fitness landscape. The fitness landscape seems to be characterized by certain tropes: famous people, stylish clothes and cute animals. The popularity of the specific images on *Garden Club* seem to come – at least partially – from their compliance with the tropes noted above. While the previous section offered some insight into the popularity of these tropes, the explanations seem to have certain limitations. While the interest in Willow Smith could be traced to mass mediated exposure to celebrities, this does not explain why we show interest in celebrities to begin with. Likewise fashion follows trends of a current age, but interest in the subject itself seems pervasive. While Haraway saw cuteness as a particularly Western way of understanding animals, it was shown to possibly be cross-cultural. Perhaps targeting something besides the technology, software, culture and ideology might reveal further reasons behind these tropes.

In an essay, published online in 2013³³, the artist Timur Si-Qin discuss photographic conventions from an evolutionary outlook. Rather than focusing on the ideology shaping conventions, Si-Qin uses the concept of attractors. This originates from dynamical systems theory and topological mathematics, and is defined as the sets of states that «a system tend to evolve towards regardless of its starting conditions» (Si-Qin 2013). With this understanding image tropes present on Tumblr represents states which the searching device will be drawn towards, no matter the cultural and technological formatting.

³³ The essay was published in Dis Magazine, an online magazine described as a «futuristic media platform devoted to the Internet, art and fashion» (Glazek 2014).

Images can be seen as carriers of attractors or motivators, which determine their chances of replication within the network. Si-Qin presents feelings and emotions as evolved signals that something is important to an organism. «From that perspective one could assume that images that are successful at evoking feelings do so because their content is somehow relevant to us evolutionarily.» (Si-Qin 2013). The recurrence of attractors in images can be seen as the results of evolved human psychology. Si-Qin describes how succulent foods, wealth, family ties and sex are «hyper-represented themes in commercial imagery», with the reason for this being their ability to «directly tap into our evolved motivators.» (Si-Qin 2013).

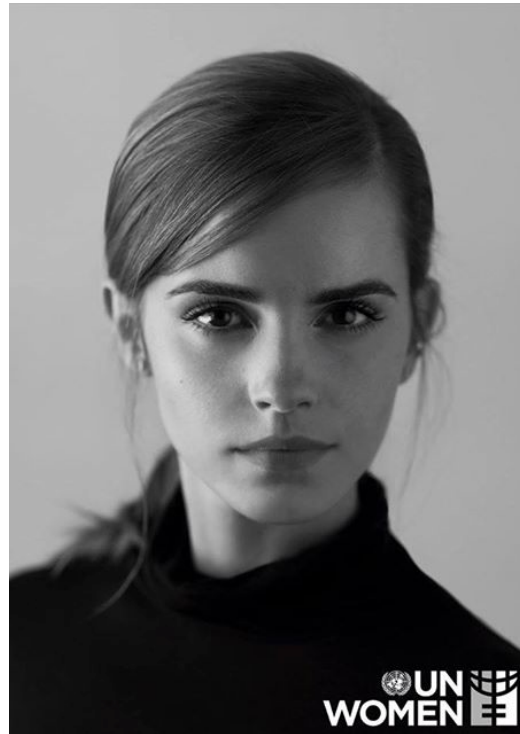
Considering the popularity of visual tropes as formed through evolutionary processes does not mean that they are fixed once and for all, or that they are unaffected by technological development and cultural shifts. Si-Qin notes that the camera is a precondition for photographic conventions, and that Europeans would, for example, not react to coffee before it was introduced to them. «But once experienced, images of coffee interact with ancient pleasure systems within the brain, as do other images of foods/drugs» (Si-Qin 2013).

What the evolutionary perspective does, is to go beyond the limited time span of technologies used in creating, distributing and viewing images. Emotions, thought and behavior today is understood not only as formed through the processes of civilization, but also by those prior, in the millions of years humans spent as hunter-gatherers. Such thinking is not a form of essentialism, but should rather be seen as a radical historicity, thinking from the deep past, seeing how it forms and impacts in the present. In the following I will apply this perspective, looking at celebrity, cuteness and style as attractors, and examine evolutionary explanations for the searching device's selecting for these.

Identifiable Individuals

Looking at the top three pictures from *Garden Club*, the motif in all three focus on living creatures of some sort. There are no human-made objects displayed, or scenic overviews. The images center on recognizable individual humans or pets, with discernible faces. Our sensory systems are evolutionary adapted to discern faces, because this allowed our ancestors to locate prey and friends, while avoiding predators and enemies. (Si-Qin 2013). Facial recognition and interpretation being a major neurological process, which suggests that they are classified in our perceptions as a distinct

class from other objects (Nelson 2001: 2). Attracting and demanding visual attention, faces are easily recognized – to the extent that humans often mistake other things for faces (ibid).



To the left: A picture of artist Rihanna, posted to Garden Club on May 26th 2013, reblogged from Survivaltips, original source Fuckyeahrihanna. The post has 60 036 notes (as of November 2014). To the right: A picture of the actor Emma Watson. It was reblogged by Garden Club from United Nations' official Tumblr, <http://united-nations.tumblr.com/>. The post has 10 430 notes (as of November 2014), and was posted on August 4th 2014.

We seem to be primed not only for noticing faces, but also to be drawn towards faces that are experienced as attractive, as sensorially pleasing. Judgements of what constitutes beautiful appearances are not highly idiosyncratic, there exists agreement between men and women (Rhodes 2006: 201). Several studies and reviews show that sentiments are neither arbitrary nor culture bound (Rhodes 2006: 200, Fink and Penton-Voak 2002:154-155). This does not diminish cultural preferences, making them irrelevant. Neither does it posit that what is experienced as beautiful will be consistent through different time periods. It does, however, show that there are traits forming foundation of attraction, that follow stronger motivators than the ideals of the

current period or culture. There are variations between beauty standards across cultures, but these seem to form from universal, culture-independent rules (Grammer et. al. 2003: 385).

Evolutionary psychologist Gillian Rhodes argues that attractive looks is not explained by a single principle (Rhodes 2006: 201). It follows characteristics including symmetry, averageness (as opposed to distinctiveness), sexual dimorphism (differences between men and women), pleasant expressions, good grooming and youthfulness (ibid). Symmetry in particular is hypothesized to reflect physical fitness, with facial symmetry signaling «the ability of an individual to cope with the challenges of his or her environment» (Fink and Penton-Voak 2002:155). Humans have possibly evolved to ascertain sensual beauty because of «the difficult task of constructing symmetrical bodies gives good indication of that organism's overall genetic quality and health» (Si-Qin 2013).

An article on the evolutionary psychology of facial attractiveness cites studies, which show that looking at attractive people leads to increased activity in an area of the brain which is associated with reward (Fink and Penton-Voak 2002:157). Looking at people that are attractive is possibly experienced as more rewarding than looking at people who are not. If this holds true there should be a greater prominence of attractive faces among the pictures selected by the searching mechanism. Applying the characteristics of attraction to the photographs of people on *Garden Club* does reveal an inclination towards beauty, and a greater prevalence of female than male subjects. One possible explanation for the gender bias is the finding of neurologists that beautiful female faces activate the reward circuitry of the brain, while there is a separation between aesthetic evaluation and reward assessment in viewing male ones (Fink and Penton-Voak 2002:157). The attractor of sensual beauty can be seen for instance in an image of the singer Rihanna and one of the actor Emma Watson (both shown on the previous page). Rihanna shows a pleasant expression and grooming, while Watson exemplifies youthfulness and symmetry.

The anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Jerome H. Barkow provides a possible evolutionary basis for the attraction towards not only beauty by itself, but also to fame. Humans have been selected to be keenly interested in individuals whose relations would likely affect

their fitness (Barkow 1992: 629). For our ancestors these individuals would be relatives, rivals, mates, offspring, partners in social exchange, and high-ranking individuals (ibid: 628). Celebrities can be compared with high-ranking individuals, in which case knowledge of their activities will be experienced as relevant to our social relations. As strangers are presented to us through mass media, they activate psychological mechanisms that «evolved in response to selection for the acquisition of social information» (ibid: 630). According to Barkow our experience of celebrities as kin, friends or rivals, lead us to seek information about their physical health, changes in relative standings, and to the greatest extent, their sexual relationships (ibid).

