Remediating tactility: The re-negotiation of sensory experience in satisfying videos on YouTube

Remediatização da tatilidade: re/negociação da experiência sensorial em vídeos de satisfação no YouTube

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Abstract:

This article investigates how 'satisfying' videos on YouTube have developed into a unique micro genre and established a new visuality based on remediating tactility (as well as other sensory experiences) via massively redundant visual characteristics and social media logic. To map this microgenre, the article outlines a novel technique rooted in cultural analytics, specifically the approach used by (Hochman and Manovich 2013) to study the visual imaginary of urban hubs. While these earlier studies focus on the chronological order of images within a (feature) film, this new approach allows for visualizing the emergence of a visual 'vocabulary' of 'satisfying' videos over time.

Keywords:

'Satisfying' videos; Youtube; Tactility; Micro genre formation; Cultural Analytics.

Resumo:

Este artigo investiga como os vídeos 'de satisfação' no YouTube formaram um microgênero e estabeleceram uma nova visualidade com base na correção da tatilidade (assim como em outras experiências sensoriais) por meio de características visuais massivamente redundantes e lógica de mídia social. Para mapear esse microgênero, o artigo descreve uma nova técnica enraizada na análise cultural, especificamente a abordagem usada por (Hochman e Manovich 2013) para estudar o imaginário visual de centros urbanos. Embora esses estudos anteriores se concentrem na ordem cronológica das imagens em um filme (de longa metragem), essa nova abordagem permite visualizar o surgimento de um 'vocabulário' visual de 'satisfação' em vídeos ao longo do tempo.

Palavras-chave:

Vídeos "de satisfação"; Youtube; Tatilidade; Formação de microgêneros; Análise cultural.

1 Introduction

Over the past years, YouTube has facilitated the emergence of numerous (audio-)visual forms, from Iraq War music clips (Snickars and Vonderau 2009, 204) over commemoration videos (218) to compilations documenting athletes' accomplishments (243/4).

Picture 1
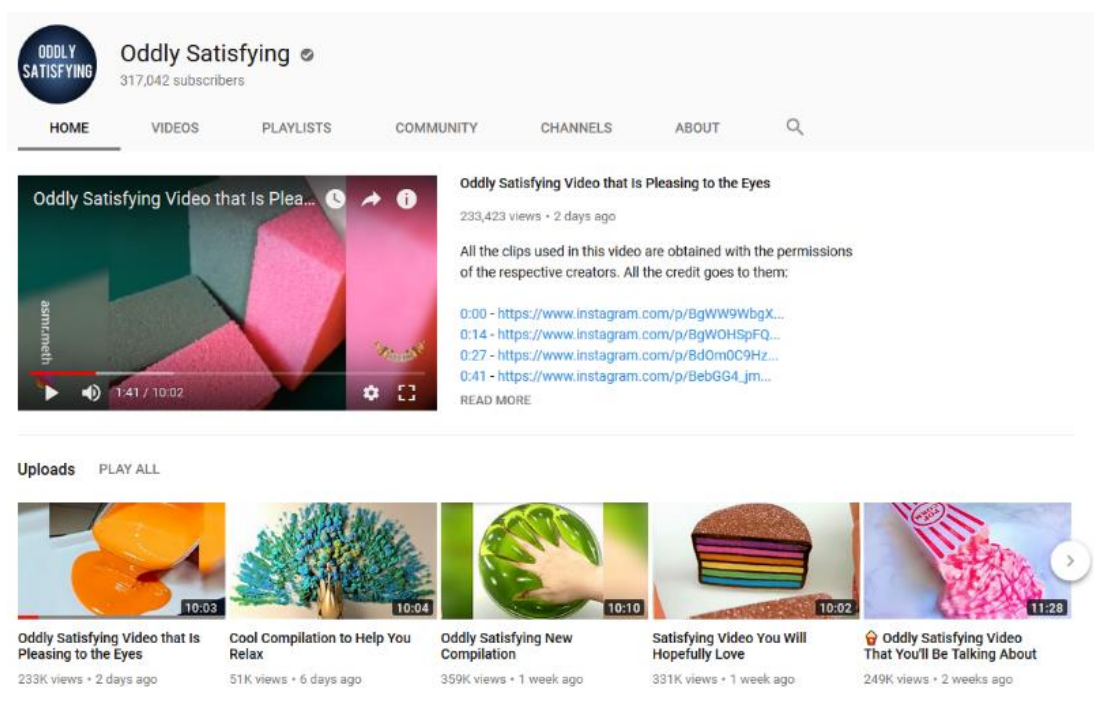
The individual videos constituting these micro genres are often quickly and casually composed and published, which makes them appear to be of marginal aesthetical relevance. Thus, academic discussions often focus on cultural rather than formal implications, i.e. on how the micro genres transform public conceptions of the phenomena they represent (cf. e.g. Edmond 2014 on YouTube music videos). Complementary to these studies, this chapter investigates 'satisfying videos'[1], a more

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[1] For an overview of the phenomenon cf. e.g.
http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/crux/2017/08/15/oddly-satisfying-videos/#.WlJTIDco-Uk.

