

The Eschatological Screen

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Abstract

*"It's gross, but satisfying when the cysts come out."
"I watch these, feeling sick to the stomach - yet still
can't stop watching!"*

*"Just respect the guy that edited this vid. The times
he had to watch this to make the right cuts."*

*These are a few comments published right below
the screen, where from huge lipomas to massive
blackheads, YouTube channel has been displaying an
incredible number of videos that perform dermatological
procedures as happenings.*

*Its audience is enormous, comparable in number
of viewers to those of porn videos, and it is precisely
their similar aspects and analogies, that comprehend
the visual language and strategies of shooting and
editing and the capacity of snatching spectators that
this article intends to explore.*

*One of our premises is the fact that medical
interventions contents that display close up skins being
cut and stitched, bleeding, squirting pus and other
matters are permitted and porn material is not. Is there
an ethical difference to the issue of voyeurism of other
people's bodies which both target at?*

*Their main difference, though, is that one occupies
space in a public institutional channel. Google
purchased YouTube from their original creators by
the end of 2006 for US\$ 1,65 Billion, and as Time
Magazine put it then, when electing YouTube as the
best invention of the year for, among other reasons:
"create a new way for millions of people to get
entertained, get educated and be shocked in a way
never seen before".*

Keywords: Aesthetical and medical procedures,
Eschatology, Skin, Voyeurism, YouTube

Introduction

Erik Satie composed "Gymnopédies", a trilogy of
compositions for piano, in 1888.

This title derives from the ancient Greek *gymnopedía*,
word that designated the annual festival in the city of
Sparta, where lads danced naked or unarmed.

The melodies of these three short musical pieces
make use of dissonances that produce a melancholic
effect that corresponds to Satie's instructions for its
performance, explained in the musical score itself,
indicating that each piece must be played painfully,
sadly, or gravely.

Satie could never imagine that his "Gymnopédie
n. 1" would become one of the most frequent musical
backgrounds of skin cleansing scenes available at
YouTube, almost one hundred and fifty years later.

"It is gross, but pleasing when the cysts come out."

"I watch this feeling sick in my stomach – but even
so, I can't stop looking at it!"

"Just respect the person who edited this video.
The number of times he had to watch it to make the
right cuts."

These are some of the comments published by the
spectators right under the screen, where, from massive
lipomas to exuberant blackheads, YouTube has been
broadcasting an incredible number of videos that
present dermatological procedures as happenings.

Its audience is huge, numerically comparable to
the spectators of porn movies, and it is exactly the
similarity of features and analogies between them,
which comprehends the visual language and strategies
of shooting and edition, and the ability of catching
spectators that this communication intends to explore.

One of our assumptions is the fact that the contents
of medical interventions that show super closes of
skins been cut and stitched, bleedings, pus's squirts
and other substances are allowed, and the porn
material is not. Is there any ethical difference regarding
the issue of voyeurism of other people's exposed body
(or parts of it) to which both address?

Its main difference though is that one occupies
space on a public and free institutional channel.
Google bought YouTube from its original creators by
the end of 2006, for 1,65 billions of American Dollars,
and as Time Magazine published at the time, when
elected YouTube as the "best invention of the year",
among other reasons:

"Create a new way of millions of people entertain
themselves, get educated and get chocked on a way
never seen before".

The advent of new generations of cell phones
equipped with high resolution and quality cameras, but
mostly, the easy access and handling, associated to
the Internet, made it possible the exceptional diversity
and quantity of contents production that we would call
"amateur" (without any pejorative meaning or intention
of prejudicial stereotype connotation, but rather as a
way to differentiate from more complex productions).

Today, the propagation of these contents is not
restricted to YouTube, for the proliferation of platforms
as Instagram, TikTok, Twitter is also responsible for
its spread.

The Covid-19

By mid-March 2020, therefore, a bit more than 4
years ago, we were taken by surprise by the planetary
pandemic of Covid-19 and the lockdown decree.

