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Of Sparkle-Vomit and Base Materialism: Field Notes on Blingee GIFs

Keywords: Bataille, Cute, Cyberfeminism, Formless, Kawaii, Pretty, Postdigital, Produsage

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This article focuses on the website Blingee, a popular online GIF generator, founded in 2006, whose mode of operation is based on user-made "stamps" and other ornamentations. Originally designed for teens to decorate their personal Myspace accounts, Blingee has inspired a cult following for its kitsch "sparkle-vomit" Internet aesthetic, that is, excessive cuteness and prettiness, often including profuse amounts of digital glitter. While the site almost closed in 2015, it was brought back by public outcry and even has a community of specialized "amateur" artists that spend endless hours working on their GIFs. In the first part of the article, I contextualize Blingee in terms of its development and background — e.g., its filiation in the tradition of Japanese purikura photography—and describe its primary uses and material-semiotic characteristics. In the second part, I explore a possible connection between Blingee GIFs and the Bataillean concepts of "base materialism" and the "formless," exuding from the poetic valences of and the specific ways in which these GIFs use the stamps and the glitter. I argue that Blingee, as poisonous "sentimental rubbish," has the potential to affect, destabilize, and disrupt the contemporary cyborgian imagination by creating sites of "parapolitical" resilience.

1. Introduction

Cute. Forever Friends. Best Friends. Love. Sweet. It's a Girl's World. Good Morning. Happy Birthday. Adorable. 100% Me. Thank you! Princess. Cutie. Emo. The Cutest Girl in the World!

Add to that layers of sparkling glitter, kittens, puppies, babies, hearts, stars, ribbons, fairies, unicorns, rainbows, flowers, anime chibi, and big-eyed cute girls (Fig. 1). Ah, did I mention sparkling glitter? Lots, lots of sparkling, maniacally sparkling glitter, corroding the images away like the uric acid in Andy Warhol's *Oxidations* (or, more colloquially, piss) paintings from the 1970s, made by having his friends urinate on copper panels as a homage to Pollock (Fig. 2). This is the material-semiotic substance of Blingee, a website founded in 2006 by German multimedia conglomerate Bauer Media Group. Blingee is one of the most popular online GIF generators that allows users to create animated pictures using photographs and artwork, combined with user-generated ornamentation called "stamps." Once created, a stamp is made available to all other Blingee users, and one cannot delete the stamp once used in a GIF (some stamps become extremely popular and widely used). Blingee GIFs are an embodiment of the cuteness and prettiness that have become deeply embedded elements of contemporary digital matters and Internet aesthetics (Wittkower 2012). Their stubborn adherence to kitsch aesthetics forefronts the workings of unruly cybercultures, betraying the high expectations of transhumanist enhancement promised by the digital revolution—a betrayal that happens at the level of the pixel. Or, as media scholar Ethan Zuckerman once eloquently put it, "Web 1.0 was invented to allow physicists to share research papers. Web 2.0 was created to allow people to share pictures of cute cats" (Zuckerman 2008). That and porn, of course: a lot of it (Kleinman 2017, para. 1).

Fig. 1. Example of Blingee GIF using multiple stamps on a drawing of a cute anime girl. Source: shorturl.at/eovzR

Fig. 2. Example of an *Oxidation* painting by Andy Warhol.

Before going any further, it is necessary to briefly address what one means by "cute." Cuteness can be understood on two different, if necessarily interconnected, levels. On the one hand, cuteness is an "affective response — a feeling one can refer to as the 'Aww' factor" (Dale 2016, 5), serving as an evolutionarily advantageous trait. This "natural" cuteness, understood as a primal, protective instinct towards neonates, is not exclusive to humans, intertwining with the broader evolution of animals on Earth. In the 1940s, Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz was the first to describe what he called *kinderschema*, or "baby schema," a set of features and behaviors found in animals, including humans, indexing youthfulness and vulnerability that trigger our nurturing instinct. Nevertheless, many scientists today argue that "instead of stemming solely from helplessness and dependence, cuteness is... intimately linked to companionship, cooperation, play, and emotional reactivity" (Dale 2016, 50 - 51), suggesting it plays a role in motivating prosocial behavior, empathy, and disarming aggression (Dale 2016, 46 - 51). This prosocial aspect is particularly significant when it comes to the role that cuteness plays in creating communities, including online communities.