recent micro genre that characteristically offers even fewer narrative elements than sports or music clips, by combining cultural analytics techniques (Hochman and Manovich 2013) with a diachronic content analysis (Bell 2004). The chapter focuses on the micro genre formation process itself and on how 'satisfying' videos have developed a new visual vocabulary based on remediating tactility (as well as other sensory experiences) via massively redundant visual characteristics and social media logic (Poell and Van Dijck 2013). Despite their esoteric premise and clickbait titles, 'satisfying' videos constitute an important aspect of contemporary culture, particularly for two main reasons,

a) they offer a forum for negotiating the alleged 'dematerialization' of digital media, and

b) they demonstrate how, beyond the current focus on Virtual Reality (VR) applications, grassroots visual media creators discover new ways of experimental and immersive quasi-sensory experiences.

To elucidate this cultural relevance, the argument below follows several consecutive steps. First, a working definition of 'satisfying' videos is presented and connected to three key concepts. Then, the emergence of the micro genre is placed in a broader cultural context to outline its academic relevance. Third, the methodological framework and corpus of videos are explained and justified; afterwards, a taxonomy of nine visual idioms is introduced and implemented to outline the visual vocabulary of 'satisfying' videos in transition. The chapter concludes by briefly acknowledging the hybridization of the idioms proposed above, by addressing the notion of 'satisfying' in contemporary online discourse, and by pointing out suggestions for further research.

2 Defining 'Satisfying' Videos as an Emergent Micro Genre

As a micro genre designation, 'satisfying videos' share several common properties, most evidently the use of the term '(oddly) satisfying' in the title. As compilation videos, they exhibit what Lev Manovich called the "logic of selection"

(Manovich 2001, 123), i.e. the fact that most digital media artifacts are "assembled from ready-made parts" (124) rather than created from scratch. In earlier examples, the references to the original clips are still listed[2], while later videos usually do not do this, e.g. because the overall number of cuts increases over time but also because some of the material is reused, thereby ensuring some familiarity on the part of the viewer.

A recurring definition that reappears in several of the most prominent videos in the genre characterizes 'satisfying' as "something that makes your skin tingle and for some unknown reason provides you with a sense of unbridled peace and happiness? Gears working in perfect synchronization, a cake frosted with absolute precision, marbles rolling so smoothly it hurts. Something that is just...satisfying?"[3]. Judging from that description, the appeal of the videos can be partly explained with reference to the flow-like psychological state known as Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR; cf. e.g. Gallagher 2016). Gallagher refers to Nitin Ahuja's definition of the physiological characteristics of ASMR as "a reliable low-grade euphoria in response to specific interpersonal triggers", adding himself that the phenomenon "might be brought on by watching someone performing a meticulous task, by the cadence of a voice, by whispering and soft sounds or by expressions of care, interest and affirmation". However, in online discourse, the term is predominantly used with reference to videos that employ binaural sound and other auditory techniques that Gallagher describes with Michel Chion as materializing sound indices, i.e. "tapping, crinkling, lip smacking and other such acoustic details 'that cause us to 'feel' the material conditions of the sound source.'". Gallagher's analysis of "'ASMR' video culture" also focuses almost exclusively on this aspect and does not pursue a comparative approach nor include any case studies. In contrast, this chapter proposes a more medium-specific approach, which considers questions of visuality and (micro) genre formation. For that purpose, it focuses on three media characteristics, which will be briefly summarized below.

a) Repetition and variation

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[2] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjeKw0B8PG8.
[3] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjeKw0B8PG8.

While the choice of material creates commonalities, 'satisfying videos' hardly comprise any defining syntactic elements. They usually employ hard cuts between clips and, apart from the earliest examples, play one or more continuous pieces of music in the background without noticeable image-sound synchronization (e.g. cutting with the rhythm of the music). Instead, through repetition and variation, the videos are intended to evoke strong emotional reactions, which arguably create the impression of triggering other sensory capacities than just sight and hearing.

Mapped onto Robert Plutchik's emotional taxonomy, the videos trigger three "primary emotion dimensions" (Plutchik 2001, 349) in particular, i.e. ecstasy, vigilance and amazement. According to this model, it appears particularly noteworthy that vigilance (as well as its less intense forms 'anticipation' and 'interest') and amazement (or 'surprise' and 'distraction' respectively) are considered a pair of opposites. As the visual motifs and material characteristics (playback speed, resolution etc.) of the clips change rapidly, the viewer thus supposedly switches between sometimes contrasting emotional states, which characterizes the viewing experience.