The Rihanna image combines the interest in celebrity, beauty and sexual attraction. Rihanna is depicted here in minimal and revealing clothing, exposing her breasts, but concealing the nipples. The popularity of this picture may come from the erotic charge of revealed skin, with the semi-nude Rihanna seen as an idealized sexual partner. It is posted to a blog called fuckyeahrihanna, attesting both sexual desire and the admiration of her as a high-ranking individual.

Style Markers of Fitness

In an essay titled «Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology», philosopher Dennis Dutton provides a perspective on fashion, placing clothing, body decoration, hair styling and jewelry among other expressions of artistry. Dutton's sees production, expression and adornment as grounded in the processes of women and men choosing sexual partners (ibid: 699-700).

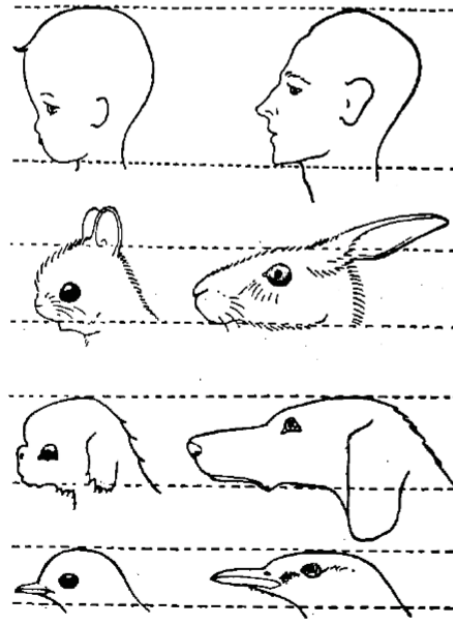
The philosopher traces the idea that artistic production is at base connected to sex back to the ancient greeks, as well showing its prominence in the thinking of Nietzsche and Freud. There has, however, been a mistaken belief that sexual content is somehow contained *within* the art. Dutton presents art rather as ways of generating attraction towards things which could have been produced «only by people with attractive, high-fitness qualities such as health, energy, endurance, hand-eye coordination, fine motor control, intelligence, creativity, access to rare materials, the ability to learn difficult skills, and lots of free time» (ibid). With the challenges and laboriousness required for creativity and expressivity they are indicators of health, whereby functioning as fitness indicators for partner selection. The searching device's disposition to style and fashion is possibly a consequence of artistry as a fitness indicator.

Helpless Baby Animals

The relation between humans and dogs has been dated back 11 to 16 thousand years ago (Freedman 2014). One hypothesis for how this began is self-domestication, where tolerance for human presence lead some wolves to take advantage of scavenging possibilities (Waller et. al. 2013). For Haraway, this means that dogs should be seen not as child-like dependent, but rather as self-sufficient individual companions (ibid: 36). Haraway describes the transformation of animals into cuddly companions as «unethical» (ibid: 11). The relation between humans and dogs has nevertheless been one in which cuteness most likely has been selected for by humans. The visual characteristics of dogs are thought to be a byproduct of our selecting against aggression (Waller et. al. 2013). In the co-evolution between humans and dogs, the animals with juvenile features have been selected for (ibid).

In an essay on the changing appearance of the cartoon character Mickey Mouse, evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould provides insight into the mechanics that lead to human preference for juvenile features. Gould shows how the behavior and looks of the Disney character have changed in parallel, as he became less mischievous the character turned progressively more juvenile (Gould 1980: 96-97). Humans feel affection for creatures with juvenile features, which are large eyes, bulging craniums, retracting chins – while animals with more adult looks of smaller eyes and longer snouts, «do not elicit the same responses» (ibid: 103). The dog on *Garden Club* has a small jaw, a prominent, bulging cranium, and a head which seems about as large as the rest of the body. Its feet are pudgy and small.

The preference of juvenility over adulthood in cartoon characters and animals may derive from evolved responses that humans have to their own offspring. Gould presents the visual differences between adults and offspring as cues which trigger behavioral responses (ibid: 101). The visual characteristics of childhood make humans susceptible for affection and nurture, causing an «automatic surge of disarming tenderness» (ibid). While these responses have evolved towards our own babies, they are transferred to the same features in other animals, and in the domestication of animals they are cultivated by our selection.



Comparison drawing of adult and juvenile features in humans and animals. From Gould 1980: 266, originally in Studies in Konrad Lorenz (1971): *Animal and Human Behavior*.

Comparing the dog photo with other high-fitness animal images reveals a similar appeal to sentiments of tenderness. A chameleon is curled up in the palm of a hand, while small black fish swim in another hand. The placement of the animals in the laps and palms of humans show disparities in size – and thereby also in power, exposing the capacity that humans have to crush simply by clenching their fist. The popularity of the pictures seem proportionate with the amount of affection elicited, according to parameters of helplessness and fragility, as well as the likeness that the animals have to human offspring. The weaker and more helpless and the more likeness an animal has to human babies, the greater the image's replication rate will become. The image of the puppy combines these two features, whereby becoming the most popular image on the blog.

Summary

In this chapter I have analyzed the most popular images on *Garden Club*. The goal of the analysis was not primarily to account for the popularity of the specific images examined, but to examine them as approximations of the network's fitness landscape. In addition the pictures provide insight into the searching device (which is formed by the populations of users), and what this selects for.

The third-most popular image showed the artist and actor Willow Smith. It is a Vine loop, showing a performance recorded with a smartphone, posted seemingly without planning or editing. The popularity was connected to the technologies and software used in recording. As a Vine it loops automatically on the dashboard, with its movement catching the attention of scrollers. The Vine was identified as a poor image, created for dispersal, catering to an audience of participants. The users are not simply viewers of this video, but fulfill the visual idea with reblogs, likes and comments.

The second-most popular image showed a preoccupation with style and fashion. It was shown to gain traction from the surprise element and skill of execution, both in the piece of clothing and in the model's action. The .gif format's repetitive nature was seen as creating a hypnotic effect, further enhancing the impressiveness of the executed action. The focus on style of this image were shown to also align with the efficiency of style markers in building one's online persona.

With nearly double the amount of notes as the preceding image, the most popular post on *Garden Club* was one among several which depict animal-human interactions. It displays a puppy dog on someone's lap, with awkwardly positioned legs, a bowed posture and sad look. These features makes the dog seem helpless, generating affection and making it seem cute. I connected its popularity with a cross-cultural disposition to cuteness.

From the top three posts on *Garden Club* I identified certain tropes that had been selected, including famous people, stylish clothing and cute animals. These were presented as attractors – states which the searching device is drawn towards no matter its starting conditions. The attractors were seen as results of human psychology, with the most prominent being the ones that best tap into our evolved motivators. This way of approaching imagery is not an essentialist way of thinking, but one which takes into consideration our prehistorical deep past, and how this affects in the present.

The *Garden Club* optima are characterized by individuals with distinguishable faces. The human sensory system comes with a pull towards faces, in particular those that display attractiveness. I showed that there exists agreement between across cultures and between genders on what constitutes attractive looks. There are indications that looking at beautiful people is experienced as more rewarding than looking at ones that are not. Our pull towards attractive looks may derive from the difficulty of constructing traits such as symmetry, which makes it an indicator of fitness. The individuals in *Garden Club* pictures display characteristics connected with sensorial beauty, such as pleasant expressions, good grooming, youthfulness, averageness and symmetry.

Fame as an attractor was shown to align with ancestral interest in high-ranking individuals, as the high-ranking would affect the fitness of others. Mass media presents celebrities to us, activating these evolved psychological mechanisms. Fashion were considered as expressions of creativity and artistry. These signal the capacity to engage in challenging activities, functioning as fitness markers for partner selection.

The third attractor, the puppy, gains its popularity from the co-evolution of dogs and humans. In this co-evolution dogs have been selected for according to preferences for juvenile features. This was discussed as possibly deriving from evolved responses that humans have to our own offspring, which have been transferred to pets. The popularity of the dog in the lap was compared with that of other animals – in particular others held by humans – finding that in addition to the resemblance to human offspring, the degree of helplessness evoked by the animals were important for their popularity.

Chapter 4:

Micro-Network Clusters

Introduction

In this chapter I will focus on the relation between the blog *Garden Club* and the fitness landscape and searching device. If the design of Tumblr imparts an aspiration for blogs to gain momentum, bloggers need to actively seek optima, posting content with the capacity for traction. In chapter three I explored *Garden Club* images that I took to be approximations of the fitness landscape optima. These were used to provide explanatory models for what the searching device selects for, focusing especially on evolutionary attractors. Some such attractors were identified and discussed, such as baby animals, beauty, fame and stylistic adornment.