This brings us to cuteness as a socio-cultural concept and, by extension, as an aesthetic category. This "second nature" of cuteness is relatively recent in human history, relating to the word's emergence at the dawn of the twentieth century, although its roots can be traced back further, for instance, to Rococo's fascination with the small and playful against Baroque's grandeur, encapsulated in works such as Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *L'Escarpolette*, or some Edo period paintings and prints in Japan (Dale et al. 2016, 2). However, in essence, the cute is a modern category, whose growth to enormous proportions in the twenty-first century has led some to speak of a "cuteness-industrial complex" (Ehrlich 2015, para. 2). The iconic Crying Boys painting series by Italian painter Giovanni Bragolin, an icon of kitsch mass-market art, epitomizes the intimate relation of cuteness to manipulative and profit-oriented consumer culture and sentimentality. But one could also refer to Margaret Keane's paintings of big-eyed women and children or the kitty and puppy calendars hanging in homes all over the world. These associations have put cute aesthetics squarely on the "dumb" side of what art and literary critic Andreas Huyssen famously called "the Great Divide" (Huyssen 1987, viii) between high art and lowly mass culture. Likewise, the pretty is a "desintensification" or domestication of the beautiful, something which is appealing in a delicate and graceful way but removed from the solemnity of beauty as a central category in classical art; one could argue that the pretty is a "cutefication" of the beautiful.

Disconnected from the biodeterminism of Lorenz's *kinderschema*, cuteness becomes contingent and relational. This is not to say that everything is (or can be) cute. Cuteness does evoke a specific word cloud or arena of attributes ranging from "small," "weak," "helpless," or "manipulative" to "young," "pretty," "quaint," "playful," "adorable," and so on. However, in the artistic and pop-cultural realms, cuteness often reflects the fact that "social and subcultural groups have their own (rather specific) criteria for what sorts of manners and attitudes constitute 'cute'" (Shiokawa 1999, 120). Even the ugly can be cute, to some extent: take, for instance, the World's Ugliest Dog Contest as an example of such concoction of cuteness and ugliness, or the blobfish, voted the world's ugliest animal in 2013 by the Ugly Animal Preservation Society (Schultz 2013), or even the cutefication of disability in Internet celebrity cats like Lil Bub (Laforteza 2014). In many respects, Japanese cute aesthetics, a.k.a. the kawaii, are a remarkably elastic and fertile ground for investigating how cuteness often combines with "antagonistic" elements—what Joshua Dale calls the "dark side of cute" (Dale 2016, 39), epitomized by trends like ugly-cute, grotesque-cute, and disgusting-cute (*buso, guro, and kimo or yami-kawaii*).

Since my article is a collection of "field notes" or preliminary observations about Blingee and the GIFs produced by its user base, it focuses on a particular intersection of cute aesthetics and "digital folklore," a term coined by Internet artists and theorists Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied to describe both "the customs, traditions and elements of visual, textual and audio culture that emerged from users' engagement with personal computer applications during the last decade of the 20th and the first decade of the 21st century" (Espenschied and Lialina 2009, 9–10) and the artifacts resulting from such "a distinct user culture developed inside user-oriented applications and services despite their low social status" (Espenschied and Lialina 2009, 11). Of the article, I contextualize this phenomenon in terms of its development and background and describe its primary uses and material and semiotic characteristics. In the second part, I take a poetic leap, speculating upon a connection between Blingee and the Bataillean concepts of base materialism and the formless. In the end, I hope to contribute, however modestly, to broaden our collective understanding of the poetic valences of such user and female-led digital environments that, despite their omnipresence and relevance to contemporary cyborgian imaginations, are not widely regarded as worthy of close observation and serious study.

2. What Blingee is and does

Initially, Blingee was created to help teens and young adults easily craft animated content to decorate their personal accounts on platforms that were then (i.e., by the mid to late 2000s) at their peak, like Myspace, the precursor of Facebook and the first social network with a global audience en *masse* (Goodings 2012, 485 - 86). In 2015, the site was about to be shut down, but due to massive outcry from fans and specialized media, it managed to secure funds to continue its operation to this day—although the end of Adobe Flash Player, by January of 2021, now threatens to take down the website for good if the Blingee team fails to convert it to HTML5. However, it is not too hard to understand why the company, perhaps not quite aware of the website's cult status, decided to shut down Blingee. After all, by the mid-2010s, the "Myspace era" already seemed like a long-buried layer of Internet stratigraphy. What is more, one can argue that Blingee's nostalgic appeal goes back to an even earlier Internet—one would not say prehistoric, but a period in the late 90s, when GeoCities reigned over the Earth.