A few videos even include elements of disgust, e.g. the image of a large spider burying itself under sand in a glass container[4], which is characteristically preceded and followed by footage of colorful syrup being poured into a cup of milk. Thus, while the sequence of clips is usually not carefully curated, the multiplicity of images often produces moments of juxtaposition. Thus, rather than actual disgust, which Plutchik defines as a more subdued form of loathing, these images more appropriately elicit an emotional reaction that Plutchik calls vigilance, i.e. keeping the viewer 'on the edge'.

b) Collective experimentation

Second, 'satisfying' videos are essentially visual experiments. Experimental forms in general have become an increasingly influential episteme within participatory media culture, which includes several other closely related micro genres. For instance, YouTube accounts like TheBackYard scientist[5] and Beyond the press[6] are building

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[4] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckoKiFfMe3k&t=7m54s.
[5] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/user/TheBackyardScientist.
[6] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCveB47lgzZJ1WOf4XYVJNBw.

familiarity and creating a feedback loop that compels viewers to subscribe by systematically exploring extreme material properties, e.g. bringing molten objects into contact with substances of various viscosities. Food testing videos constitute a different take on the same principle of experimentation, in which the reference point is the host (rather than a physical object), with whom viewers develop an intersubjective relationship based on a shared "embodied simulation" (Ferrari and Gallese 2007, 73). Yet, these videos similarly explore many potential experimental configurations, e.g. particularly expensive or exotic food. Both examples exhibit forms of 'explicit experimentation'; in contrast, 'satisfying' videos are rather implicitly experimental because many video creators independently iterate on the same, gradually consolidated set of visual tropes, assessing the 'success' of their experiments by the number of likes and views they receive.

c) Playful modes of production and reception

Finally, even though 'satisfying' videos are self-contained and linear audiovisual forms, understanding their production and particularly reception requires taking into account concepts of play and games. Barthes' notion of "jouissance", which John Fiske references in is discussion of pleasure and play in televisual culture (Fiske 1987, 224), constitutes a useful conceptual link, which appears particularly applicable to the case at hand. Fiske summarizes it as "pleasure of the body, experienced through heightened sensualities that relate it to human nature, rather than culture" (227), thereby distinguishing it from 'plaisir', i.e. pleasures of the mind. He applies this to television by arguing that jouissance, experienced in play, can also be triggered by "physical signifiers of the text - the 'grain' that some singing voices have [or, more generally,] the sound of speech *close up*" (227/28). Arguably, 'satisfying' videos translate these auditory 'physical signifiers' to a specific visual vocabulary as elaborated below.

A second, loosely related concept from the study of games is the notion of "vertigo", which according to Roger Caillois constitutes one of four distinct "species" of games (Caillois and Halperin 1955, 73). Vertigo in play is defined by overstraining the senses, as in children's whirling games or "some dances like the waltz", which can

produce an "effect[…] of intoxication" (all 73). Arguably, the rapid sequence of incoherent images in the videos and the fact that many viewers will watch multiple 'satisfying' videos in quick succession leads to a viewing disposition (or: dispositif, as explained below) characterized by vertigo.

3 Situating 'Satisfying' Videos in Contemporary Visual Culture

Despite their alleged novelty and often idiosyncratic aesthetics, 'satisfying' videos can be regarded as a continuation of several ongoing, well-studied developments. In her analysis of *Life in a Day*, an online video experiment YouTube conducted with the help of directors Ridley Scott and Kevin Macdonald to "tell the story of a single day on earth by collecting videos from around the globe" (Gotto 2011, 179), Lisa Gotto argues that YouTube produces a "new sensorium" rather than merely circulating audiovisual content.

Picture 2

THE PILLOW BOOK - Digitally Remastered, Film Movement Classics Trailer
9,808 views

This hypothesis will serve as a conceptual basis to argue that 'satisfying videos' in particular afford new sensory experiences by remediating senses other than sight

and hearing. This 'remediation' of other sensory modalities with audiovisual means has been a distinct aesthetic strategy in avant-garde cinematography, e.g. close-up depictions of calligraphy or ink washed away by water in films like Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* (Willoquet-Maricondi 1999). From that angle, 'satisfying' videos represent a re-appropriation of (elements of) this postmodern visual vocabulary through the bottom-up mode of online video production, including its largely decentralized processes of micro genre formation rather than Greenaway's deliberate references to established genre conventions. Moreover, while avant-garde filmmakers have 'played with the senses' more sparingly, 'satisfying' videos characteristically condense the process, eliminating the syntagmatic qualities of the images while creating new, social contexts of meaning.

'Satisfying' videos further reaccentuate the concept of micro genres (Rehak 2007; Kudelka 2014) because, in contrast to previously studied examples like bullet time action films (Rehak 2007) or special-interest websites (Kudelka 2014), they are comparatively numerous. Moreover, as applied in this chapter, the notion of micro genre both refers to formal properties of the content but also to genres of communication (Crowston and Williams 2000). From that angle, 'satisfying' videos constitute an ephemeral community, which is characterized by "us[ing] different genres in their communication, and us[ing] common genres with different frequencies" (203). With the compilation videos as a shared reference point, this community facilitates an ongoing discourse on sensory experience and "mobile video literacy" (Weilenmann, Säljö, and Engström 2014) that extends beyond YouTube.

The few comparable studies of visuality in social media (e.g. Hjorth and Pink 2014) pursue an ethnographic approach, reconstructing the perspectives of individual creators. Instead, this chapter conducts a comparative analysis of visual material and, for that purpose, draws on literature about formal characteristics that 'satisfying' videos share with other media genres.

