

## “Let’s get this thing open”: the pleasures of unboxing videos

Article (Accepted Version)

Mowlabocus, Sharif (2018) “Let’s get this thing open”: the pleasures of unboxing videos. European Journal of Cultural Studies. ISSN 1367-5494

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## **“Let’s get this thing open”: The pleasures of unboxing videos.**

### **Abstract**

Digital videos depicting the unboxing of new objects have become a lucrative revenue stream in the YouTube economy, and are beginning to attract critical interest from media scholars. Much of this work focuses on the economic and regulatory dimensions of this new digital form, but little has been written regarding the texts themselves, or the pleasures they offer viewers. In this article, I contribute to recent scholarship on YouTube genres, by perform a critical ‘unboxing’ of this digital form. Following a brief introduction to this phenomenon, in which I outline the key narrative tropes found in these videos, I unpack the affective intensities and tactile pleasures that structure these texts, in order to consider how and why unboxing has become so popular.

**Keywords:** Unboxing; YouTube; Smartphones; Affect; Haptic Visuality; Touch; Technology.

In 2006, Aradius Media Network<sup>1</sup> posted a 90 second video showing the unpackaging of a new mobile phone – a Nokia E61. This is broadly understood to be the first example of what has since become a transnational phenomenon: the unboxing video. In the ensuing decade, ‘unboxing’ has become one of the most popular genres on YouTube, with over 57 million results being returned for a search of this term in November 2016. Today, the unboxing genre includes the unpacking and reviewing of a wide variety of objects – from games and toys, through to audio-visual technologies and beauty products - although smartphones, along with other consumer technologies, continue to be a popular topic for unboxing. Yet to date, this cultural phenomenon has received limited critical attention, with the notable exception of Craig & Cunningham’s (2017) work. In an article focusing on toy unboxing videos, these authors draw upon interviews with unboxing creators to explore the creative labour involved in producing these videos, and the regulatory concerns that this genre raises.

Craig & Cunningham resist the tendency in critical media scholarship to pitch consumers against commercial agents, or to view unboxing as ‘just’ another form of advertising. Instead, they position unboxing as a new form of creative production that warrants a nuanced approach to regulation. Importantly, the authors see these videos as offering more than just product placement, ‘celebrity’ endorsement, or conventional advertising. Communities of viewers are built up around these channels and creators speak of how unboxing provides new ways to engage, share and interact with their children, as well as to generate an alternative revenue source. Craig & Cunningham’s work is an important intervention into our growing awareness of ‘social media entertainment’ (SME) and

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<sup>1</sup> See O’Connell, 2013 for discussion.

articulates the need to go beyond the (perhaps outdated) binaries of producer/consumer, in order to recognise the changing shape of media production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this article, I build on Craig & Cunningham's initial intervention in order to 'unbox' the pleasures of this digital form. I begin by mapping some of the generic conventions of the genre, before focussing on a set of specific details – touching and handling objects, cinematic perspective, and audience orientation – in order to discuss the affective intensities and tactile pleasures that structure these texts, and which locate the genre within a broader landscape of consumer culture. As such the epistemic gains of this work include the identification a common narrative within unboxing videos and a critically informed appreciation of the pleasures that circulate within and through these texts.

I focus on smartphone unboxing videos for several reasons, not least because of the genre's origins. These videos also represent a distinct chapter in the lifecycle of the smartphone, signposting as they do the 'beginning' of a new phone's life. Finally, I choose smartphones as my focus because they have been a constant in the world of unboxing videos, echoing the regular release of new handsets by major technology companies. As such, they offer an opportunity to consider the conventions and pleasures of unboxing videos across an established and comparatively stable history.

The findings published here are based primarily on a corpus of sixty unboxing videos, downloaded from YouTube in 2016 using freely available software. I purposely chose not to focus on the sixty most 'popular' videos returned in the platform's search results (popularity here being determined here by YouTube's algorithms), but instead selected the

twenty most popular videos dedicated to unboxing the (then) latest smartphones from three different companies. Thus, my corpus of videos focuses on the unboxing of Apple's iPhone 6s, Samsung's Galaxy S7 Edge and Microsoft's Lumia 950. This allowed me to ensure that any conventions I documented were generic, rather than specific to a particular brand of phone. I also performed deep dives into some of the most popular review channels, which allowed me to consider the evolution of this digital genre over a longer period.