In this chapter I will continue the analysis of high fitness images and attractors. Central here will be questions of how *Garden Club* can gain agency. Agency is understood here – with De Landa – as the capacity for generating structure. As the populations of users follow evolved motivators, the single user seems to face two choices: either adhering to these attractors, or rejecting them. What I will examine here is the possibilities for users to cause the emergence of structures which differ from the attractors.

In chapter two I showed how the connections of Tumblr are rhizomatic, forming multiple disorderly lines. Out of the users' interactions micro-networks are formed, where the individual users are of less importance than the whole rhizome. While the capacity of single users to impact the fitness landscape of the network will be restricted to their adherence to the searching device, these micro-networks could gain the momentum to disseminate alternate attractors. This means that the agency of *Garden Club* will be connected to the micro-networks it participates in.

The posts on *Garden Club* will be seen as tokens of micro-networks rather than the choices of the individual user. To examine the micro-networks I will use the same selection of 112 high fitness

images used in the previous chapter, this time focusing on which user they originate with, and who they are reblogged from. I have made a list of the interactions, focusing on the frequency of them, to establish possible micro-network formation (see appendix).

In an essay from 2012, titled «Soft Brand Abstracts: Closer Than Ever Before»³⁴, Altmann discusses how users «earn kudos and social capital (advancement) largely through sharing information and research in their daily streams» (Altmann 2012). As the user interacts with the social network, she becomes able to «predict the types of content that will get the most or least hits among a certain content clique, and there are plenty of communal tropes.» (Altmann 2012). I will explore what kind of tropes can be seen forming in the connections between *Garden Club* and other users. These will be found by identifying commonality among images according to where they are reblogged from. The central question of this chapter becomes, what kind of diversified attractors are disseminated by the micro-networks that *Garden Club* participate in, and what kind of impact does these diversifications have on the fitness landscape?

Forming Micro-Networks

In the first chapter of the thesis, I used the title and the blog's presentation to discuss likeness between gardening and the organisms there with blogging and images. In addition to gardening, the blog presents itself as a 'club'. The dictionary defines a club as group of people meeting to participate in an activity.³⁵ On Tumblr likes and reblogs form connections, with reblogs being public displays, producing visibility and visual affinity. With time and repeated interaction, the connections cause the formation of clubs.

In an interview Altmann is praised as 'a prophet', calling her work generation defining.³⁶ This renders Altmann as a powerful force, positioning her as a central force in the micro-networks, the leader of the club. On one of her webpages³⁷, Altmann presents several of her own blogs, and those of other users that she connects with. This sketches a map of the micro-networks she participate in,

34 The essay was commissioned by the Hirshhorn Museum & Goethe Institute, and is available from <http://karialtmann.com/texts/platform/> (Reading date 03.02.15).

35 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/club> (Reading date 10.05.15).

36 <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/ripe-for-capture-artist-kari-altmann-is-a-prophet> (Reading date 06.05.15).

37 <http://r-u-ins.org/> (Reading date 03.02.15).

rendering her projects as umbrellas for the blogs of other users. She often captions reblogged and found content as 'produced for' *Garden Club*. These gestures of appropriation is complimented by one going in the opposite direction, as Altmann presents *Garden Club* as a collaboration between different Tumblr users³⁸. Rather than a blog with followers, *Garden Club* becomes one of many that exist in micro-networks, networks within Tumblr. The potential audience for the project is turned into a club or a network of loosely connected peers, whose blogging – at least partly – becomes in-group conversations.

In the previous chapter I selected images ranging from 1000 notes and upwards (posted in the period between the blog's start in 2010 and October 2014). None of the 112 high-fitness displays singled out originated on *Garden Club*, they were all reblogged. I have made a list over where these images are reblogged from, and which user originally posted it on Tumblr (see appendix). Looking at the source of images first, these come from a large number of different blogs, most of which are only the source of a single post reblogged to *Garden Club*. Those that have more than one post include the user Mwenemutapa2007 with five, as well as Digimprov with 3, 4est and Unflavoredwaxfloss20 with two each. Considering where the images have been reblogged from, shows greater clustering. There are far less posts coming from a single source, with a multitude of stronger connections. Three stand out in particular: Hontou, Nnbennynn and Advancedsystemsarray, where the former have 24 reblogs and the two other 10 each. Two have 5 reblogs: K-0-Chnl and Le1f, while a few others have four reblogs: Mwenemutapa2007, Oliverjgilbert, B0ylita, Jadour and Survivaltips.

Some of the reblogged users are artists with distinct practices of their own – such as the Berlin-based Estonian Katja Novitskova, blogging as Survivaltips, as well as the American rapper Khalif Diouf, with the artist name Le1f. Diouf is depicted in two of the high-fitness images as well. Novitskova has created an artist book called *Post Internet Survival Guide 2010* (Revolver Publishing 2011), where Altmann contributes both with artwork, and is interviewed.

The reblogging statistics reveals different connections than the ones identified by Altmann on her webpage. The connections noted by Altmann are not the ones that generate the capacity for

38 BstFrndFrvr, HydrothermalEmerald (Emily Jones), Econimish (Nick Lalla), Perfctionism, Visual-Aids (Sam Hancocks), Megacycles (Bill Hitchert), AquaAge, from <http://r-u-ins.org/> (Reading date 03.02.15).

dispersal of altered attractions, since images from these blogs do not show up among the top 100 blog posts. One possible explanation for this discrepancy could be that the list presented by Altmann on her webpage was compiled at an earlier point in the project (it is undated), and that these have since become less important.

Identifying Clusters

In the following I will examine the micro-network of connections formed by the repeated reblogs of *Garden Club*. Each reblog connects a post to another user's collection, with other posts of further connections, which are tied to others again. This means that the complexity of micro-networks increases exponentially. It would therefore be beyond the scope of this thesis to flesh out the micro-networks. With micro-networks forming from user interactions, and being important for dispersal, however, focusing on the ones that are often reblogged is a way of approaching them.

The formation of micro-networks depends on the clustering of imagery. The users might identify certain types of images that interest them and find others with similar inclining, participating knowingly in their spreading, or they can occur spontaneously and without reflection. Examining micro-networks is therefore not simply mapping relations, but also seeing which kinds of imagery are popular within certain micro-networks. I will discuss clusterings of imagery, using mainly pictures from the three most popular sources of imagery for *Garden Club*: Hontou, Advancedsystemsarray and Nnebennynn. The clusters I have identified were found by comparing the most reblogged pictures from the blog, looking for commonality between them.

Uncanny Animals

The reblogs from Nnbennynn feature almost exclusively animals and other critters, including slugs, jellyfish, amphibians and lizards. The dog discussed in chapter three gained its traction from cuteness and the proximity it has to humans. The skin-tones of the axolotl (depicted below, top left) and the slugs (bottom left) give proximity to humans as well, but without generating similar pleasing sentiments.



Clockwise from top left: Captioned «Wooper Looper (ウーパールーパー, Ūpā Rūpā)», and originally posted by kabutomushii. It was reblogged to *Garden Club* from jadour on November 12th 2012. It has 17 829 notes (by February 2015). Image captioned with «*Triboniophorus graeffei*, the Red Triangle slug. A beautiful species found in eastern Australia» and «Queer Family», posted originally by Hypoprepia, reblogged on January 8th 2013, from nnbennynn with 3356 notes (by February 2015). Uncaptioned image with 4965 notes (by February 2015), originally posted by Ckslbr. Reblogged by *Garden Club* from nnbennynn on March 3rd 2013. Image posted to *Garden Club* on April 10th 2013, with 3452 notes (by February 2015). Originally entered into Tumblr by Flygex-eatin-on-softies, and reblogged to *Garden Club* from nnbennynn.

Rather than cute, these animals can be described using Freud's concept of the *uncanny*, which are phenomena associated with dread and fear. The German word for uncanny is «unheimlich» (literally meaning un-homely), which according to Freud makes it tempting to conclude that the uncanny is frightening because it is unknown (Freud 1919: 2). According to Freud the uncanny

is, however, precisely the familiar, the known, turned into estrangement (ibid:15). The uncanniness of the axolotl and the slugs, come from their likeness to humans. Their looks are all too familiar, as if they are severed body parts, but still retain their ability to move and act. They are as limbs that have been re-animated, and freed from the human bodies they gain life forms that seem alien and frightful. The slugs give an impression of being newborn, as if they have just crawled out of bodily orifices. The axolotl is in part redeemed by the presence of a detectable face, but this might just as well make it even creepier.