First and foremost, they are designed for "spreadability" (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013), exhibiting key aspects of viral videos such as "incongruity", "exaggeration", and "surprise" (Pirouz et al. 2012, 672). They share the element of "repetitiveness" (Shifman 2012, 197) with Limor Shifman's taxonomy of YouTube

memes and, as compilation videos, are rooted in the "poetics" of lists as a knowledge structure, an aspect that (Young 2017, 131) explores from a cultural historical perspective using the umbrella term 'list cultures'. Furthermore, 'satisfying' videos are part of the video remix genre, but while existing studies of video remixes (Horwatt 2009; Gotto 2011), foreground issues of emancipation, appropriation and resistance, 'satisfying' videos instead aim for establishing a form of visual phatic communication (Miller 2008) and playful competition as will be elaborated below.

4 Method and Corpus

To conduct an exploratory mapping of 'satisfying' videos as a micro genre, the chapter combines a montage technique rooted in cultural analytics, specifically the approach used by Hochman and Manovich (2013) to study the visual imaginary of contemporary metropoles, with a comparative visual content analysis (Bell 2004).

Since 'satisfying' videos emerged as a fixed term in early 2016[7], the corpus will comprise the most viewed *YouTube* results for the search term "oddly satisfying" of the past 24 months. The aim was to ensure a more or less even distribution across the period from December 2015 to September 2017, despite a few clusters of particularly popular videos at specific points in time such as early March 2017. Moreover, videos that focused on only one type of content[8], e.g. clips depicting mechanical food processing or cake decoration, were deliberately excluded for this study. Based on these selection criteria, ten videos with a total of 270 shots, ranging from one second to half a minute in length, were selected for this analysis.

First, a set of nine visual patterns was derived and iteratively refined through cursory viewing. These include 'craftsmanship and tool use', 'order, efficiency and precision', 'automation', 'mechanical and chemical reactions', 'identifying with a

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[7] Cf. e.g. https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205y&q=%22satisfying%20video%22.

[8] The most popular video with almost 38 million views as of March 2018, is a recent (Jan. 2017) compilation of clips involving gooey substances; cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCu2paqBF6Q. Moreover, several clips of dominoes falling with about 16 million views each also were among the top results.

non-human object', 'heightened sensory experiences', 'effortlessness and vertigo', 'food' and 'optical illusions/visual experiments'; in that order, they will be elaborated on as the basic semantic fields within the emergent visual 'vocabulary' of 'satisfying' videos below. Next, screenshots were taken of all individual shots in the compilation videos; the images were labeled according to the publication date of the video and sorted into folders according to the nine patterns. Finally, two large-scale contact sheets (cf. Illustration on the side) were created using the macro *Image Montage*[9], which Lev Manovich, Matias Giachino, and Jay Chow of the Software Studies Initiative developed for the open source image processing program *ImageJ* in 2014. A 4000x4000px square montage shows the images sorted into image strips according to the pattern they represent; more importantly, a 2000x16000px montage also displays the images sorted thematically but in chronological order, indicating both the amount and types of motifs within each category over time. Both images are available in their original resolution, along with the other screenshots in this chapter, online at https://imgur.com/a/kQKfl.

While *ImageMontage* and similar tools have been commonly used for semi-automated analyses of very large visual corpora (Yamaoka et al. 2011), this technique is different on several accounts. There are only very few applications of the tool to screenshots from audiovisual content[10] (instead of image archives), and these focus on the chronological order of images within a (feature) film, e.g. visualizing changes in the dominant color or visual density. Yet, as the syntactic properties of images within 'satisfying' video compilations are usually irrelevant, and users will often watch multiple clips by following video recommendations, all ten videos are treated as one collective visual corpus rather than as individual unit. This approach follows the principle of "networked visualities", which Hjorth and Pink (2014, 51) define to describe how mobile phone photographs render movement as "frozen into a networked snapshot".

Even more important, previous cultural analytics usually consider the semi-automated image mapping as an endpoint, relying on empirical lines of argumentation;

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[9] Cf. https://imagej.nih.gov/ij/plugins/image-montage/index.html.
[10] Cf. e.g. http://lab.softwarestudies.com/2013/01/visualizing-vertov-new-article-by-lev.html.

for instance Hochman and Manovich (2013) visually sorted random image samples (comprising thousands of Instagram photos) from different cities across the world according to average brightness or hue to "reveal[…] a 'signature' of dominant visual preferences" that characterize the respective places. Due to their large sample size, these mappings claim a high level of cultural validity, but remain rather elusive, as e.g. the visual signatures are expressed in numbers, which are not easily compatible with more interpretive cultural analyses.

In contrast, the visualizations created for this chapter operate with a small corpus and the use of automated image processing capabilities of *ImageMontage* to support a hermeneutic inquiry, considering the digital artefacts themselves with Mieke Bal as "theoretical objects" (Bal 2013). Bal argues that "images can perform an equivalent of speech acts; that they can respond ('speak back') to the look cast onto them, and that they can entice viewers to theorize". With her argument, Bal is referring to images in the sense of documentary filmmaking, and she does not systematically expound the concept of theoretical images in her article. Yet, despite covering 'only' 270 images, the contact sheets similarly become a performative element in the research process, they 'speak back' e.g. by affording forms of serendipitous discovery that would not be possible by watching the videos themselves. Thus, while the corpus is by no means 'representative', alternating between a macro and micro view on the chronological visualization can lead to productive hypotheses. For instance, it shows how some categories (e.g. 'optical illusions') appear to have gradually and consistently increased in relevance, while the popularity of others fluctuated more extremely (e.g. 'identifying with a non-human object'). These could be verified with a larger corpus using a more traditional cultural analytics approach.