The academic semester of the Design School at the
State University of Rio de Janeiro had only started 2

weeks earlier and I had barely met with my group of advisees in their final course project. As everybody else, at that point we didn't know neither the extension, nor the length that this isolation would impose on us.

Each one of us needed to find out our own ways of resistance and resilience, and I believe that the immersion in our cell phones as portals to a diversification of sceneries as a means to escape from the enclosure within which we got confined doesn't have historical precedents.

The paradox of finding oxygenation to the real through a dive into a dispositive, a digital electronic membrane, as a Poltergeist ¹, is a phenomenon I still intend to explore in further works.

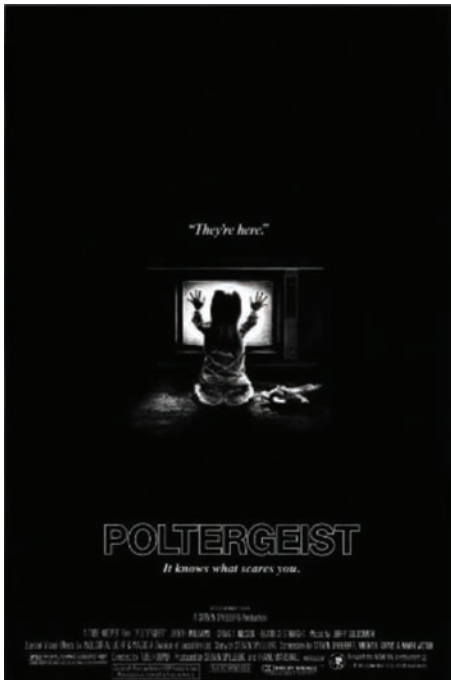


Figure 1 – Poltergeist movie poster (1982).

Back to the sudden cut from the School activities, I tried to find ways of not disconnecting from my students and we established a weekly routine of remote meetings, even before the University institutionalizing new academic protocols based on distance learning, via Meet, or Zoom etc.

In one of these encounters, one of my students confided in me that, in the estrangement of this new state of things, she had acquired the habit of watching earwax-cleaning videos.

Curious, I went searching for these videos and found others, of skin cleansing, that took me away! I became, both an addict and an expert of this material at the same time.

Dermatologists x Beauticians Popstars x Anonymous

Dr. Sandra Lee has in her Instagram 4,7 million of followers and beyond 10 thousand posts. Her YouTube channel has more than 8,3 million of subscribers!

Better known as Dr. Pimple Popper, this dermatologist is an American media celebrity and has a very active promotional machine in the social network.

Beyond that, she developed a complete line of her own dermatological products labeled SLMD (presumably from the initials Sandra Lee Medical Doctor) which publicity intercalates with her posts in the social media.

Dr. Lee's communication strategy consists on an approach, let's say, pedagogical, to her laics' audience. The diagnosis and information corresponding to each stage of the performed procedures are shared with the patient him(her)self, and these records, consequently, with the immense audience of her channel.

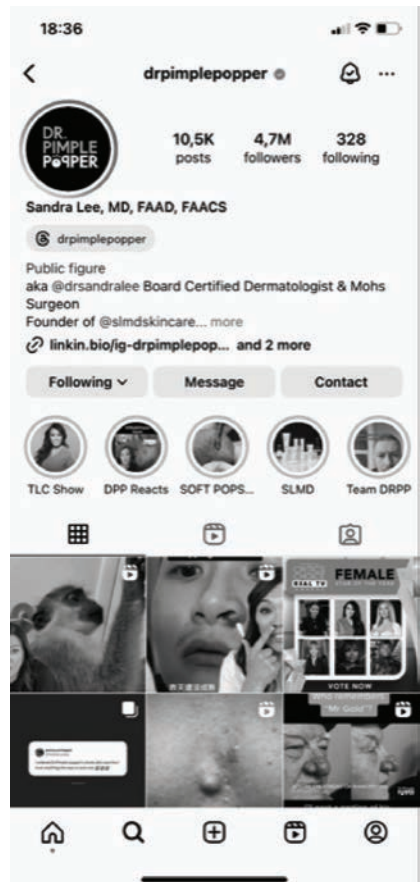


Figure 2 – Dr. Pimple Popper's (aka Dr. Sandra Lee) Instagram page.