By separating the animals from ourselves they can be turned into cute creatures again. This is exemplified in the bright yellow axolotl, whose color distinguishes it from human limbs. The presence of tiny feet can once again generate a feeling of empathy and care-giving. The picture of the frog (top right), and the lizard (bottom right), likewise alternate between being uncanny and cute. The helplessness of the frog poised between the fingers makes it cute, but its plumpness and bulging eyes may incite repulsion. The lizard is an example of a popular internet trope related to animal cuteness which shows animals eating³⁹, and its pudgy feet make it seem cute. Its long body, however, sabotage the potential for cuteness.

Other frequently reblogged users share a focus on uncanny creatures, including Jadour and Music For Your Plants. As the bloggers post such imagery, they form a micro-network of animal photos which slide between uncanny and cute. The participants of the micro-network will have varying motives, but as they expose themselves to this type of images their threshold of creepiness will change. Freud describes the experience of uncanniness as «reality-testing», which is to test the «material reality of phenomena» (Freud 1919: 18). To keep the uncanniness effect, the participants of the micro-network will have to increase the weirdness of the creatures displayed. As the bloggers take part in this micro-network their repulsion can gradually fade, and be replaced by attraction towards this type of imagery. The axolotl and the lizard contain hints that they are revered as companion species, with placement in aquariums and cages making it possible that they are someone's pets.

39 See for instance: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/om-nom-nom-nom> (Reading date 23.02.15).

Plants and Technology

Several of the most popular pictures on *Garden Club* feature vegetation in some form, ranging from a dark rainforest photo and a bottle filled with leaves on Nnbennynn to 3D rendered vegetation on Hontou. The preoccupation with vegetation can be traced to evolutionary adaptations, a consequence of our pre-hominid ancestors having spent most of their time in trees (Si-Qin 2013).



To the left: Uncaptioned image with 49, 718 notes (as of October 2014), originally posted by Milika on July 4th 2013. *Right:* Image with 49, 718 notes (as of October 2014), originally posted by Millika on July 4th 2013. Shhhp added the caption 園藝 (gardening), and the post was reblogged by Garden Club via Advancedsystemsarray on November 10th 2013.

Among pictures of plants, there is a potential micro-network of pictures contrasting plants and technologies. This micro-network can be exemplified with a picture featuring several screens that display foliage (above, to the left). Using perspectives from a direction of psychology called ecopsychology, humans are rendered as in relation to and dependence of nature (Søreide Slåtta and Madsen 2014). The screens showing foliage function as attractors – not because of their technical fidelity, but because they tap into the existensial dependence that humans have on nature (ibid).

In a picture from Advanced Systems Array a couple of Sony Playstations, a Walkman and a Phillips television are taken out of their normal context as technological objects (above, to the right). These objects are used to house different types of plants. This can be seen as an example of the avant-garde technique *détournement*. *Détournement* originates from the Situationists, and translates to hijacking or misusing (Debord and Wolman 1956/2006). The Situationists Guy Debord and Gil Wolman consider *détournement* as means for transforming «phrases or plastic works that happen to be in fashion; and above all an ease of production far surpassing in quantity, variety and quality the automatic writing that has bored us for so long» (ibid). It is a technique in which elements are borrowed, and often parodied. The Situationists were disinterested in simple reversals of the intended meaning of the borrowed elements, seeing *détournement* as «*less effective the more it approaches a rational reply*» (ibid, italics in original). In the picture here, consumer objects are destroyed, but it is an act of creative destruction. The use of technology as planters, turns the emphasis from the annihilation to the reinvention of the object's use.

The ease of production in *détournement*, simply applying already existing elements in new contexts, makes the Situationists see it as a «powerful weapon in the service of class struggle» (ibid). Among the other pictures from Advanced Systems Array there are military aircrafts, a riot squad with heavy artillery and armory. The blog seems to focus on global politics and warfare, as well as capitalism, consumerism and various forms of injustice. This warrants a political view of the picture in question, which can perhaps be traced to the way it frames technology. The picture shows a condition in which there is no point in maintaining the functionality of technological objects. The consumer objects have been made redundant, replaced by a new gadget. The picture nevertheless mocks the idea of technological development as linear – from old to new – as the obsolete technology is reinfused with new life.

Altmann has been presented as working with a «survival fantasy aesthetic»⁴⁰, and the picture from Advanced Systems Array could be described that way. Technological waste is abundant, and electronics are often dumped in development countries.⁴¹ Rather than the devastating effects

40 <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/30/announcing-prix-net-art-awardees/> (Reading date 16.03.15)

41 <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/dec/14/toxic-ewaste-illegal-dumping-developing-countries> (Reading date 24.02.15)

of this practice, the picture shows ways of working against the negative impact. The survivalism displayed connects it with the current environmental crisis, rethinking waste management in an ecological sustainable way.

Uncommon Style Choices



Top row: To the left: Post captioned (●~●*), originally posted by Sirdef. Reblogged from hontou, with 1823 notes (in March 2015). *Right:* originally posted on July 12th 2012, by Beatsthatrefunky, with the caption «Get Up Stand Up! Indigenous Leaders demand suspension of Belo Monte Dam». The Garden Club post was reblogged from Advancedsystemsarray on July 15th, with the added sentence «shreddest hair award 2012». It has 1388 notes (as of February 2015). *Bottom row: To the right:* reblogged from 3dsmall to Garden Club on December 28th 2012, and has 29341 notes (by February 2015). *Middle:* originally posted by boobs420. It was reblogged to Garden Club on August 19th 2013, from Advancedsystemsarray. The caption «biopolitical evolution» was added by Advancedsystemsarray, and it has 1762 notes (by February 2015). *Left:* Still from a .gif captioned by leeisnthereforthat: «Making this my new background tbh». It is reblogged from Le1f on July 26th 2012, and has 1315 notes (by May 2015).

Most of the reblogged images on *Garden Club* come from Hontou. The top three most popular images on *Garden Club*, discussed in the previous chapter, all came from Hontou. The other images from this blog also heavily feature celebrity, with pictures of artists Drake and Rihanna, as well as fashion and clothing, in particular from the company Nike. As discussed in the previous chapter, the images on Tumblr can function as style markers, reblogged to purvey personal identity. The proliferation of popular brands and celebrities function as means for gaining momentum.

Some of the pictures on Hontou's image collection display surprising stylistic choices. These include pictures of faces shot with direct flash, referencing the snapshot aesthetics of Tumblr, discussed in the pervious chapter concerning the poor image. A picture shows the American actor Anthony Mackie from the movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (shown on the previous page, top left). Around his head half circles and a flower has been added, and the picture is captioned with a Japanese style emoticon⁴²: (●^●*). From being a substitute for facial expressions in textual communication online, the emoticon is here turned into a frame for the actor's face. The action hero's masculinity is displaced, turning him into a cute flower-adorned smiley.

Some of the images contain style choices which are not the consequences of technological lacks or post-production additions, but rather is a central characteristic of the subjects depicted. Celebrities are caught in unflattering moments, with dopey facial expressions, or people wear clothing that go against the common dress codes of today. This is evident in some pictures on Hontou, but becomes clearer on the blogs *Advancedsystemsarray* and *Le1f*. Through a selection of images from different positions in the fitness landscape, and from various blogs, I will sketch out the possibility of a micro-network revolving around what can be considered uncommon style choices. I will also explore the cultural implications of this micro-network's focus.

Advancedsystemsarray has captioned a picture of an indigenous man with «shreddest hair award 2012» (depicted on the previous page, top right). He is pitted against a duo of suit-wearing, white men. This draws attention to the indigenous man's stature, colorful clothing and pointed finger. Against the generic middle-aged demeanor of the men in suits, the indigenous man gains presence as an individual. He is shown as in charge of the situation, with one of the other men seeming to

42 See for instance <http://whatjapanthinks.com/2007/09/19/turns-25-but-how-old-are-japanese-emoticons/> for more on Japanese style emoticons (Reading date 30.04.15).

flinch to avoid confrontation. Among the top ten most popular images on *Garden Club* one portrays a woman turning her head and tossing her hair, as if in a shampoo commercial (previous page, bottom right). Rather than a young woman with luscious hair, however, she is middle-aged with braided hair finished off with plastic beads. With direct flash used in photographing the braids are frozen in motion. The flash also smooths wrinkles of her face, but at the same time gives her skin an unappealing glisten. The hairstyle is an uncommon choice for a middle-aged woman, but her expression is one of self-confidence and contentment.