Thus, even at its birth in 2006, Blingee already felt like an atavistic remainder of a vanishing aesthetic. The aesthetics of the World Wide Web's age of innocence, of cheesy personal websites and fan pages, *Tenshi Muyu* and *Sailor Moon* tributes, and primitively animated cute emoticon mascots. The Internet Archive did a favor to humanity by preserving over 4.500.000 GeoCities-era animated GIFs through their special project GifCities: The GeoCities Animated Gif Search Engine, available online at gifcities.org. Similarly, Lialina and Espenschied created a Tumblr-based project called "One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age" to collect screenshots from defunct GeoCities homepages. Their "treasure trove of outdated aesthetics, web design tropes, and apologies for not posting more or not having the site cleaned up" (Chayka 2013, para. 2) is an ode and eulogy to early www aesthetics.

Blingee's continued popularity is a noteworthy phenomenon, resulting from the interweaving fibers of authentic tween "sparkle-vomit" (Wilson 2015, para.1) and an adult "tongue-in-cheek, retro take on remix culture" (McHugh 2015, para.1). Like other obsolete technologies, revived by the love of devoted fan communities, their appeal is ultimately nostalgic — consider, for instance, Polaroid and its rescue (and eventual merge in 2020) with The Impossible Project, or the current popularity enjoyed by risograph printing at the hands of graphic artists. Here, I use the word "nostalgic," not necessarily in the syrupy acceptation of "sentimental rubbish," as Adorno (2013, 340) put it; although, in

what Blingee is concerned, this is *exactly* right. Instead, in the sense of being attracted to outdated things that lay "outside of the modern framework" (Natali 2004, 11) of emancipatory progress. In other words, although Blingee was rescued from the digital oblivion and resurrected, it was also "zombified" in the process: leaving one with the impression of an artifact of the past without a future proper, one which has overstayed its welcome in the teleological march of history. Such resistance to futurity becomes embedded in Blingee GIFs as an integral part of their materiality, like a clot blocking futuristic visions of the Internet's information highways.

Fig. 3. *Purikura* machines in Japan.

Fig. 4. Example of *purikura* taken by a group of friends in cosplay.

It is worth mentioning that there are non-Internet-based antecedents to Blingee, which follows in the tradition of Japanese *purikura* (from the English, "print club"). Purikura is a form of photography taken in specialized coin-operated photo booths, available in malls or on the streets, in neighborhoods like the fashionable Harajuku in Tokyo. It allows one to add stamps and manipulate the image digitally according to a set of options, for instance, "backdrops, borders, insertable decorations, icons, and text writing" (Miller 2017, loc 2464) as well as "hair extensions or twinkling diamond tiaras" and, notably, eye-enlargement and "tenderized light effects" (Pan 2015, 107) (Figs. 3 & 4). The underlying idea is to beautify, or rather, "kawaiify" the photo — *kawaii*, as I mentioned before, is the Japanese word for "cute." Mostly devoted to female group selfies, purikura became popular in the second half of the 90s, intersecting with the evolution of coeval street fashion subcultures, like *gyaru* or decora. Indeed, both styles imported purikura into real life by gluing glitter and stickers on the face and other areas of the body and clothes (Figs. 5 & 6). Although Blingee is an animated version, many of its primary features of cute stamps and glitter galore adhere to the aesthetics of the older Japanese *purikura*. Conversely, the smartphone camera lens filters and stickers (e.g., on Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, etc.) whose usage has become, nowadays, a widespread cross-age cultural technique, can be considered the successors of Blingee GIFs.

Fig. 5. Examples of gyaru models with cute face stickers.

Fig. 6. Example of a decora practitioner with stickers on her face.

Besides stamps, texture (instead of opticality) is arguably the primary aesthetic feature for which Blingee is known, namely, its heavy use of glitter, affectionately nicknamed "sparkle-vomit." In Blingee GIFs, sparkles can be superimposed on the entire image or restricted to parts of it, using masks. For instance, one can add glitter of various shapes and colors to the clothes of pop celebrities like Drake or Avril Lavigne (Fig. 7),or the hair of a beloved anime character. An important point to emphasize is that in many Blingee GIFs, the only movement in the animated clip (i.e., that which moves from frame to frame) is the "movement" of the glitter. Or, when there are stamps, of the stamps. In other words, even though they are GIFs, the base picture does not move, only the ornaments applied over it.