Here we can also follow personal stories of individuals, where the status of “before” and “after” the intervention is emphasized. Through the classical format of great part of these videos, we follow a narrative that begins with the introduction of the subject and his(hers) dermatological condition, sometimes so aberrant that limiting and socially embarrassing to him(her)self.

The anamnesis environment is of the asepsis of a medical office, where Dr. Lee and her assistants are invariably dressed in doctor/nurse uniforms ² adequate to surgical interventions.

In Dr. Lee’s channel we watch a very wide spectrum of procedures, from mere blackheads extractions to radical incisions and removals that require the use of anesthesia and suture.

Everything is available at YouTube for a longer attendance of these practices, or at Instagram for “shorter samples”.

There is a relative caution regarding the content of the broadcasted images and this preventive measure is taken through the display of a layer of a black filter with high index of opacity over the image and the following texts: “sensitive content”; “this video may contain graphic or violent content”, which is a pleonasm; and in a small box, “see why”; and more under, at the baseboard of the screen, “watch the tape”.

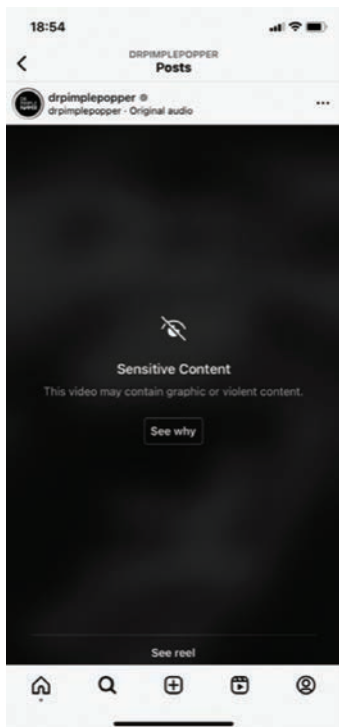


Figure 3 – Sensitive content warning layer over one of the images at Dr. Pimple Popper’s Instagram.

I highlighted Dr. Pimple Popper, but there are other doctors that operate (no pun) on a very similar line, as Dr. PopZit (aka Dr. Greg Lynch), D. Khaled Sadek, Doctorly (Dr. Luke Maxfield) etc, that became true personas, characters that transformed their daily clinical exercise in true shows for this audience, anxious for the eschatological voyeurism.

Eschatological Voyeurism

Here is important to resort to the etymological origin of the word *eschatology* for there are 2 meanings for this word in English.

From the Greek, *skor, skatos* = excrements.

In our case, in Medicine and in Biology, Eschatology or Coprology is the study of feces. In Psychology, *eschatology* is the obsession with excretion or excrement, or the study of these obsessions.

While dermatology doctors explain to their patients, and their audience, through an accessible scientific discourse, the detours produced by the organisms of these skins that result in the aesthetical aberrations and the corresponding procedures they adopt for its restoration, another strand, very active and potent in the production of videos of dermatological purport, also catalyzes the attention of the public.

These are beauticians working in spas in Vietnam³, which serve an impressive number of customers.

In some of these videos it is possible to observe the configuration of these spaces and the disposition of many narrow beds, aligned within a small separation distance from each other, the minimum sufficient to allow circulation.



Figure 4 – Working stations in a Vietnamese skin-cleansing spa.

Nevertheless, in great part of this material, the scenes start from a close up in some spot of the facial skin and its annexes such as ears and neck⁴ that will be manipulated, where we are able to see the pores in such magnified scale that we don’t necessarily identify which part is it: if a chin, a nose, a forehead...