Both the indigenous man and the woman with beads in her hair express confidence despite unusual appearances, and a similar sentiment is found in the reblogs of images from Le1f. One is from a fashion shoot, featuring Diouf himself posing next to a waterfall, on rocks and lying on the branch of a tree. The other is a .gif of the artist dancing, wearing a jacket, short hot pants and shoes (a still from this is shown on page 75, bottom left). Le1f has drawn attention for being an openly gay rapper, with a flamboyant personality. In an interview, New York Times presents his position as unusual, since Le1f «expresses his interest in other men with such bravado and lack of ambiguity»⁴³. In the music video which the .gif is culled from, he gives a lap dance to a man wearing a mask of the iconic Pikachu, from the Pokémon franchise.

An image on Advanced Systems Array shows the model Valeria Lukyanova and two girls on a beach (depicted on page 74, bottom middle). The girls pose next to Lukyanova, as if having met their idol. The picture is captioned «biopolitical evolution», and seeing the model next to the girls makes it possible to consider them as levels in a chain of development. The youngest girl stands upright, with her arms simply hanging by the sides of her body, striking a smile. The two others strike poses to greater extents. The older girl has begun looking downwards and directing her gaze at the camera in a certain way. She pushes her chest forward and up, and slightly offsets the position of her shoulders and arms to emphasize her bosom. The youngest girl has a military-patterned bikini giving a tomboy impression, while the older has a stripe-patterned pink one.

Lukyanova is the final version in this 'biopolitical evolution', representing a giant leap of great intensification from the older girl. She has shifted her stance to a slightly awkward one, with a

⁴³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/gay-rapper-le1f-is-embraced-by-his-world-and-the-mainstream.html>
(Reading date 11.03.15).

bent knee. A hand is placed on her hips to emphasize them, and to push the upper part of her body forward, and she is slightly tilting her neck. Lukyanova has the least revealing swimsuit, but it draws special attention to her waistline and cleavage. Placing the model next to the girls shows how exaggerated her features are, with a disproportionately thin waistline, slimmer than those of the girls next to her. Her facial traits are childlike as well (larger eyes in proportion to the face, as described in the previous chapter), but exaggerated and made more prominent than those of the girls.

Lukyanova can be seen as an optimal version of what the French philosophical collective Tiquun describe as the *young girl*. For Tiquun this is a historical concept, not a biological necessity – meaning that the actual young girl is not necessarily even female or young (Tiquun 2012: ii-iii). The *young girl* is a model citizen for current ideological forces, for consumer society, as youth and women are invested with «an absurd symbolic surplus value, by making them the exclusive bearers of the new esoteric knowledge proper to the new social organization» (ibid: 2). In an essay online in The New Inquiry, Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern criticize the french collective's text as misogynic. Weigel and Ahern consider the book as reprimanding a type of person that has «been punished enough already for how commodity culture exploits her» (Weigel and Ahern 2013). While Tiquun contests that their term's gender non-specificity redeems it from such criticism, for Weigel and Ahern this simply further removes the women described of their subjecthood.

The conceptual tool of the *young girl* is neither used to criticize consumer society nor to discuss the misogyny of Tiquun. I would rather draw attention to how Tiquun's descriptions fit the appearance of Lukyanova. She is a *young-girl*, in the sense that she displays the freedom to do whatever she wants with her body – turning it into an object for seduction. Lukyanova embodies an exaggerated form of youth, and these exaggerations echo those found in the text of Tiquun. Their text is filled with excessive formulations, manifesting striking bleak poetry. One example of this is that there «isn't room for two in the Young-Girl's body» (Tiquun 2012:29), which the abnormally thin waist of Lukyanova testifies to.

Lukyanova is an all too perfect example of the young girl. Her exaggerated looks have little in common with current beauty standards in models, and looks more like a real life cartoon character or barbie doll. While seemingly less a woman with subjecthood, and more an expression of current ideologies, the cartoon-like exaggeration of her features problematize this view. By pushing ideals to their limit, Lukyanova can be seen as a subversion of them, revealing the incongruities they already contain. Like Tiqqun's text, Lukyanova can be seen as an ironic performance of misogyny.

The posts discussed in this section highlight individual idiosyncrasies that defer standard ideals of beauty, fashion and style markers in different ways: The picture of the woman borrows signifiers from shampoo commercials, but replaces the young model with a middle-aged woman; a colorfully dressed indigenous leader is pitted against a duo of suit-wearing men; a character from *Captain America* is turned into a flowery emoticon; the rapper Le1f dances in ways that are normally reserved for women in videos accompanying this music genre and Lukyanova pushes current beauty ideals to their limit.

The peculiarity of these individuals are not displayed as tokens of embarrassment. Instead, the pictures show the non-conforming individuals with spunk and pride. The woman smiles, and the indigenous leader is portrayed as in charge of the situation. Le1f is described as an artist who can «write, produce, sing, dance and entertain», that «looks incredible while doing it».⁴⁴ Lukyanova is seemingly idolized by the young girls. The weirdness of these displays is not simply granted a place in *Garden Club*; through the repeated focus on non-standard choices a counter-aesthetics is formed, with disregards of prevalent taste and style notions.

Imitated Brands

So far I have discussed clusters of imagery that have gained momentum without adhering to attractors examined in the previous chapter. I will now discuss how the micro-networks and such altered attractors impact the fitness landscape and optima. I will focus on a picture (shown on the following page), which will be used to create an understanding of the relation between attractors

⁴⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/fashion/gay-rapper-le1f-is-embraced-by-his-world-and-the-mainstream.html>
(Reading date 11.03.15).

and diversified attractors. The picture is one of several in on *Garden Club* which feature branded objects, and there is a prominence of sportswear. The one I will discuss is a compilation of logos.



Uncaptioned picture, with 4820 notes (in November 2014), posted to *Garden Club* on December 20th 2012. Reblogged from K-0-Chnl.

The inclusion of branded imagery on the blog could be understood, with Troemel, as a form of internship. While writing specifically about artists on social networks, Troemel's observations can be applied to Tumblr users in general. Interns work for companies with minimum to no payment, and in return they receive work experience, and put themselves in the position for future offers of payed positions. Troemel sees the practice of voluntarily letting your social network presence be filled with logos as something which «closely resembles unpaid internship's reversed labor relationship: you go out of your way to do work for a company, and in return they give themselves money» (Troemel 2013b). Nevertheless, users have incentives for posting images featuring branded products since they function as style markers, which were discussed in the previous chapter as possible purveyors of personal identity.

The picture selected here features what seems to be Adidas logos, and thereby represents the company. Closer inspection, however, reveals that all the logos are wrong in one way or the other. Some display altered versions of the iconic three stripes of the Adidas logo, others feature variations on the trefoil logo that Adidas used from 1972 to 1996.⁴⁵ The wording in the logos are off as well, ranging from close proximities such as 'adididas', 'abibas' and 'avivas', to ones that are less similar such as 'sdidsa', 'adimas', 'abclids' and 'adivor' and those that bear little resemblance such as 'xinertai', 'wandanu' and 'mockba'. One logo even shows elements borrowed from a competitor, meshing together the Nike and Adidas logo. The image lacks a heading stating how it should be read, or what kind of use it is supposed to have.

The image shows a selection of logos, which to greater or lesser degree resemble the one used by the company Adidas. They are laid out in equal size, non-hierarchical, without the actual company logo among them. It functions as what Altmann in an essay describes as a scrambling of brand impressions (ibid). According to Altmann such activities are commonplace on Tumblr, and she traces this to the availability and simplicity offered by technologies such as Photoshop and silkscreen printing: «Some of these rebrands create new meaning or operate in new kinds of systems, many simply tweak the read into a congruent product for a similar profit structure, with or without an ironic cultural filter. Still, even this simple act diversifies the logic» (Altmann 2012). The different logos could be seen as an example of *adbusting*, or culture-jamming – which Naomi

45 See <http://www.logorange.com/logodesign-A.php> (Reading date 30.04.15)

Klein in her book *No Logo* present as attempts to reclaim ground from the corporate world (Klein 2000:81). This strategy is evident in a different image from high fitness pictures of *Garden Club*, showing a piece of clothing with a logo reminiscent of Tommy Hilfiger, which instead reads 'Taliban Hillfighter'. It is unclear, however, how the Adidas logo variations can function as adusting. The picture with logo variations is too opaque, lacking the critical edge of 'Taliban Hillfighter'.