5 Towards an Emergent Visual Vocabulary of 'Satisfying' Videos

The analysis aimed at retracing the emergence of a visual 'vocabulary' for 'satisfying' videos. In early 2016, the term 'oddly satisfying' is still used mostly with reference to individual clips, but some compilations of specific motifs, e.g. mechanical

contraptions[11] and efficient (or rather: aesthetically pleasing) work routines[12], already exist. The earliest video in the corpus, published on 10th December 2015[13], demonstrates that at this point the variety of visual phenomena that would be grouped under the label 'oddly satisfying' was still much larger, and the individual shots were much longer. Over time, this thematic scope became more and more narrow as the visual 'vocabulary' of 'satisfying' videos in active use became consolidated. At around April 2016, video creators started playing with the 'genre' formula, thereby further discursively stabilizing it. For instance, inverting the concept of 'satisfying' itself, as in videos like the "ODDLY UNSATISFYING VIDEO COMPILATION!"[14] became a much-imitated way of playfully exploring the boundaries of the genre designation. Later videos were explicitly framed as a 'challenge'[15], in line with Caillois' principle of "agon" (Caillois and Halperin 1955, 65). Caillois differentiates between four archetypes of games and uses the term to describe competition and rivalry as recurring game elements alongside 'alea' (i.e. games of chance), mimicry (simulation games and role play) and ilinx (games that disorient and/or destabilize the players). Yet, these videos do not 'play out' as actual competitions but primarily use signifiers of agon in a humorous, self-reflexive manner (even though later videos clearly demonstrate the creators' intention to outdo each other). Even later, in the second half of 2017, 'satisfying' videos gradually became discursively linked to the idea of relaxation[16]. At that point, many videos were deliberately edited to be exactly 10 minutes long, a para-textual characteristic that, according to user comments, was regarded as adding to the 'satisfying' quality[17] and, thus, became part of the informal genre conventions.

Below, the nine previously introduced categories, which together constitute a taxonomy that represents the vast majority of "visual idioms" (Heywood and Sandywell 2005, ix) found in the corpus, will be briefly characterized individually, as they are intended to provide basic orientation in parsing the multiplicity of visual

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[11] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lXO69eRWkkY.
[12] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmWhmRnvVLk.
[13] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cr82m129bj0.
[14] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H91i8v0F9IA.
[15] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=99+%25+satisfied.
[16] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHr45sHJ6tk.
[17] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD8N7t8Hg7k.

motifs. However, many motifs more adequately constitute hybrids of multiple categories, and this hybridization will be elaborated on in the concluding chapter.

a) Craftsmanship and Tool Use

The first category is attributed to videos that document craftsmanship as well as the material qualities of tool use. Common motifs include calligraphy and the use of very sharp knives. This appreciation of physical capabilities and manipulating material appears to be at least in part a reaction to the common sentiment that digital media diminish sensory experiences. In a comparative review essay, Mark Paterson describes a concurrent "return to senses" (Paterson 2008, 563) in contemporary scholarship, aimed at "reassert[ing] the validity of nonvisual experience" (563).

b) Order, Efficiency, and Precision

The second, closely related category also involves craftsmanship but shifts the focus from the person to the practice itself, which often exhibits a surprising amount of precision or efficiency. These e.g. include processes that make seemingly messy and difficult tasks easy to accomplish, e.g. loading rounds of ammunition into a magazine or cutting bushes into a standardized shape. The most common type of practices is cleaning, e.g. picking up tiny metal shards from the floor using a magnetized container or cleaning rust off a piece of metal using a laser.

The images essentially address the epistemic gap between analogue and digital media. While digital media consist of discrete units, analogue media are continuous, characterized by material residue and small imperfections. Lev Manovich argues that this epistemic is only gradually becoming apparent through the ongoing "shift from physical and mechanical media technologies to electronic media and then digital software" (Manovich 2013, 133). For instance, while color in physical paintings is tangible and uneven, in digital images it is expressed by numerical values indicating e.g. red, green, and blue (RGB) proportions or hue, saturation, and lightness (HSL), which can be mathematically manipulated. Videos in this category at least conceptually bridge that gap, promising to transfer the notion of 'near-digital' perfection into physical environments.

c) Automation

The third category again shifts the focus from practices in general to automated processes in particular.