There is a complete abstraction of individuals, both the one that executes the procedures and the other, that has his(her) skin cleansed. They are parts of 2 abstracted beings. From one, that we will call *active*, we just have the operative hands, covered with white latex gloves. From the other, the *passive*, we see parts of the face, as a place of action, a battle site, that will be stick, perforated, squeezed.



Figure 9 – Two abstracted individuals.

This is a typical scene: a white latex gloved hand on a client's face, used as a support base for the beautician pen write the name of the spa⁵ and the client's code number. It is quite strategic to display the spa's name, contact phone number and brand on that spot that may be either the thumb or the indicator finger nail area, for that is permanently framed throughout the videos, functioning as an identification of the company.

Do not expect a narrative. The full length of the videos doesn't bring up any happenings beyond the stabbings on the skin. There is not an after. We never get to know any results, how this person's face came out of the cosmetic session, if the result of the performed operations was, indeed, good.

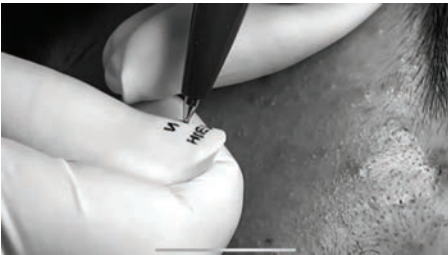


Figure 10 – Beautician writing the name of the spa and the client's number or code on her white latex gloved hand thumb, using his (her) face as a support base.

Almost invariably, throughout these videos, we are presented with more than one highlight scene, that consists of the suspension of the sequence of continuous action of extractions and the posing for the camera with a major blackhead "skewed" in the sharp and pointy instrument that just aided in its extraction.

Quite often, we are also "toasted" with a triumphal ending⁶ scene where usually the white latex index finger⁷ poses for the camera, covered by the blackheads and other "impurities" that were diligently collected, aiming at their less compromised and more complete original shape. Through the cell phone camera pan movement it is made possible to evaluate the quantity and the quality of these extractions. Indeed, it is a current practice in these spas, collecting and not discarding these wastes by sticking them, when captured, for its greasy material quality adheres easily onto the latex surface.



Figure 11 – Typical final scene of Vietnamese spas' videos (not necessarily the end of the job), where the active fingers of one hand pose to exhibit the collected material from the clients' face.

For this whole show, borrowing Guy Debord's thought, author of "Society of the Spectacle" (1967), the attention and the competence of whoever is doing the shooting of these performances is absolutely necessary, and the quality of these records, because as much mechanical as it may seem, it makes a whole difference to the fruition of this spectacle.

Some research methodology

During a period of 6 months, on a daily regularity, I watched a countless number of these videos.

I took note of the names of many of these Vietnamese spas (as they call it) as: Ga, Hana, Hari, Hien Van [Present], Hong My, Huang da Nang [Skin Direction], Linh Mun [Ebony Spirit], Mai Ngac [Tomorrow], My Linh [My Spirit], Na Sa, Nhât Bang [Degree], Quyn Giao [Surrender], Sac Dep [Beauty], Sophia Skin, Suri Nuygen, Thao Ami, Thuy Dung [Lenient], Wendy, Xinh [Pretty]. I tried to translate it through Google Translator⁸, facing some difficulties for the Vietnamese language has some typographical accent characters not always identifiable.

All the frames of still images and videos displayed in this article were obtained from my cell phone screen, a very old Iphone, from public and free pages available on the Internet, either at YouTube or Instagram platforms. That is a choice based on the fact that they were watched this way.