To understand what kind of function these versions of the Adidas logo might have, it is necessary to get an impression of how Adidas, or rather, how companies in general, function. To do this I will construct a simplified logic of branding. In an essay for the online *Dis Magazine*, titled «What Does Nike Want?», art curator and writer Agatha Wara utilizes De Landa to examine how companies function. Wara describes brands as sharing the same «evolutionary goals as organisms, that is, to succeed», meaning that they aim to stand out in competition with «other species (brand-species) in order to guarantee continuance over time» (Wara 2012).

Companies are parts of fitness landscapes, where they too perform searches for optima. De Landa describes oligopolies, which are markets that are dominated by a small number of sellers. Oligopolies tend to be non-competitive, with few, dominating companies, and rivalry and deliberate planning as the major structuring forces. Large corporations are planning systems, which operate in ways that can be described as «anti-market» (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012). To maintain dominance the large corporations do what they can to avoid competition by steering the searching device. One such strategy would be the generation of recognition and appreciation through advertisement, effectively offsetting the balance for companies that cannot afford widespread marketing. To rise in competition brands create products and ads that evoke and shape consumer interest, and to achieve continuation the brands strive towards «ubiquity, diversity, specialization, complexity, and socialization» (Wara 2012).

Product-consumer relations today rest on what Joshua Simon terms the materiality of brand names. Writing for the online journal *e-flux*, Simon exemplifies using Nike shoe, which is «first and foremost a Nike and only later a shoe, with the symbol on the shoe becoming the material substance from which it is actually made.» (Simon 2011) The shoe is not simply a product of rubber, leather, textile and plastic, before becoming a shoe it is a Nike or an Adidas. The consumer buys brands as

much as objects, and shoes derive their value not simply from objecthood, but to a greater degree from the brand.

Smaller companies can attempt to compete with the dominating rival forces such as Nike and Adidas, but the anti-market forces in place may make this an unviable option. Instead, the smaller companies might attempt to survive by imitating the dominating brands. The companies may offer similar products, and even mark them with resembling logos. By manufacturing products as close to the imitated object one as possible, the smaller firms can trick consumers into mistaking their product for the authentic one. The logo compilation shows this in a compressed format, with the logos of many (possible or actual) companies imitating Adidas. Some of them are close imitations, with only slight visual shifts or letter changes, so they can easily be mistaken.

Brands have anti-market forces in place to avoid having to compete with imitations of their products. Companies for instance trademark linguistic combinations, including their brand name and other phrases used in conjunction with their identity. If any logos from the compilation featured in the *Garden Club* image were to adorn shoes they would be probably devaluated, as counterfeit Adidas products. In the U.S. there are laws prohibiting the import of such products⁴⁶, and the image on *Garden Club* could be a chart used by customs officers to spot products that should be confiscated at border controls. In order to sell imitated merchandize the best way is therefore not necessarily to make them as close to the original as possible. In the picture this strategy can be seen in how some logos have different names – such as 'Mockba' – or have logos giving them distinct identities of their own.

Returning to the micro-network clusters discussed above, one way of looking at them would be as criticism of the conformity of attractors. Yet the understanding unpacked from the Adidas logo picture renders the altered attractors foremost as imitations. This does not imply that they have been created with the intention of resembling attractors. With the framework of replication and evolutionary structure formation discussed in chapter two, the fitness landscape will be arranged as peaks and slopes of slight variations. The variability of imitations was rendered a requirement for searching capacity to form. When the rate of copying errors is zero, the cloud of replicants will not

46 <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/15/1124> (Reading date 01.05.15)

form (De Landa 2011: 53). Evolutionary change depends on this cloud of replicants to move over the landscape, clustering around optima. Slight variations of optima will tend to form around them, with slopes of greater variations following.

The *Garden Club* imitations are comparable to the Adidas imitations featuring 'xinertai', 'wandanu' and 'mockba'. Rather than posting imitations which are close replica of optima, most of the blog features images that are far away from the dominant attractors. Brands perform trend forecasting, making approximations of consumer choices. Altmann presents trend forecasting as the creation of two 'creatures', which are «the future consumer and the future product, who are projected to be in a state of symbiosis with each other and endlessly advancing into different iterations» (Altmann 2012). Both the image blogger and the trend analytic will anticipate shifts in the fitness landscape, predicting which attractors will garner attention. How well the respondents are anticipated determines where the images or products will end up in a fitness landscape. The sentiments evoked by the pictures themselves become less important than their potentiality as strategies for hitting upon optima. The openness of the *Garden Club* pictures seem to be more important than the subversive potential, as the pictures diversify rather than criticize.

Garden Club can be seen as an attempt to predict future shifts, and through the formation of micro-networks these predictions can also push the searching device in certain directions. The animals replace cuteness with uncanniness, potentially causing a shift within micro-networks as what constitutes cuteness and what is rejectable. The depicted persons display uncommon style choices, whereby broadening the range of available identities. The image juxtaposing plants with technology engage creatively with consumer objects, reconfiguring what use value the objects can have. As the pictures spread in the micro-networks their momentum can build, causing the altered attractors to potentially impact on the network as a whole.

Summary

The capacity that single users have to impact the fitness landscape of the network is restricted to how well their posts fit into the evolutionary attractors of the searching device. Through the formation of micro-networks of likes, reblogs and visual affinity it is possible to impact the fitness

landscape with diversified attractors. I have explored the micro-networks that *Garden Club* are part of, looking at the blogs which are the most reblogged sources of posts on *Garden Club*. These were Hontou, Advanced Systems Array and Nnbennynn. Micro-networks form clusters of imagery, and I considered which types of micro-networks of imagery these users formed together with *Garden Club*.

The pictures from Nnbennynn nearly all feature some form of creature, which straddle between cuteness and the uncanny. The repeated inclusion of such imagery will lead to a diversification of attractors: As repulsion diminishes the sentiment can become one of affection, where the creatures are conceived as cute. The micro-networks forming these clusters have the capacity for shifting the focus of the searching device both towards repulsion, but also to infuse cuteness with weirdness.

Reblogged images from all three blogs center on vegetation, and I identified a micro-network dispersing juxtapositions of plants and technology. I discussed two pictures from this micro-network, showing how the combination of elements removes the conception of progress from the technology. One did this through revealing that the most attractive side of technical fidelity was its capacity to represent nature. The other was seen as a *détournement* of consumer electronics, which were filled with soil and plants. The outdated technological waste was given new life through this act of creative destruction.

Several reblogged images feature celebrities and fashion displays. These are style markers which are reblogged to show personal identity. Among these images, however, there are several surprising and non-conform stylistic choices. I focused in particular on pictures of the model Lukyanova, a .gif of the rapper Lelf and pictures of a middle-aged woman and an indigenous man. The pictures displace age limitations, gender roles and beauty ideals, overturning standard tropes. The individuals are portrayed as confident despite their peculiarity. The micro-network cluster identified here is a counter-aesthetics of individuals that defy conformity with bravery.

Using a picture of Adidas logo variations I discussed the relation between the attractors and the altered attractors. The picture featured imitations of the Adidas logo, some close duplicates, such as 'adidas' while others feature names bearing little resemblance. To understand the function of these imitations I constructed a logic of branding, approaching companies through evolutionary terms, as structures that aim for domination. Oligopolies are markets dominated by few companies, which because of the deliberate planning systems of these companies become anti-markets. Against the anti-market forces of large corporations, smaller business may adopt a strategy of imitation, with similar products and logos of the dominant brands. Other anti-market forces – trademarking and prohibition of importing counterfeit goods – force the imitation away from close proximity, to the creation of somewhat distinct identities.