Each video was coded according to a pre-determined set of criteria designed to identify the conventions that structure this genre. The analysis paid attention to the cinematic techniques employed (editing, lighting, camera angles, music, sound and graphics), setting, mis-en-scene and mode of address. In particular, and following the findings of an earlier period of informal immersion, the coding detailed the narrative structure of each video, including the reviewer's haptic and visual evaluation of the handset, together with their review of the product. Of course, every unboxing video (arguably, every user-generated video) strives to stand out from the crowd and a fine balance must be struck between developing an individual style that viewers recognise and want to engage with, and being generic enough that the video communicates the information and pleasures one expects from an unboxing video. As such, while one can always find exceptions and examples that defy the conventions of the typical unboxing video, such exceptions are perhaps best understood as proving, rather than refuting, the rule(s).

### **Introducing Unboxing as a Genre.**

At first glance, unboxing videos seem unique, not to mention bizarre, bearing little relation to anything else within our cultural purview. As a genre, they have come under scrutiny and criticism in the popular media (see, for instance, see Donlan, 2012; Buist, 2014; Barker, 2015; Hof, 2015), with talk show host Ellen DeGeneres (2015) articulating an oft-repeated question in response to viewing this new digital form - “I have two questions. Number one, why? Number two, seriously, WHY?”. Indeed, these videos seem so strange and so unimportant that one might even question the merit of studying them. There are many possible answers to this question, but perhaps the simplest one is money.

Unboxing is integral to the broader YouTube economy<sup>2</sup> and producers of some of the most popular videos now earn considerable revenue from their work. While many are coy about their earnings, the financial rewards can be immense (see Li, 2015). In 2014, the highest earning YouTube channel was DisneyCollector BR, a toy unboxing channel, generating an estimated at \$4.8 million (Ferenstein, 2015). In 2016, Techbotinc.com reported that Lewis Hilsenteger, the creator of the popular *Unbox Therapy* channel had amassed an estimated net worth of \$1.9 million from unboxing. A year later, Hilsenteger was identified as one of the top ten influencers in ‘Tech and Business’ according to Forbes magazine. Doubtless these success stories fuel the imagination of many amateur reviewers, and what makes unboxing so alluring to amateur producers is the fact that many of today’s most successful channels were started by people not that different to themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> see Andrejevic, 2009, Hesmondhalgh, 2010, Burgess & Green, 2013 and Jenkins, 2013 for a discussion of this economy.

The financial success of this genre is reason alone to study unboxing, but it also points towards other reasons and other questions. If these videos generate vast amounts of money because of their subscriber numbers and viewing figures, what makes them so popular? Why do people subscribe to these channels and watch these videos? The question of spectator pleasure is something I wish to focus on in more detail, but before doing so, it might be useful to dispel the myth that unboxing videos have appeared out of nowhere. This genre is in fact the product of many other cultural texts and practices.

Sitting somewhere between a frog dissection and a striptease<sup>3</sup>, unboxing videos draw from a reservoir of established representational forms that span different platforms. For instance, in signposting the arrival of new products and providing advice and information about them, unboxing videos resonate with established genres of ‘educational’ television. Thus, we can trace the lineage of this digital form back to older genres of instructional programming such as cookery and gardening shows. These videos also echo informative and reviewing genres, such as science and innovation programmes and motoring shows.

At the same time, the focus on unpacking, revealing and touching previously untouched objects clearly references the language of commercial pornography. Whether it be teenagers losing their virginity, or college jocks experimenting with same-sex practices, the advertising for pornography regularly relies on the notion of ‘first-time sex’, and frequently promises its viewers access to moments of sexual boundary crossing. No matter how

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<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Tarleton Gillespie for this observation and for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am also indebted to Dylan Mulvin, Dan Greene, Nancy Baym, Sarah Hassan and Ifeoma Ajunwa for their feedback and advice.

unrealistic such claims might be, these promises speak to our desire to witness performers traversing hitherto uncrossed sexual thresholds.