Fig. 7. Celebrity rapper Drake "glitterfied" using Blingee. Source: shorturl.at/fuGY3

Additionally, like in *purikura*, cuteness and prettiness become all-absorbing (although not exclusive) forces indexed by the medium, to the point that gothic and grotesque darkness themselves can be rendered rather cute and cuddly. Color combinations like black, white, purple, and red are popular choices in such cases. Users combine these with stamps of bat and spiky angel wings, black hearts and butterflies, sparkling skulls and spider webs, and attempts at "dark" or "depressive" text (e.g., "gothic love," "100% crazy" or "emo girl") (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Example of Blingee GIF with an emo "dark" aesthetic. Source: shorturl.at/ikDH6

On occasion, as can be seen in Figure 9, Blingee is also used for political activism, for example, to undermine the image of macho figures like Donald Trump. Another form of Blingee "activism" is actually not politics but a kind of "parapolitics" (Ivy 2010), related to what writing duo Alicia Eler and Kate Durbin have termed The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic. The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic combines dreamy adolescent girl sensibilities with "immediate, hyper-embodied, raw and vulnerable" (Eler and Durbin 2013, para. 14) expressions, as a strategy for feminist reclaiming of the "minor and generally unprestigious feelings" (Ngai 2007, 6) and aesthetics associated with femininity. One could think of it as a fourth-wave version of the 1990s kinderwhore or Riot Grrrl movements. *Au point*, Eler and Durbin begin their article with a Blingee GIF of artist Frida Kahlo with a glittering unibrow, beautifully encapsulating the mix of Blingee's sparkling cuteness and prettiness with an icon of visceral female strength against physical and psychological pain (Fig. 10).

Fig. 9. A Blingee GIF with a cute aesthetic mocks Donald Trump, using the phrase "Putin's Little Bitch." Source: shorturl.at/adkvE

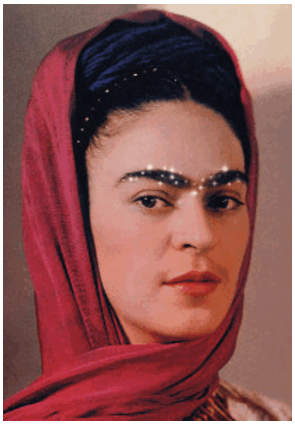

Fig. 10. The Frida Kahlo GIF in Eler and Durbin's article "The Teen-Girl Tumblr Aesthetic." Source: shorturl.at/diT03

Generally speaking, in Blingee GIFs, puppies, kittens, and babies rule. Fantasy figures, too: fairies with sparkling wings, diaphanous elves, beautiful princesses, and enchanted princes (Fig. 11). The probability of finding an anime character with big dewy eyes is equally great, as this kind of character has become a "go-to" to create fluff on the Internet. Add a few hearts, ribbons, and some sparkles, and one gets to have a perfect Blingee. There is, however, yet another common kind of "cutefication" in Blingee, namely, when male characters from Japanese animation (or other media), popular among female fans—often, characters with "masculinized" traits of aggressiveness or emotional uptightness—are "cutefied" with glitter and other kinds of pretty embellishments and ornamentations. Here, we enter a terrain, if not of deliberate irony, of subver-

sion of masculinity by feminized, and therefore abject, digital matters. There are countless examples of this kind of intervention on Blingee, such as Figure 12, featuring a popular *tsundere* character (who is generally cold or disagreeable to others), Uchiha Sasuke, from the action manga and anime series Naruto.

Fig. 11. Example of a Blingee GIF with a fairy tale aesthetic. Source: shorturl.at/egD57

Fig. 12. Uchiha Sasuke, a popular tsundere character from Naruto, "cutefied" with Blingee stamps. Source: shorturl.at/oszAG