Picture 3

In earlier videos, this 'pattern' had been interpreted more liberally, including e.g. also choreographies with many performers that exhibit complex scripted (i.e. 'automated') interactions[18]. More recent examples focus instead on mechanized food processing and other completely automated workflows but also human work involving continuously moving tools, e.g. clay sculpting on a pottery wheel. In the most recent videos in the corpus, this motif includes also digital creation processes, e.g. graphics software that affords automated mirroring of user input via a graphics tablet. Automation has become a more and more contentious cultural phenomenon since the early 1980s (Sheridan, Vámos, and Aida 1983), and judging from these images it is becoming more and more versatile as an aesthetic experience. In a few cases, the visual effect of automation is also achieved via time lapse clips of human actions, e.g. an artist creating an image out of countless overlapping strings[19], which appear 'automated' as they occur in unnaturally rapid succession. As such, this category

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[18] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cr82m129bj0&t=1m.
[19] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckoKiFfMe3k&t=9m40s.

exhibits contemporary fascination with symbiotic interactions between humans and machines, a mindset that Clive Thompson calls "cyborg consciousness" (Thompson 2010). Rather than assuming a rivalry between human and artificial intelligence, "cyborgian activity" according to Thompson e.g. involves using Facebook to remember birthdays or using a GPS navigation system to enhance one's own spatial orientation. The repetition of clips in this category visualize this mindset, iterating upon it using many different motifs.

d) Identifying with Non-Human Objects

Watching a factory robot as in many clips of the 'automation' category might appear abstract at first since there is no human agent involved, who would afford identification. However, due to the constant repetition of non-human 'objects' and specifically by virtue of their often unusual or extreme material properties, these clips arguably do establish an empathetic relationship with these objects over time.

This relationship is not based on perceived anthropomorphization, i.e. imagining the object having quasi-human physical or behavioral characteristics, but rather on what new media philosopher Ian Bogost calls "alien phenomenology" (Bogost 2012). With his object-oriented ontology, Bogost argues that all objects, animated or otherwise, interact with each other but that these interactions are accessible to us via speculative philosophy based on metaphor (67) but also via popular media such as (video) games (52). Arguably, clips in this category, e.g. of a sponge absorbing water or a stream of magma flowing into the ocean, fulfill a similar purpose using audiovisual media. Bogost proposes a posthuman perspective, which does not distinguish between 'objects' and 'subjects', in which "stuffs enjoy equal being no matter their size, scale, or order" (6); accordingly, he is interested in the 'experience' of things, e.g. "how the sensor [of a digital camera] sees" (67). As a tool to approximate these object sensibilities, Bogost primarily turns to computers and digital games as a reference point. However, due to their unusual visual characteristics and mode of distribution, satisfying videos may serve a similar purpose. For instance, the motifs in this category usually surprise through depictions of extreme material qualities, thereby temporarily unsettling the viewer's perception of their 'objectness'. Through repetition

and variation, viewers learn about these material contiguities in different contexts, similar to how players of a game experience the same in-game situation in different forms across multiple playthroughs. In a similar argumentative gesture, studies of 20th century film and literature (e.g. Augustine 1991) repeatedly frame the city as a character, thereby implying a similar posthuman ontology; in comparison, 'satisfying' videos intensify this viewing experience by condensing it in both time and space.

e) Immersive Representations of Mechanical and Chemical Reactions

This category again represents a slightly different take on the previous, also depicting unusual material properties, but focusing on the interactions between numerous 'moving parts', either small-scale mechanical objects or the chemical constituents of interacting substances, rather than one more or less homogeneous object. In this category, we find repeated shots of milk being poured into a coffee cup or liquid of different viscosity coalescing, but also countless paillettes on a cushion forming visual patterns or marbles and domino pieces colliding with each other.

Since these interactions are very complex, their behavior is partially black-boxed but can be tentatively anticipated, especially if viewers have seen many similar clips before (which more often than not will be the case). Therefore, these clips are inherently game-like, they challenge the viewer to predict what will happen and, through iteration, will allow them to refine their mental models, creating a sense of accomplishment. This satisfaction can be tentatively explained using Jenkins' category of "viewer mastery" (Jenkins 2006) as a characteristic of media fandom; yet, while Jenkins' mastery refers to complex narrative structures (i.e. Barthes' hermeneutic code), the mastery afforded by this category of clips refers to visually parsing and anticipating material interactions (i.e. closer to Barthes' proairetic code).

f) Heightened Sensory Experiences

While the previous categories refer primarily to motifs, the category of heightened sensory experiences is concerned with the mode of mediation, i.e. the way the clips are recorded or edited to seemingly augment the viewer's sensorium. These include close-ups, both with regard to the visual and acoustic 'point of view', and

extreme slow-motion photography, often in combination, e.g. depicting a bullet passing through the flame of a candle or an electric drill digging into a metal object. These clips offer numerous variations of Barthes' notion of jouissance, as applied by Fiske to audiovisual media (cf. above). Writing in the late 1980s, Fiske argues that "close-ups in soap opera may produce jouissance" (Fiske 1987, 228), magnifying emotional reactions of the actors in ever-changing constellation. The clips in this category take this condensing of audio-visual jouissance, which Fiske observes in the soap opera genre, to a new, extreme level. In that sense, they constitute a very pure manifestion of McLuhan's central claim that (new) media forms are 'about' extending the senses rather than primarily representational.