Discourses and Environments

Much in contrast to the Doctor's performed extractions videos, where their procedures and interventions are outspoken in detail to both, patient and audience, through medical/scientific discourses that may vary from one doctor to another in their pedagogical and public approach, the speech of the Vietnamese beautician spas employees is usually heard through the whispering voice of the worker during her⁹ job, to either the client and/or to her¹⁰ coworker who is standing up by her, in charge of the cell phone taping.

Since most of these procedures are carried out in their clients' faces, the beauticians sit in a rolling chair at the head of the bed, to better access their

workspace. The arrangement of these positions also favors the client/professional proximity for a much closer verbal communication.

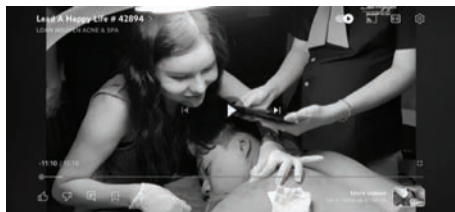


Figure 12 – A typical Vietnamese spa scene in some aspects: beautician sitting at the head of the bed to access the client; coworker standing up by her, targeting the image capture at the manipulated area. Nevertheless, not so common in some other aspects: the beautician's face is revealed, even if for few seconds; she is not wearing a mask (perhaps because the client is belly down); the job performed is not facial, but on the client's back.

Although this author doesn't know the Vietnamese language, and it wasn't the intention to transfer the verbal sound track to an AI platform to have it translated, it is possible to identify the meanings of the beautician comments through an exercise of otherness, per their sighs, exclamation and surprise tones, and laughs. In a bolder interpretative speculation, some conversations may be tentatively riskily inferred.

Nevertheless, back to the difference of content and type of discourses between dermatology doctors and beauticians, we could make conjectures about the class and the status of these professionals, whereas doctors stand on a high level of the society structure, owners of a recognized expertise that permits public exposure of their lore. That status is also evidenced by the fact that the audience gets to acknowledge their faces and names. Beyond that, they are the owners of the clinics named after them, as well displayed in the social media channels.

The beauticians in those spas are anonymous employees whose faces, except very few ones, are deliberately ellipsed by the camera that avoids targeting at anything, but their labor hands, where we may read the name of the spa and/or the client code or number. It is not known to us whether their practice was acquired through a technical course or empirically. Is their low tone voice a sign of humility or a means of coping within an environment where a number of other skin cleansings is being carried out? Or both?

The environments are set up according to their functionalities. Dermatology doctors may perform complex surgeries that require a whole design adapted to their clinic, to accommodate equipments, instruments, supplies, and auxiliary assistants. The scene happens in this silent, private, windowless and aseptic room where the use of special clothes, facemasks and gloves is mandatory. Depending on the kind of procedure to be performed, the patient will also get a special gown and/or be covered by a blanket with an opening to the body area to be accessed. Although a good number of interventions are on the head area,

including lots of cysts extractions from the scalp, and not only face and annexes as beauticians do, the whole body is subject to various skin abnormalities.

We mostly listen to the doctors explanation of the patients' condition and diagnosis, sometimes unable to be defined from the outer aspect of the lump or bump, confirmed after the access to its core through perforations and blade cuts (eventually, biopsies may be required). Then, step-by-step, we are guided through the path of what they are actually doing, such as numbing, cutting, stitching. There is contentment in showing the removed substances and an evaluation of its size, weight, consistency etc. When the procedure is less invasive and "radical", there may be occasion for some interaction, dialogue, between the doctor and the patient.

I see the purpose of these medical videos as a kind of voyeuristic entertainment, although I recognize they may also be of public utility, beyond learning about dermatology issues and procedures, as people with similar conditions will be able to identify to the portrayed and search for aid.

As previously said, the Vietnamese spas can accommodate some clients simultaneously (the number may vary on the size of the installation). The environments are neat and the workstations close to each other. Beauticians dress as they please, wearing masks as we can notice in the rare glimpses, since most of these videos start straight from the close up on the clients skin face. Each workstation has a powerful light source.