The altered attractors of *Garden Club* function less as critique of evolutionary attractors, and more as imitations of them. Rather than close replica, however, the pictures are far ranging variations on attractors. The pictures function as predictions of possible future shifts, and by generating a wide variety it is more likely that some of them will hit upon optima. As the micro-networks spread anticipations of future optima, they can at the same time move the searching device, affecting the fitness landscape.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

The Goals of the Thesis

In this chapter I will summarize the research findings of my thesis, starting with reiterating the goals of the thesis. The research object has been Tumblr, selected for its position as one of the largest growing social networks of 2014. In a time where much online traffic comes via mobile devices, Tumblr is particularly suited for such viewing, with short-form, visual-focused posts. Specifically, I focused on the artist and Tumblr user Kari Altmann, and her blog *Garden Club*.

Through her practice, Altmann approaches different artistic mediums as file formats, positioning herself as an artist and her artwork as nodes in networks. Her work thereby reflects current conditions – not only for artists, but for participants in social networks in general. Altmann's blogging creates value systems for sorting data and generating patterns. In my analysis I have set out to interact with and adopt Altmann's patterns, applying theoretical frameworks to them.

My thesis is grounded in media aesthetics, an interdisciplinary field combining perspectives from media studies and aesthetics. Media aesthetics moves away from fixed objects to a processual conception of mediation. I have used an environmental conception of media, as an ontological condition of humanization. Examining the dynamic processes of blogging, I have attempted to understand the logic of Tumblr. I have examined the relation between the network and users, how these levels constitute and structure each other, and how Tumblr determines what kind of interaction takes place.

A central research question of my thesis was: How should I analyze an object which is at the same time a stable collection of published posts, and an ongoing project which is constantly updated? The posts, mostly images, also show sprawling diversity, coming from a wide range of sources. With the reflexivity Altmann offers on her position within the network I have used her blog to build a

framework for image selection and analysis. A sub-question then became: What kind of understanding of Tumblr and social networked images is found on this particular blog?

The Logic of Tumblr

Images as Organisms

The blog offers a view on image blogging, which was taken as the starting point of my analysis. This view was traced to the heading of the blog – its title and logo picture. The title connects images with gardening, presenting image blogging as a process of tending to the organisms in this environment. From this the main question of my thesis became: How can images be considered having organism-like qualities, and what kind of understanding of Tumblr does this perspective offer?

To examine images as organisms I utilized Mitchell's picture theory. Mitchell is concerned with how people treat pictures as if they were alive. We perceive images as double: rationally we see consider them with adamant materialism, while still animating and personifying them. Animism is usually connected to the primitive 'other', but Mitchell shows how modern secular individuals also perceive images with this attitude. For Mitchell is not a cause for criticism, but a perspective for understanding images.

I began my analysis letting the blog's layout select what to focus on rather than making the choices myself. I started with the *The Garden Club* logo, which features an air-plant, held out towards the viewer. The picture shows the act of showing, whereby functioning as what Mitchell calls a meta-picture. The meta-picture is a visual representation of the act of depicting. As a meta-picture the logo is capable of saying something about image blogging and the network in general. It could thereby be used to develop perspectives on *Garden Club* and Tumblr.

Mitchell's theory sets out asking what pictures want. This way of thinking is based in psychoanalysis, with desire distinguished from need and demand. The question reformulates Freud's query of what women want. Such inquiry frames images, and women, as inferior and incapable of answering themselves, having someone speak for them. What the subalterns wants is thereby connected with what they lack: power. In analysis the examination of what the images want

Mitchell distinguishes between the overt positive desire, and what the picture seems to lack. Also important in his analytical strategy is the attempt to not only subjugate pictures by speaking for them, but to become a medium for pictures to act through. This is founded in Mitchell's combination of Panofsky's approach to pictures as symptoms of their time with Althusser's understanding of all practice as ideological. The combination renders images as agents which can act in relation to the viewer.

I analyzed the Garden Club logo, considering what it seemed to want. Its positive desire were connected to its position in the network as a post. The pictures take part in endless scrolls of constantly updating, where the user looks for more than at pictures. The pictures in this framework want to stop scrolling, and to have this punctuated by a like. The air plant has exotic looks, desiring to be noticed. The reblogability of Tumblr pictures can be compared with the air plant's ability to live without stable sustenance, anchoring down temporarily before floating with the wind.

What the picture lacks was connected to its position as a logo for the blog, and to the hand in the motif. The logo removes the picture from the circulation on Tumblr, and the hand ties down the plant so that it is incapable of traveling freely with the wind. The picture lacks existence on its own term, as a picture-organism. Mitchell's theory offers a framework for understanding images as agents, but ultimately restricts viewing them as autonomous organisms. Pictures are considered as material, but in addition they also depend on the mind, with images requiring humans to be experienced as such. The agency of pictures hinges on image's relation to humans, putting limits on an examination of the organism-like side of pictures.

Non-Anthropocentric Pictorial Agency

In the second chapter I further examined the organism-like sides of images, and what kind of agency images have in relation to the network and users. My aim was to create an ontology of social network images, where they could be considered agents without requiring an anthropocentric focus. Focusing on the text below the header image, this asks the question of 'what makes you viral'. I replaced the view of pictures as organisms to a discussion of them as viruses. I set out to construct a viral logic and apply this to Tumblr images.

To construct the viral logic I displaced the anthropocentrism of viruses as pathogens, replacing this with a more neutral framework of connectivity. This framework was adapted from De Landa's development of terms from Deleuze and Guattari. Viruses were conceived as capable of entering into assemblages with users, which are connections where the parts still maintain their individuality. The assemblage causes properties to emerge – which are manifested as tendencies – and these in turn generate capacities. Capacities are events, such as the viral capacity for infection. And they are double, requiring the meeting with something which has the capacity to become infected. The conditions the assemblages exist in determine their tendency, for virus-hosts this is the tendency for acute infections or persistence, where the latter is the most common.

For De Landa agency is connected to the capacity that entities have for structure formation. To show how viruses and Tumblr images have agency I examined their function using De Landa's conceptual construction of a possibility space. The possibility space is an abstract space containing all possible assemblages as well as their properties, tendencies and capacities. According to De Landa this space is not transcendental – meaning non-physical – it has simply not become actualized. The material assemblage function as realizations of the possibility space.

The possibility space renders the relation between viruses and images as something more than simple analogy. Instead both are actualizations of possibility spaces. Images enter into assemblages with users, and the tendencies of these is to either form acute dispersal or to lay dormant in collections. The influence exerted by viruses on their host was shown mainly to come from persistence, which gives viruses evolutionary impact on organisms. With the amount of images included into Tumblr, and the structure of the network's dashboard, the tendency of most pictures will be to become dormant in collections.

The copying errors in viral replication leads to processes of selection, where some replicate while others do not. The possibility space of viruses can be arranged as gradients of fitness, or fitness landscapes – with peaks of optima and valleys of lower fitness. On Tumblr the images are likewise parts of fitness landscapes. Fitness is decided by the amounts of likes and reblogs that pictures receive, with note counts as visible fitness values assigned to each post. The inclusion of variation will cause some posts to be favored over others, and the images with their note counts form

landscapes of valleys and peaks. Optima are the best matches, while other images form dynamic populations of variations. This variability is a requirement for evolutionary change to occur.

The selection mechanisms coupled to the fitness landscape generate a searching device. While without a goal, the searching device traverses the fitness landscape, in search of optima. By performing the search it gives viruses the capacity to exert influence on the structure formation of organisms. On Tumblr the selection pressure and fitness landscape also generate a searching device. The searching device is beyond the perspective of the individual users, but impressions of it can be made by seeing which posts accumulate notes. The posts that gain several notes can be seen as approximations of fitness landscape peaks. While the searching device has certain plasticity, adherence to it is required for images to be dispersed and blogs to gain momentum.

Viruses lack the complexity required for life to emerge, but gain these through forming assemblages with hosts. The connections formed by viruses were discussed as vital in the branching of life into different species. The nature of organisms were seen as rhizomatic, which is a structure of non-linearity, with viruses traversing borders and making the relations between species as criss-crosses of multiplicity.

The connections of Tumblr likewise generate lines of connectivity. The structure of the network and the relations taking place displace the autonomy of the single user, turning them into a multitude of relations, forming rhizomatic micro-networks. Likes and reblogs form the connections of the network, with reblogs being public displays, producing visibility and visual affinity. With time and repeated interaction, the connections cause groups to be formed. Rather than an artist with an audience, *Garden Club* becomes one of many that exist in a micro-network, a network within Tumblr. The capacity that single users have to impact the fitness landscape of the network is restricted to how well their posts adhere to approximations of the fitness landscape. The formation of micro-networks generate forces capable of impacting the fitness landscape.