g) Food

The previous categories primarily involve the remediation of touch; in contrast, the category of food exhibits similar audiovisual properties (e.g. slow-motion or aspects of precision) but aim to evoke the senses of taste and smell. These clips, e.g. depicting a Bunsen burner browning the whipped cream on a cake or a melted cheese sandwich being pulled apart, rely on the viewers' experience with combinations of sight and smell to create quasi-synaesthetic media experiences (Waterworth 2013). In that sense, these clips – outside of 'satisfying' compilations – have given rise to separate micro genres such as experience videos of tasting menus at expensive restaurants[20]. Yet, while these genres usually rely on the host commenting on the smell, taste and overall experience, clips in this category do not use any verbal commentary but rely on iteration to intensify and convey the idea of sensory experience.

h) Effortlessness and Vertigo

This category focuses less on any particular sensory modality but rather on extreme sensory experiences in general, on seemingly impossible tasks appearing almost effortless, which is often accompanied by a sensation of weightlessness that viewers attribute to the human agents on screen and, through repetition, allegedly

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[20] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUeEVLHfB5-S4p8XPU7OZEepNqq96GLb3.

experience themselves. The different manifestations of this category, e.g. a trampoline jumper shooting hoops or the first-person view of a bungee jumper, can be summarized using Caillois' concept of vertigo (cf. above), and thus be characterized as game-like activities.

i) Optical illusions and visual experiments

The ninth and final category refers to visual tropes that question the reliability of the central sense of sight altogether, comprising optical illusion but also visual experiments, e.g. achieved by playing pieces of footage in reverse or by emulating a video scrubbing effect to enhance the satisfying quality. Initially, these rarely include computer-generated or augmented images, i.e. the vast majority of images are expected to have a material reference point. the only exception in the corpus is a shot featuring an AR filter projecting a black hole-like effects onto the surface of a table in a video from September 2016[21]. Later, computer graphics effects become more generally accepted as part of the genre conventions, as evidenced e.g. by several CG clips in one of the most popular videos from September 2017[22].
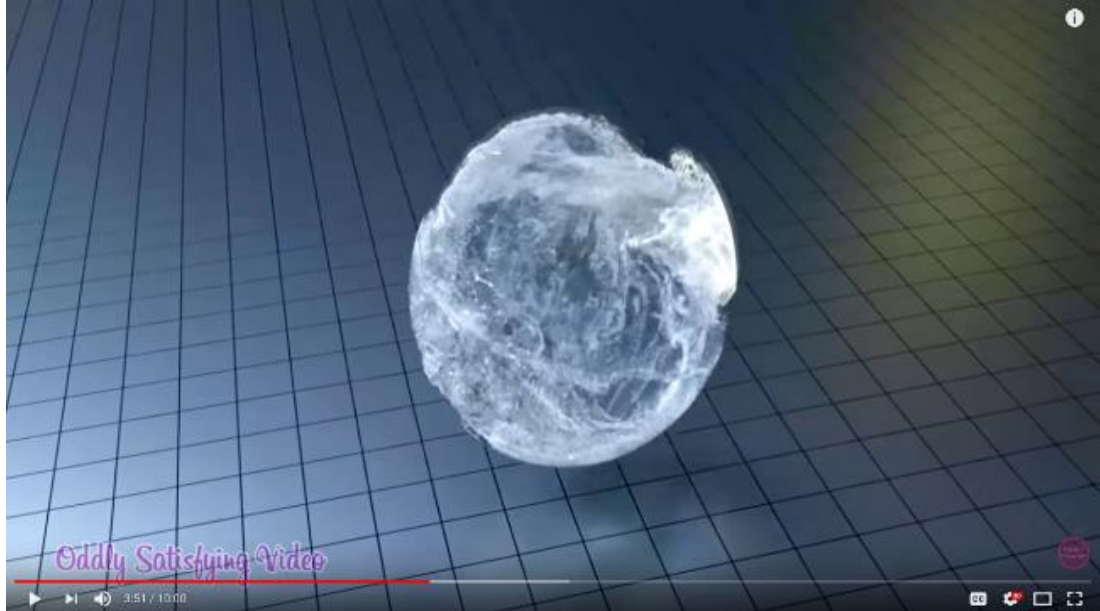
Picture 4

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[21] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckoKiFfMe3k&t=1m58s.
[22] Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5CDwHsbL9s&t=3m47s.

Many of these images exhibit a form of using digital imaging technology that can be characterized with Miguel Sicart as playful (Sicart 2014). Sicart defines playfulness as the "attitude of play without the activity of play" (21).

Picture 5

While play is autotelic, i.e. a goal in and of itself, the playful use of technology "respects the purposes and goals of [the] object or context [it is applied to]" (21). The above image illustrates this principle; it depicts a fluid simulation, which in the same form could be applicable to any video game or CGI movie, but disables the rendering of the container object required to 'hold' the fluid for the physics modeling, thereby de-familiarizing the image.

5 Playful, phatic communication through visual artifacts (Conclusion)

As evidenced particularly by the last category, a continuous element within the corpus of 'satisfying videos' has been the inherent playfully competitive disposition of both video creators and viewers. From that angle, the largely de-centralized micro genre formation process itself can be conceptualized as a kind of meta-game, in which the rules are continually being renegotiated and expanded.