Such promises echo in unboxing's commitment to discovery and revelation. Why else would so many video creators document the slicing through of security seals and the peeling off of screen protectors? Even in the more professional, carefully edited reviews, the unboxing will either be re-enacted onscreen, or a recording of the earlier unboxing will be edited in. Unboxing videos cannot function without the *act* of unboxing and, as with pornography, this act speaks to our desire to witness the traversing of a boundary, seeing something for the first time. Like Madonna's virgin who was 'touched for the very first time', unboxing celebrates the new, bringing us into a close relationship with the 'box fresh' object as it is revealed to us.

The focused attention that the unboxed item garners also resonates with the visual (or, perhaps, visceral) language of pornography. Linda Williams (1989) coined the term 'meat shot' to signpost the initial act of sexual penetration in porn and Nils Van Doorn (2010: 424), suggests that this close-up shot allows 'the spectator to vicariously experience the "action"' being represented on screen. Unboxing videos regularly engender a similar moment of 'action' - what we might here call the 'geek shot' - whereby the phone is revealed, removed or unwrapped for the very first time'. As with the meat shot, the detailed

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<sup>4</sup> Cultural awareness of this moment was signified in season 5, episode 14 of hit comedy show, *The Big Bang Theory*. Raj invites his friend Howard to join him in removing the screen protector from his new iPhone 4. This moment is coded as sexually pleasurable for both characters, leading one YouTube commenter to suggest that as 'peeling plastic off a new phone is like reaching an orgasm for nerds'.



attention the phone receives in the hands of the reviewer is complimented by tight camera angles and close-up shots, and this intense scrutiny resonates with the fetishising gaze of the pornographic camera, which lingers on specific body parts as if investigating them in minute detail.

The relationship between unboxing videos and the language of pornography also ties the genre to other *pseudo*-pornographic cultural practices found in contemporary digital culture. Social media has helped to popularise terms such as ‘food porn’ (Rousseau, 2014) and ‘property porn’, (Botterill, 2013), where the portmanteau of ‘object + porn’ signals pleasurable investments in an object, while also telegraphing a self-awareness that this investment might well be considered ‘excessive’ or ‘inappropriate’ by some. Tim Walker (2009) has identified the ‘pornification’ of unboxing, referring to it as a form of ‘geek porn’, echoing the use of the term by Andru Edwards, chief executive of unboxing.com. Thus, while unboxing videos do not utilise this portmanteau and rarely include such self-reflexivity, they can be seen to operate in a similar way, bringing into close focus objects and practices that are otherwise taken for granted, unworthy of attention or hidden away.

Finally, these videos also reference mainstream televisual genres invested in ‘the reveal’ as a narrative device. These include makeover shows, home improvement programmes and ‘business-fixer’ titles. As with pornography, one of the central pleasures of these texts lies in the moment of transformation; seeing the ‘new’ object for the first time (Lewis, 2013). This revelation is integral to the narrative structure of unboxing videos, which builds up anticipation and rewards viewer’s attention via the reveal. Thus, while the unboxing video

may at first appear decidedly alien, it does in fact share much in common with texts that are utterly familiar to us.

This textual ancestry does not preclude unboxing videos from having a set of codes and conventions that mark them out as belonging to a discrete genre, and it is worth pausing to identify some of these key tropes. Individual reviewers clearly attempt to stand out from the crowd by playing with these conventions. Indeed, on a platform that thrives on the eternal competition for audience attention, one might go so far as to say that breaking convention is central to this digital economy. At the same time, it is possible to identify a set of common narrative tropes and visual conventions, some or all of which appear in the majority of unboxing videos.

For a start, the narrative of an unboxing video is typically structured around a belief that the video is documenting the reviewer's first engagement with the object being unboxed. As such, unboxing videos are motivated by a journey of *discovery*, and the viewer is invited to discover the new device alongside the reviewer. This journey may be strictly linear – we witness the reviewer open the box for the first time, remove its contents and examine each item in turn – or it may be more conspicuously edited, identifying the fact that the unboxing, review and testing of the device has not happened in real time. Irrespective of this differentiation, smartphone unboxing videos typically employ a similar narrative arc and I shall briefly outline this narrative, before focusing on specific tropes contained within it.

