

STUCK IN PAUSE



Night rider: in films such as *CENTER JENNY*, Trecartin presents a map of a commodified emotional landscape organised by the rhythm and beats of the club

Marked by both hyper-acceleration and inertia, Ryan Trecartin's movies offer windows on to an absurdly amplified 'future now'

By John Beagles

In her controversial *Artforum* article *Digital Divide* (2012), critic Claire Bishop argued that the art world appears to operate in a state of disavowal when it comes to the impact of digital culture. One of the few non-Luddite artists Bishop did cite was American Ryan Trecartin. Trecartin, who frequently discusses how he "wants to push where we're at at the moment", produces movies (he doesn't like the term video) that seek to "capture the vibrations" of a hyper-connected and networked "age of intensity and anxiety".

Trecartin, whose work was exhibited at New York's MOMA in 2011, first came to prominence with *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004). This work, alongside key pieces such as *I-Be Area* (2007) and *Item Falls* (2013), explores and embraces the post-human possibilities of a digitally decentred, hybrid self. Trecartin's prophetic and symptomatic movies picture the effects of the splintering of the self away from the material body and into the multiple realities of digital culture's baroque online spaces. Like that of predecessors such as Warhol, Koons and, most importantly for Trecartin,

Cindy Sherman, his works are excessive, accelerated amplifications and maps of what he refers to in interviews as the 'future now'.

One recently developed marker of the onslaught of the future now is reading software, which aims to increase human reading speed by up to 40 per cent (read a book in an hour!). Purchasing this software might be useful for speed-surfing the internet to note the spread of the meme of accelerationism. In recent months, there has been a seemingly endless, exponentially multiplying list of books, journals, talks and conferences on this critical strategy, which, as the philosopher Benjamin Noys has written, embraces the idea of 'the worse the better'.

Reading through recent texts such as Alex Williams's and Nick Srnicek's *Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics* (2013), it is difficult not to make a connection to Trecartin's practice. Rejecting the convention of resisting (slowing down) the dehumanising drives of technological capitalism from a position of autonomy and critical distance, Trecartin's movies, in true accelerationist style, propose that the "cure is more of the disease". Counterintuitively, an accelerationist artist such as Trecartin wholeheartedly plugs in to the ravaging drives of capital, injecting its pathogens, imbibing its dehumanising effects, seeing within capitalism's developments the potential for a Promethean reimagining of the self, and by extension a radicalised future society. The markers of

Trecartin's high-risk, potentially subversive provocation – like Warhol's, Koons's or Sherman's – are exuberant over-identification, non-ironic blank parody and grotesque absurdism. Writing about Koons's and Sherman's Faustian pact with celebrity and commodity culture in the 1980s, the critic Hal Foster remarked that they were entangled in a "suicidal embrace". As a consequence of his own suicidal embrace with the world of digital-consumerist entertainment spectacle, Trecartin has quickly discovered that statements such as "capitulation is sexy when you land on the right vibrations" reap accusations of uncritical complicity from certain sectors of the 'art community'.

Created with long-term collaborator Lizzie Fitch, Trecartin's movies are all available online at Vimeo and YouTube. Each is constructed from highly edited frenetic handheld POV footage of an ensemble cast of characters, digitally processed to the point of implosion under the weight of layered digital effects, 3D animation and mashed-up, auto-tuned, speeded up dialogue and music. They are exhausting in their unbridled, excessive sonic and visual intensity. For example, *Item Falls* features staccato jump-cut edits that flip between tracking the beats of a dubstep soundtrack and taking their cue from the excessive eye twitches of one of the film's characters. Not surprisingly, Trecartin's movies routinely go over the edge, becoming dizzily impressionistic and abstract in their cartoon-like barrage of fast

talking, lightning editing and morphing bodies. Trecartin has spoken of his interest in mapping a traumatic, transitional moment in the culture; nowhere is this clearer than in his characters' accelerated use of words. His heavily scripted 'musical' texts fuse the banal platitudes and aspirational slogans of consumerism with acid put-downs ("beeitch!"). "She has a word problem," one of the characters in *Any Ever* (2009) remarks. "I just feel the need to redefine everything." This ravenous hunger to map the mutating character of language infects Trecartin's movies. His use of metronomic repetition empties familiar words of any residue of meaning they might possess. A transitional traumatic moment indeed.