As suggested above, 'satisfying' videos are game-like in that they produce a strong sensation of vertigo, which is both rooted in their visual parameters but also in their distinct dispositif (Kessler 2006). Using the cinema of attractions as an example, Frank Kessler uses this term – which is often associated but not fully synonymous with the English term apparatus – as "a material technology producing conditions that help to shape […] a certain viewing position that is based upon unconscious desires to which corresponds […] an institutionalized film form implying a form of address trying to guarantee that this viewing position […] functions in an optimal way" (61). The dispositif of satisfying videos is defined by a combination of their formal properties, i.e. their compilation structure, the iteration on familiar motifs and even the reuse of clips from earlier videos, with the affordances of *YouTube* as a social media platform (Bucher and Helmond 2017). For instance, the unique label 'oddly satisfying' as well as the formal similarity contribute to the fact that the *YouTube* recommendation algorithm quickly offers up a mostly homogeneous selection of similar content, which is consumed as a continuous stream of videos. The musical accompaniment further adds to this mode of perception, which is reminiscent of watching music videos on television, which was considered to "embody the extremes of what is inherent in the televisual apparatus" (Edmond 2014, 312) in the 1980s. This "form of address" is designed to produce creates a sense of Flow (Chen 2007), i.e. a state of balance between increasing cognitive abilities (i.e. textual 'mastery') and challenge. This principle has been mostly discussed in the context of games, and its applicability to 'satisfying' videos demonstrates the useful of regarding them as a game-like visual phenomenon.

Picture 6

Another recurring principle, which permeates the entire 'language' of 'satisfying' videos (or rather: the use of that language), is the notion of "phatic communication" (Miller 2008, 395). Vincent Miller defines it as "a communicative gesture that does not inform or exchange any meaningful information or facts about the world"; rather, "its purpose is a social one, to express sociability and maintain connections or bonds". According to Miller, a lot of online social interaction – e.g. quickly written tweets or YouTube comments – falls into this category, containing little informational content but instead using language in a performative sense, to produce a sense of connectedness and shared identity. While Miller refers to verbal communication, 'satisfying' videos apply the same principle to visual communication. The above image, depicting the automated separation of egg whites and yolks, is but one example to back this claim. The clip does not produce deeper insight into the production process itself, but, as many viewers might have their own, idiosyncratic experience with separating eggs as a tedious, difficult process, it taps into this shared knowledge to create a sense of connectedness. At the cathartic moment, when the separation is finally shown, users know – and discuss in the forum comments – that others watching the same clip will exhibit very similar emotional reactions, which creates a temporary bond. The same applies to the celebration of human achievement, which is particularly evident in the craftsmanship and vertigo categories. While most

viewers could not replicate the tasks themselves, iterating on these images produces a positive feeling of shared virtual accomplishment through the means of visual communication.

To conclude this chapter, three especially useful trajectories for further research into 'satisfying' videos will be briefly outlined. First, the nine categories were discussed separately as a first step to provide basic orientation; thus, follow-up studies should more explicitly address the inevitable conceptual overlap between these categories, which itself constitutes a driving force in the consolidation and maturation of the micro genre itself. For instance, the repeated depictions of calligraphy in close-up exhibit a combination of chemical reactions (between ink and water or different liquids)[23] and craftsmanship. The weighting of these categories will depend both on the formal properties of the individual clip and on hermeneutic inquiry of the viewer. Second, while the relevance of 'satisfying' videos as a mirror image of contemporary digital culture has been established, it would be useful to assess the generalizability of the approach to related corpora, e.g. cooking or life hack videos on *YouTube* or other video sharing platforms. Finally, and most importantly, the discursive dimension of 'satisfying' videos has been deliberately left out of this argument, but will be vital to assess their lasting cultural implications. A critical discourse analysis of YouTube comments accompanying the videos could be a first step in that direction, e.g. following Mautner (2005), who adapts that method specifically to web-based corpora. First and foremost, the term 'satisfying' is both omnipresent in this discourse (as well as digital culture as a whole) but also highly elusive; therefore, it is important to understand how the connotations and rhetorical functions of the term change over time, especially the agreement on an increasingly standardized 'vocabulary' of 'satisfying' visual phenomena. Furthermore, it might be fruitful to consider the visual categories established in this chapter also as discursive categories. For instance, in the second-earliest video from February 2016, the most upvoted commenter characteristically points out that "the fact that this video ends at exactly 5:00 adds to the satisfaction"; this type of perception clearly aligns with the pattern 'order, efficiency and precision',

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[23] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHr45sHJ6tk&t=35s.

which is not just applied to the content of the video but to its production as well. Other valuable sources to observe the discursive ramifications of 'satisfying' videos are reaction videos[24], i.e. videos that depict and discuss the responses of YouTube influencers but also everyday viewers, as well as the subreddit /R/OddlySatisfying[25], which takes the process of phatic communication into a different media context.

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[24] Cf. e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1z_d3r46s8g.
[25] Cf. e.g. https://www.reddit.com/r/oddlysatisfying/.

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