3. Blingee and/as Base Materialism

In its undermining of the aesthetic integrity of images, Blingee's sparkle-vomit may establish a surprising relationship with concepts such as Georges Bataille's "base materialism." As Benjamin Noys puts it, "base materialism" as defined by the French philosopher, is an "active base matter that disrupts the opposition of high and low and destabilizes all foundations," and that, in doing so, "destroys the promise of liberated spaces and offers a more radical disorienting freedom" (Noys 1998, 499), unreducible to politics. While sparkle-vomit (in Internet lingo) means an excess of cuteness or prettiness which becomes too much to handle by the standards of decorum and good taste, the term already encodes a

destabilizing contradiction: “sparkle” denotes an idea of light, purity, and idealization, while “vomit” is its dialectical opposite, i.e., the unclean and debased substances one expels to the ground below. One finds a similar contradiction on the Internet and pop culture meme “puking rainbows,” meaning “To vomit rainbows at the sight of something amazing on the Internet,” or “To be so overwhelmed with cuteness that you puke rainbows” (MPVTOX 2012). Unicorns are a common subject of the “puking rainbows” variety of illustrations, signaling that they are so magical that even their lowest excretion is made of sugar, spice, and everything nice (Fig. 13). The notion of “sparkle-vomit” may not fit into what is usually understood as the “dark side of cute” but constitutes an integral part of it.

Fig. 13.

Borrowing from Adorno’s expression in his *Aesthetic Theory*, Blingee’s “poison” is that of kitsch and other axes traditionally “low” in the hierarchy of artistic production and reception for their abundance of “sentimental rubbish” (again, Adorno). These include fandoms of various culture-industrial products and, in my view, particularly Western fandoms of mainstream manga and anime, which, due to their internalization of *kawaii* aesthetics, and despite the massive Japanization of global pop culture in the twenty-first century, still tend to be frowned upon as an improper form of cultural impurity (the birth and spread of Internet slurs like “wapanese,” from “wannabe Japanese,” “weeaboo” or “weeb” attest to the enduring suspicion towards such fandoms). In any case, one of the more striking aspects of Blingee GIFs is that despite (or precisely because of) all their

brilliance, they exude a material decomposition. Or, rather, they seem to be in the process of decomposing or being decomposed, in the biological sense of decay but also in the *sensu stricto* of being "de - + composed." Undone, split, or fragmented into pieces. Specifically, it seems to me that the clouds of diamond-shaped sparkles add an unsettling dimension to the images they intend to "beautify." The use of sparkles to represent an aura of "preciousness" has a long tradition; for instance, in the iconography of shoujo manga (Japanese girl-oriented comics), they convey hazy sentiments or beauty (Fig. 14). But Blingee sparkles are not delicate — they are aggro. White or brightly colored and often used in large quantities to give the images a glittery effect. Thus, they tear up the fabric of the images, gnawing at their surface, piercing them with tiny voids that compromise their material integrity (Fig. 15).

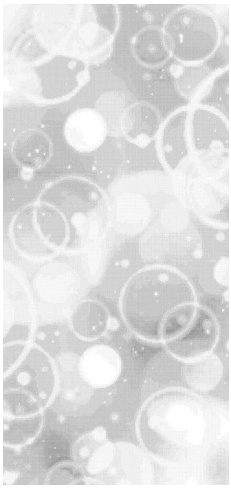

Fig. 14. Example of "shoujo sparkles" in a screentone used in manga.

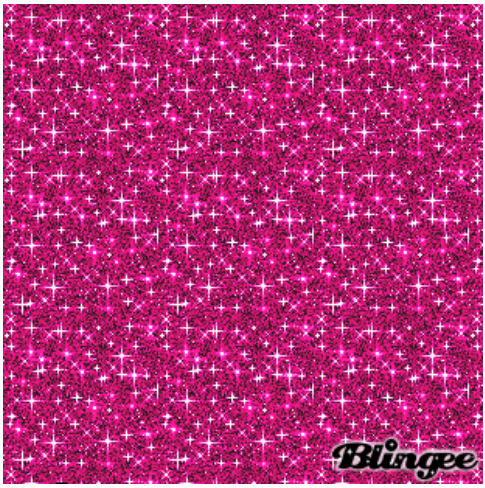

Fig. 15. Example of Blingee glitter. Source: shorturl.at/bksA5

Returning to the comparison that I drew earlier in this article between Blingee GIFs and Warhol's *Oxidations*, these sparkles are like urine on copper. Of course, one should note that the context surrounding the production of these two types of artifacts is undoubtedly different, even contradictory, considering the latter's phallocentric dimension. However, for the sake of argument, I would like to dispense with such contextual differences and focus on one aspect they have in common despite any apparent differences: their baseness and lowness. Just like Warhol's Oxidations destabilize the spiritual and philosophical sacredness of art by literally pissing on it, so do GIFs in "pretty pink princess" (Moskowitz 2011) style made by the prototypical Blingee user, i.e., the teen girl, engage in a transgression of taste that, in its own way, also fits into the category of "excre-

