

Error in apparatus as aesthetic value

by Alejandro Schianchi

Abstract: An error seems to be that which gets between the ideal being and the real being; the error appears to be a singularity, a Non-being that transforms and distorts the Being. Audiovisual techniques, technologies, devices and media try to suppress errors; however, an ideological and aesthetic possibility hides behind the use of errors.

1. Introduction

An error, a failure, or an accident connotes something that is bad, wrong and inappropriate. The purpose of this work is to demonstrate the positive aspect of errors that take place in the artistic production achieved with audiovisual machines.

We will start by giving a more precise meaning to what we usually call “error”. In order to do so, we will resort to its scientific definition, particularly in the fields of physics and mathematics: “difference between the measured or calculated value and the real value”. This means there is a difference between the real obtained result and the prevision we had made and had thought as certain. At this point we will introduce an element which is important to highlight: the concept of error would be unconceivable without the idea of prevision. Prevision entails supposing, waiting, and, above all, “believing” — in terms of faith — that something is going to occur and is going to happen somehow. Only in this way the error is able to appear. If, for example, we do not expect anything in particular from an apparatus that produces images, any result will be satisfying. Moreover, we can set forth that in the field of the arts originality, unlike repetition, carries a different value. Every time art moves away from the normative pressure of academicism (evident in the vanguards of the 20th century), it will attach a positive sense to the difference explained as a shortfall by exact sciences.

If we talk about prevision and repetition, the concept of definition inevitably comes up; definitions are later transformed into classifications. Stability allows us to sort the elements that make up a system according to their characteristics. When we use a photographic camera in the usual way, we expect to obtain, after a series of processes, an image that is true to the one that was in front of the lens of the camera at the moment of exposure. If we obtain instead a splotch, we will infer that some kind of error occurred during the process, because the photographic camera (in its standard definition) does not produce abstract images, but rather reproduces objectively that which is captured by the lens.

2. Perfect Machines

The utopian view of an error-free machine finds its origin within two spheres, science and religion.

We mentioned already the pejorative definition of an “error” in mathematics and physics, where the goal is clearly to eliminate errors, and where we find the impetus for the “Difference Engine No. 1”. Designed by Charles Babbage, the Difference Engine No. 1, without the need for human intervention in its calculation process, is considered a precursor to modern day computers. The data is entered, the gears turn, and we obtain a result free from the common errors which would occur when using the mathematics tables of the time. On the other end, with the utilization of the clock by monks in the the VII century to schedule time for prayer, religion (western Judeo-Christian) found itself concerned with embedding meaning into machines. And as David F. Noble explained, the Middle Ages began to see these technological devices as a means to re-establish the divine order which governed in the lost paradise. One of the first records which demonstrates this relationship is the “Utrecht Psalter” where we can observe two armed groups, one allied with God and the other with the Devil. In the latter, we observe the use of stones in sharpening their swords, while the “divine” group utilizes grinding machines. Technological progress becomes a virtue, and a quest for perfection in science and religion. A possibility to eliminate “errors”, that built also a general quest that conduct most of modern society until today.

With the passing of time devices became more complex, and the ideal machine became an automatic system free of errors. The user simply turns it on and waits for it to produce what is expected. The engineer, programmer, or technician needs to foresee all the possibilities the automatic system may face, in order to minimize the margin of error during it’s operation. For most of the users, this automation turned the machine into a black box. However, an unexpected action is found hidden within its automatic operation, which leads to imagining scenarios of rebellion where machines turn against their creators.

3. Error in the Art

Different from science and religion, the artistic vanguards of the XX century established that the exceptions to the rules and systematizations, the uncertainties, chances and “errors” and all those elements outside the scope of Art’s classical conventions, could be included and used as another element of aesthetic creation.

The productions and considerations of Luigi Russollo and John Cage in music, Marcel Duchamp, Nam June Paik, and Wolf Vostell among others, do nothing more than continuing the error inclusion proposal in the artistic field and confronting the common uses of the technical devices around us.

These subversions of technology created even a stronger impact on the current massified “digital” supports environment, where errors try to be eliminated under a system of more than 50 different correction methods, which were highly advertised with the arrival of the “digital” supports.

In the sounds and digital images world, the cases of Yasunao Tone, Oval, Takeshi Murata, JODI, and 0100101110101101.ORG, among others gave rise

to an aesthetic called “glitch” which paradoxically proposes the repetition of a certain sound or image as resulting from accidents and “unexpected” actions from the digital audiovisual devices.

4. Expanded Glitch

Nevertheless, we do not believe that the analysis of errors should be restricted to audiovisual devices, we think that errors are essential to the functioning of any system, therefore, we could analyse how error works in philosophical, scientific, social and economic systems. And encourage to take errors in the aesthetic field as a possibility to discover new elements of a work of Art.

A failure in an apparatus program often sends back a faulty image or a sound which cannot be otherwise conceived. Limits are blurred, and we are faced with the naked truth, without attires or pretenses. We receive data, waves, and exposed information according to an artificial mechanism which constantly defines itself in its errors.

This is what makes an error unique, revolutionary and beautiful, and there lies its value.

A short circuit in an appliance builds a new and unpredictable world that is embraced by the artistic field as one more aesthetic element.



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