Garden Club Analysis

Selecting Posts

The conceptual framework of De Landa provides an understanding of how Tumblr functions. These terms construct a method for analyzing the network and its blogs. I considered how the pictures and users form assemblages, and the connections between them generating rhizomatic micro-networks and causing fitness landscapes and searching devices to emerge. With this framework I selected material for analysis, identifying the fitness landscape approximations of *Garden Club*, and the micro-networks the blog participates in.

With fitness landscape approximations available on all Tumblr blogs, I considered the posts with large note counts on *Garden Club* as peak approximations. I selected the most widely reblogged images, setting the range from 1000 notes and upwards. From the blog's beginning and until October 2014, 112 high-fitness images were singled out. I focused in particular on the top three, and compared these peaks with the slopes. The same set of pictures were used to map relations in the micro-networks of *Garden Club*. I focused on *Garden Club*'s most frequent interactions. Micro-networks cluster around images, I therefore explored what kind of imagery the micro-networks are formed around.

Garden Club Attractors

The three images with most notes on *Garden Club* centered around stylish clothing, a celebrity and a cute animal. I discussed why these types of imagery had such popularity. Comparing the pictures with the rest of the selected high-fitness ones gave an impression of the frequency of these traits, and also how the peaks differed from the slopes.

The popularity of the third-most reblogged was considered as resulting from the materiality of the software used in recording and sharing, and the network's structure. It functions as a poor image, made for easy dispersal, with users fulfilling through likes, reblogs and comments. The second-most gained popularity through the network's functionality, and works as a style marker to build one's online persona. The most reblogged picture was connected to a cross-cultural tendency towards cuteness. Animals that could be identified as cute have a greater chance of dispersal than those who could not be considered as such.

Fame, style and animals were shown to function as attractors, which are states that the searching device is drawn to. The attractors in the pictures were understood as the result of evolved human psychology, and the pictures were analyzed to reveal the deeper structures that have led to their prominence. Fame was shown to possibly result from our ancestors attentiveness towards high-ranking individuals, since these would affect their own standing in tribal groups. As mass media delivers celebrities, this mechanism is activated. Fashion was seen as requiring creativity and artistry, and as such displaying individuals' capability of engaging in challenging activities. It could thereby be a fitness marker for partner selection. Humans and dogs have co-evolved, with humans selecting for dogs that have juvenile features. This could possibly be evolved responses humans have to our own offspring. Juvenile traits in children generate affection, which have been transferred to animals as they are turned into pets.

A common trait among these images is the focus on individuals, with distinguishable faces. This was shown to be a result of a pull towards faces in the sensorial system of humans. Faces that display attractiveness were discussed as particularly appealing, with indications that looking at attractive people being more rewarding than looking at ones that are not. What constitutes attractive looks were shown to possibly be cross-cultural and in agreement between sexes. With the difficulty of constructing traits such as symmetry, it can function as an indicator of fitness, thus making it important in partner selection. The *Garden Club* fitness landscape was shown to be filled with individuals displaying characteristics connected to attractive looks.

Micro-Network Alterations

The micro-networks related to *Garden Club* were found to center around animals, style and beauty and technology and nature. These micro-networks were identified and discussed by looking the frequent interaction between *Garden Club* and specific users. One micro-network could be seen forming around creatures that can be described as uncanny, creating a proximity to humans and eliciting responses of objection. Another micro-network features juxtapositions of technology and plants, diminishing the sense of technological progression. Among the reblogs of style markers such as fashion displays and celebrities, a counter-cultural micro-network of surprising and non-conform style choices were identified. These imagery were considered altered attractors, which are distributed by the micro-networks.

I discussed the relation between attractors and the micro-networks alterations using a picture of Adidas logo variations. Conceiving brands as structures which aim for domination, companies like Adidas generate oligopolies, markets that are dominated by few companies, causing them to become anti-markets. Smaller businesses face the choice of competing in these anti-markets or imitating the dominant brands. Products that look like the dominant brand might be mistaken for it, while trademarking and prohibition of counterfeit goods will force greater variation into the imitations.

Altered attractors spread by micro-networks related to *Garden Club* can be compared to the Adidas logo variations. The pictures function as imitations of attractors, but rather than close ones, they differ greatly, featuring unconventional depictions of style, beauty and animals that are normally viewed with antipathy. These are the variations forming around the optima, which are requirements for evolution to form, but at the same time they may function as predictions of future shifts in the fitness landscape. With micro-networks clustering around alterations, they can gain momentum, ultimately causing the searching device to move, shifting what constitutes attractors in the network.

Summary

With this thesis I have created a method for analyzing Tumblr blogs, and generated an understanding of the logic the network operates according to. This was done by selecting the blog *Garden Club*, which presented a meta-perspective on the social network and image blogging both on *Garden Club* and in general. This was identified in the blog's title and the logo image, which were shown to imbue images with agency, presenting them as organisms. The image theory of W. J. T. Mitchell was used to approach the agency of pictures, examining what pictures want. The structure of Tumblr with endless scrolls and constant updating makes users look *for* more than *at* images, so the pictures here want to be noticed. The *Garden Club* logo shows an air plant. These plants can live without stable foundation, anchoring down temporarily, comparable to the reblogability of Tumblr images.

In Mitchell's theory pictures are considered dependent on human minds for their existence. To discuss pictorial agency in a non-anthropocentric sense I displaced the conception of images as organisms, focusing on them instead as viruses. The logic of virality was considered using Manuel De Landa's framework of assemblages. The virus and the host forms assemblages – connections where the parts still maintain individuality. Agency was recognized as the capacity that viruses have to generate structure. This capacity was discussed using the conceptual framework of a possibility space – an abstract, yet physical space containing all possible assemblages, with their properties, tendencies and capacities. The replication of viruses are measured in fitness, and the possibility space with assigned fitness values can be arranged as a fitness landscape.

Viruses and images were conceived as different actualizations of the possibility space. The images and users on Tumblr form assemblages, with tendencies to form acute dispersal or to lay dormant in collections. Some pictures have higher reblogging rate than others, and the note count will be a visible display of this. The different rates mean that the Tumblr possibility space is a fitness landscape, with high-note posts as peaks. Selection mechanisms coupled to the fitness landscape generate a searching device. While without a goal, the searching device traverses the fitness landscape, in search of optima.

The actual fitness landscape and the searching device of Tumblr is beyond the perspective of users, and the beyond the scope of this thesis. Posts with high note counts, however, will function as approximations of the fitness landscape optima. I analyzed the most reblogged posts on *Garden Club* to get an impression of the Tumblr fitness landscape. By investigating the top three pictures I found that the searching device was primed towards style, celebrity, and cuteness. These were considered attractors, which are states that the searching device is drawn to. Attractors were discussed as the result of evolved human psychology. This renders fame as the result of ancestral attentiveness to high-ranking individuals, which resurfaces when celebrities are shown to us in mass media. Fashion becomes an indicator of fitness, as it displays individuals' capacity for engaging in creative and artistic practice. Cuteness was displayed in the picture of a puppy. Dogs have co-evolved with humans, and have been selected for juvenile features. The approximations further showed sensorial beauty to possibly be an attractor in itself.

Viruses and organisms form rhizomatic connections, which are structures of non-linearity, as the viruses criss-cross and generate multiplicity in species relations. The Tumblr users likewise have their autonomy displaced, becoming multitudes of relations in micro-networks. In order to gain momentum and dispersal the single user needs to adhere to the searching device, but in micro-networks users can combine to generate forces which can impart the fitness landscape. As the users begin to follow each others patterns, the micro-networks increase the capacity for impacting. The micro-networks related to *Garden Club* were found to center around altered attractors: animals that were uncanny, rather than cute; fashion, people and celebrities displaying uncommon style choices. These function as imitations of the attractors, forming the variations around optima. The imagery of micro-networks function less as subversions and critique of predominant attractors, and more as predictions and potential future shifts of the searching device.

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Appendix: Statistics

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mwenemutapa2007	5
digimprov	3
4est	2
unflavoredwaxfloss20	2
anormaux	2
beyonce	2
0001yes	

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