mental" aesthetics. While one suspects that, in most cases, such programmatic transgressiveness is all but removed from authorial intent, one could go so far as to argue that (following Bataille's theory of transgression) Blingee GIFs capture the fracturing, "unacknowledged excess" (Buchanan 2010) produced by such stereotypical visual culture associated with girlhood, especially within a misogynistic "culture that celebrates youth and beauty above all else while simultaneously denigrating the bearers—young women, overwhelmingly" (Power 2013, para. 2).

Another connection between Blingee GIFs and the *Oxidations* happens on a "purely" formal level, in the process mentioned earlier of de-composition. Both these types of artifacts are *corps morcelé* (Lacan), whose fragmented surfaces, eaten up from the inside (in the case of Blingee GIFs, not by piss but by vomit—sparkle vomit), threaten to "shatter the illusion of wholeness" (Buchanan 2010) underlying our fantasies of ageless perfection. Considering that Blingee GIFs typically evoke a neotenic aesthetic of perpetual adolescence, this shattering of fantasies becomes even more striking and the contrast (of life and decay, Eros and Thanatos), more glaring. Here, Blingee GIFs enter squarely into the territory of post-digital aesthetics, which oppose "digital high-tech and high-fidelity cleanness," as well as any notions of "teleological movement towards "perfect" representation" (Berry and Dieter 2015, 16), in favor of wallowing in the "messy state of media, arts and design after their digitization" (Berry and Dieter 2015, 19). The fact that, in a way, Blingee GIFs already seem damaged or fragmented ties in with their anti-futurity (i.e., against the grand narratives of digital progress) and even the current interest in them, of which this article is a manifestation, has something retro about it. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine a digital archaeologist of the future lovingly digging up glitchy traces of Blingee GIFs, like fragments of vases from excavations into millenary ruins, for there is something about them that gives one the impression that they would be entirely at home in a ruined environment. It is as if these images are ready to unravel into pixelated muck, despite their aspirations to the stratosphere of sparkling optimism. Moreover, because, in Blingee, the worse taste, the better, the damage is not "just" material (assuming that anything can ever "just" happen on a material or formal plane, divorced from their content), but also culturally catastrophic. Poisonous—in the Adornian sense, which is thoroughly conducive to Bataillian baseness.

The name of the website itself, Blingee, comes from "bling," an onomatopoeic jargon indicative of ostentatious clothing and gaudy jewelry as well as of the materialistic attitudes that are associated with them — explaining why some of the more popular Blingee stamps are gold gangsta chains, a symbol of status and wealth in hip-hop culture (Fig. 16). Following Bataille, the idea of excess and, therefore, expenditure is thus inscribed in the very etymology of Blingee. An expenditure, a loss of energy, time, and resources also visible, for instance, in the works of competition-winning Blingee artists like Irina Kuleshova, a 50-something-year-old Russian divorcee who has, by her own admission, "married Blingee." As she puts it in her interview with Olia Lialina, "All my free time I make blingees or I think about a new trick that would make my pictures more alive" (Kuleshova 2015, "You are the author of 263,207 stamps..."). Kuleshova's epic Blingee GIFs epitomize the act of "designing for abundance, joy or delight" (Kendall 2019, 90), which is the substance of Bataillean luxury as meaningless dissipation of surplus energy (Kendall 2019, 74) (Fig. 17).

Fig. 16. Example of a gangsta chain stamp used on puppies in a Blingee GIF. Source: shorturl.at/fsBH0

Fig. 17. Example of a Blingee GIF created by Irina Kuleshova, a "queen of Blingee." Source: shorturl.at/bsPQ9