As with McLuhan's seminal text, the medium is frequently the message in Trecartin's work; its aesthetic puts me in mind of the film theorist Steven Shaviro's term 'delirious aestheticism'. Indeed, Shaviro's own work on accelerationism, both in his book *Post-Cinematic Affect* (2010) and, more recently, in his online lectures on *Post-Continuity Cinema*, have a real connection with Trecartin's films. For instance, in his analysis of Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* – perhaps the best example of a mainstream film with accelerationist tendencies – Shaviro details what he regards as a significant shift in the film's formal, organising structures, where narrative coherence and spatial organisation noticeably deviate from established classical modes. As he writes, post-continuity editing is orientated not towards the production of meaning but "moment-by-moment manipulation of the spectator's affective states". For Shaviro, in the "liquid narratives" of post-continuity cinema, immediate visceral affects trump overall coherence – an arthouse variant of Matthias Stork's idea of 'chaos cinema'. In the imaginative space of such films, atemporality dominates, with a succession of images looping and repeating in a mesmeric, hallucinogenic ebb and flow of intense peaks and bottomed-out lows. Drawing on the work of theorist Robin James, Shaviro notes the similarities between this orchestration of affect and dance music, specifically the building of peaks and troughs along a sine wave of fluctuating intensity and silence. Trecartin's movies operate with this logic in films such as *The Re'Search* (2010) and *CENTER JENNY* (2013), where his map of a commodified emotional landscape appears organised by the beat and rhythm of the club. In this respect, as Shaviro and others note, the accelerationist mode is the amped-up aesthetic of post-Fordist precarious capitalism, under which, as Italian theorist Franco Berardi has written in *The Soul at Work*, we live in a bipolar economy swinging from euphoria to panic, hyper-enthusiasm to dissociative disengagement. The modulations along this sine wave fill Trecartin's movies. His characters max out then crash and burn, then max out then crash and burn then...

In terms of content, Trecartin's characters are often like corporeal versions of digital avatars. Yet figures such as Pasta in *I-Be Area* or Cindy Career in *Ready (Re'Search Wait'S)* (2009) are not 'the beautiful people' but boringly normal in their fleshy imperfections and deviations from celebrity symmetry. While there's no traditional naturalism – the grotesque make-up gives these

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figures the semblance of computer-game or cartoon characters – the clothes and physical spaces his meat avatars inhabit are clearly coded as middle to lower-middle class. Here, Trecartin's staging of the paradoxes in today's "traumatic moment" comes to the fore. After all, a genuinely accelerated life is clearly the preserve of the hyper-privileged people outside of 'society', the 0.1 per cent who really get to live out the capitalist dream and injunction to live life to the max. Consequently, although Trecartin has said that he doesn't regard characters such as Pasta or Cindy Career as alienated, the pathologies they present make it difficult not to read the movies as playing out, often in a hysterical, violent manner (each one contains random moments of destruction), the intense daily anxieties and frustrations produced by the gap between access to a digital realm of fantasy and 'opportunity' and a decelerated social sphere of endless inertia and devastating class division. The fact that Pasta and Cindy Career's subjectivity is distinct from the dominant white male heterosexual (AKA 'feminine') makes this all the more pointed. A character like Daisy in *I-Be Area* may be constantly stimulated by the sensation of speed but it is only a sensation because, unlike real speed, it is unshackled from directional movement. As one of the characters says: "You are stuck in pause."

The interior location of this inaction is telling. Firstly, because the rooms and all the characters in them operate as the embodied offline versions of fragmented online personalities – the splintered digital self and all its avatars are brought together, temporarily made meat. The interior space also resonates because, as the critic Hannah Black has remarked about the popular accelerationist internet character Overly Attached Girlfriend (OAG), "the tragic heroine of melodrama belongs to the interior". Trecartin's figuring of this entrapment of the feminine collective

psyche is certainly intense in its melodrama. If Trecartin's interior spaces do represent the various manifestations of a digitally decentred self, it is nightmarish in its recombination of these 'parts'. All the characters in Trecartin's movies are hyper-anxious, agitated and over-stimulated. Continually trying to wrestle with their manufactured, infantilised desires, there's a bleak desperation in their attempts to be what Foucault called entrepreneurs of the self. Pointedly, and despite Trecartin's contrary protestations of positive utopian digital zeal, it's hard not to look upon his characters as inhabiting a new circle of hell. Being plugged in, participating all the time, clearly isn't good for their mental health. The loss of Eros in everyday life appears acute in Trecartin's world. To borrow from the title of Sherry Turkle's seminal survey of the impact of digital culture on daily lives, all Trecartin's characters are 'alone together'.

Trecartin's retweeting of the pathologies of the 'future now' frequently runs the same risk as many another accelerationist. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari remarked that "art is not chaos, but a composition of chaos", a form that "creates semiotic devices capable of translating the infinite velocity of reality flows into the slow rhythm of sensibility". At times, Trecartin appears too enraptured with the noise, speed and buzz of the 'future now', the movies operating only on the level of a brutal, chaotic visceral assault on the viewer. While there's often a dark pleasure to be had from the accelerated excesses of this visual and sonic offensive, not least in its undercutting of many of the dominant regimes of good taste in contemporary video art, without sufficient modulation, Trecartin's translations are often no more than repetition with minimal difference, a restaging that appears comfortable just impressionistically mapping the surface effects of digital culture. However, when he fluctuates his sine wave, dipping between the delirious highs and death-grip lows of our anxious era, he manages to produce an accelerated, more subversive and compelling flash of the 'future now'; a timely vision that nails a logic of desire perched between its peaks of good vibrations and troughs of depressive dissociation. ☹



Amped up: *The Re'Search*, like other Trecartin films, features fragmented personalities in interior spaces