Sound and Image in Vietnamese spas' videos

Sound wise, there are basically two kinds of videos: the captured sound from the actual spa surroundings and a music track. In the first case, sometimes we can distinguish many simultaneous layers: a) people talking - the conversation between the beautician and her client or colleagues, or among a group of people; b) cell phones – alert tones, cell phones ringing, someone talking out loud (both sides), games being played; c) animals and people - dog barking, rooster crowing, street vendor; d) vehicles and machines - motorcycle, car and truck driving by, connected machines, constructions; e) environmental music; f) natural phenomena – rain, rumble. It is then contradictorily possible to have some notion and perspective of the width of the space while limited to the viewing of the close topography of an acne skin on a 7 x 14 cm (2,5 x 5,5 inches) screen.

A few times though, the room is so quiet it is possible to hear the deep breaths, sighs and moans of the client submitted to pain, as well as the needle spikes and stabs on his(her) skin.

Quite often a musical sound track is superimposed to the scene, invariably only melodic, ranging from Satie's "Gymnopédie n. 1" to Zen melodies that can be edited on a loop that lasts forever.

Regarding the relationship between image and sound in these videos, we have noticed a phenomenon

that consists in the discontinuity of the scene when there is a change of music over a constant image, as the opposite, changing takes under the same music, does not produce disruption.

Further developments and a final note

This is a first approach towards a series of issues I intend to address within the voyeurism subject towards the human skin¹¹, present in films such as Peter Greenaway's "The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover" (1989) and "Pillow Book" (1996); Almodóvar's "La piel que habito" (2011), and Pasolini's "Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom" (1975).

In the visual arts, I highlight, among others, Rembrandt and his self-portraits, and Anish Kapoor's installation, "Marsyas". In the literature, the great Marquis de Sade.

When Freud died, in September 1939, the book by his bedside was Balzac's "La Peau de chagrin" (1831). That was the last book Freud read. Set in early 19th-century Paris, "The Magic Skin and the Wild Ass's Skin" tells the story of a young man who finds a magic piece of shagreen (untanned skin from a wild ass) that fulfills his every desire. For each wish granted, however, the skin shrinks and consumes a portion of his physical energy.

Notes

¹ "Poltergeist" (1982) is a movie directed by Tobe Hooper and Steven Spielberg that focuses on a Californian suburban family that has to deal with weird and scary phenomena when spirits start to communicate through a TV set. The roots of the word *poltergeist* make perfect sense: in German, *poltern* means "create a disturbance", and *geist* means "ghost". A ghost that announces its presence with rapping and the creation of disorder.

² In pastel color tones, rarely in "plain" white.

³ The initial "spontaneous" algorithm offers I got from YouTube led me to these Vietnamese sites. I have searched for other references and found some sparse Korean ones, but nothing compared to the "consistency" of the Vietnamese, whose specific practices of collecting excretions in their hands as they work are mentioned by Mr. Popzit in one of his videos.

⁴ 95% or more of these procedures are performed in the face and few on the back and arms (in the last one, it is mostly steatocystomas, a melt buttery looking excretion).

⁵ Most of the spas have adhesive labels that adheres to the latex, with their name, phone number and sometimes a brand or logotype.

⁶ It is not the end of the client's complete cleansing job. It is just the finishing of that specific cell phone shooting.

⁷ Sometimes the thumb and index finger aligned.

⁸ The ones I found, even with some uncertainty, are between brackets.

⁹ We refer to these professionals as "her" since throughout all our video views there where only women (mostly young) documented working.

¹⁰ The same applies to the ones that stand by handling the cell phones to document the procedures.

¹¹ The skin is the heaviest and largest organ of the human body, covering about 7,500 cm² (2,952 inches² or 82 yards²) of an adult individual. This organ protects our body against impact, pathogens, excessive water loss, and acts in its own thermoregulation. Besides that, it contains receptors that permit the perception of pain, tact, temperature and pressure.

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