The excesses of kitsch beautification have become the hallmark of the contradictory aesthetics of subcultures that stem from poverty, including trailer trash, gangsta culture, or Zef in South Africa. Thus, while apparently contradictory, the fact that a significant part of Blingee GIFs are permeated with cute aesthetics establishes a link with this "culture of the gutter, of trash, [which] is itself scatological" (Krauss and Bois 1997, 120) in its nouveau riche fixation on superficial displays of wealth. This superficiality—both literal and figurative—is encapsulated in the idea of the "stamp" as a decorative unit that exists over the image, a sticker repeated ad nauseum and whose relationship with the image beneath is inevitably shallow. (Fig. 18) As I mentioned before, the same shallowness applies to the very "movement" of these GIFs, as the only thing that actually moves in the short clips are the stamps or the glitter, not the picture at the base. This, in itself, is one of the aspects that "lowers" the aesthetics of Blingee GIFs. It is a cheap trick of amateur and, importantly, girls' crafts, that goes against the tenets of "proper" composition in the fine arts (associated, in the modernist tradition, with masculinized precision and restraint). In other words, glitter,

kittens, cute anime characters, and other "sentimental rubbish" like motivational phrases are scatological insofar as, excreted from any aesthetic or intellectual deepness, they naturally occur on the surface.

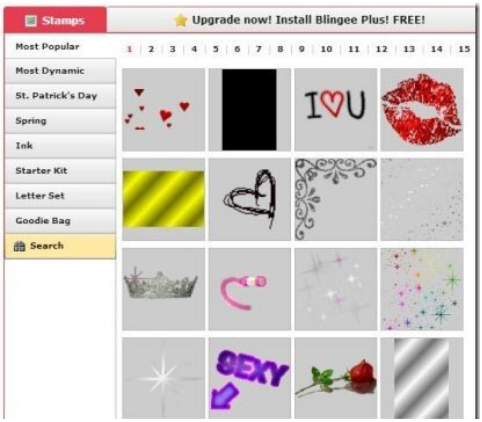

Fig. 18. Stamps can be searched on the Blingee website using keywords and hashtags.

The use of texture (e.g., glitter) and stamps, superimposed on the images in Blingee, attempts to create a sense of integration that is ultimately futile due to the superficiality embedded in the website's mechanics. This observation brings me to yet another Bataillean category, the formless. Far from being "informal" (as in the abstract and gestural qualities of *arte informale*), Blingee GIFs, in their maniac operations, attack the formal qualities valued by modernist taste. In particular, Blingee stamps, compulsively repeated and opened up to amateurism (remember that these are all user-generated!), create a paradox, as their customization eventually results in absolute redundancy and visual standardization. Which is to say that, after a few Google searches, all Blingee GIFs blur into each other. Regardless of their authors' intentions, these GIFs magnificently fail to reach the heights of beauty and imagination promised by their most recurring motives, whether cute or fantastic, pointing to a phenomenological "toxicity" lurking from within the layers of kittens and sparkle-vomit. If anything, Blingee GIFs may strike one as resolutely anti-lyrical in their baseness. They enact a dismemberment of lyricism itself, as the expression of deep feelings or emotions in art, which comes neither from the straight path of modernist medium-specificity nor from the emphasis on disgust-inducing (bodily) scatology in abject art. It is a curveball from somewhere unexpected. A catastrophe of this kind can, if not be redeemed, at least translate into a radical and exciting (perhaps, to some point, even liberating) material experience.

3. Conclusion

I intended this article as a collection of thoughts and notes taken during my field research on the website Blingee, where users create animated GIFs in the aesthetic of Internet sparkle-vomit, i.e., excessive cuteness and prettiness. Since these were primarily meant to meet my own research interests for an art project, it was not my intention to be exhaustive or final, and my mindset was speculative and exploratory. Nevertheless, the fact that sparkle-vomit aesthetics have achieved considerable relevancy within the contemporary psyche is undeniable. It is manifested, for example, in the fact that Lisa Frank — author of colorful illustrations of puppies, unicorns, dolphins, stars, hearts, rainbows, cute patterns, and whatnot — has been selected to represent the United States at the 2021 Venice Biennale; this, although her company primarily produces stationery and stickers (Vartanian 2019, para. 1).

I think that further exploration on the topic of Blingee GIFs and sparkle-vomit will connect to the postdigital aesthetics of cyberfeminism and glitch feminism, currently enjoying renewed interest. How might these "girly" techno-environments spark and destabilize the contemporary cyborgian imagination? Can there be a value to their "parapolitical" actions, for instance, in reclaiming and rerouting "Internet Ugly"(Douglas 2014) aesthetics and meme culture towards a "consciously posthumanist and ecologically invested postmodernism" (Chaudhuri 2016, 70)? Whatever the answer to these questions, I hope, more generally, that my brief "field notes" are evocative to those interested in the elusive and ever-broadening scope of digital and Internet trends, and the relations that these can establish with the realm of philosophy and aesthetics.

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