In line with other genres of product review videos, many unboxing videos begin with a short title sequence. This often includes moving graphics, a soundtrack and the channel's brand

logo<sup>5</sup>. The overwhelming majority of those videos sampled (48 out of 60) included a title sequence and, this typically appeared after a very brief introduction to the video's topic. Echoing my earlier observation regarding the genre's relationship to established televisual forms, this is not dissimilar to the first joke of a typical American sitcom, or the headline preview of a news programme, both of which appear prior to the opening credits of an episode.

Whether a title sequence is included or not, the reviewer normally offers a brief salutation ("*Hey everyone, Lenny from OneTechStop here*") before launching into an introduction, detailing the product to be unboxed. Whether this salutation is made 'in person' and to camera or not, varies. While by no means a hard and fast rule, it appears that more polished, edited videos tend to include a direct-to-camera address, putting a face to the (brand) name. Meanwhile, minimally edited videos, which often feature lower production values (such as poor lighting and sound quality), tend not to reveal the reviewer beyond their hands, which perform the unboxing.

Videos also regularly include a 'biographical' element and one of two types of biography were present in 47 of the 60 videos sampled. Firstly, there is what we might call the 'biography of the phone', where reviewers provide details of how the new phone fits within the broader history of a specific company ("*today we are having Microsoft's latest flagship Lumia device with us*") or information about the product's availability ("*It was announced earlier this month but today's its finally available to the general public for purchase*"). This

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<sup>5</sup> See Marwick (2013) for a detailed discussion of branding and digital culture.

is regularly coupled with information on where the device sits relation to its competitors (“*today, we’re going to take a look at Samsung’s rival to the iPhone 6*”). Such information telegraphs the reviewer’s expertise to the viewer, allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge and familiarity with the tech industry and the smartphone market.

This biography of the phone is regularly supplemented by a ‘biography of acquisition’, (present in 28 of the videos studied) detailing how and why the reviewer has come to be in possession of the phone. For instance, in one video from the sample, Ryan of *Beginner’s Tech* thanks a high street phone retailer for supplying him with the device under review. Meanwhile SuperSaf, informs his audience that he “...*actually got this device early, thanks to Carphone Warehouse, who I’m working with on an epic project.*” Other videos in the sample included ‘shout outs’ to companies and retailers for supplying the device about to be unboxed.

Other biographies of acquisition serve to identify the new device as the reviewer’s personal phone. Hence, in one review we learn that “*the mailman has just delivered my new phone!*”, while in another, the reviewer states that “*I’ve gone for the silver Samsung this time because I’ve been rocking the gold look for a while now*”). Working in different ways, these biographical details signpost information to the viewer, whether it be about the expertise and credibility of the reviewer (*I can trust this reviewer because they are a professional*) or personalising the review (*I can trust this reviewer because they have invested in this phone*)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of authenticity, branding and trust, see Abidin & Ots (2016).

Following the introduction, reviewers typically begin their review by calling attention to the packaging that the new device has arrived in. An inspection of the box is a regular feature of unboxing videos, appearing in 51 of the videos analysed and this review process involves either an edited sequence of tightly framed shots showing each side of the box or the manual handling of the box by the reviewer, who turns it over so that each side can be seen by the (static, overhead mounted) camera. As to the content of this review, it is both aesthetic and technical, taking in the form factor and design of the box, together with the information printed on it. While the viewer is treated to a variety of ‘box shots’ the reviewer relays detailed product information. This typically includes data on the power of the battery or camera, the capacity of the on-board storage, the type of charger required, and the dimensions of the device.

From here, the review moves on to the unboxing of the phone, and this removal of the phone from its packaging remains a constant across the genre. Even when videos state that the reviewer has in fact been using the device for several days, footage of the (earlier) unpackaging is included, such is the importance of the unboxing. Three common features of this unboxing are worth noting at this juncture. Firstly, the phone (which is normally the first object visible when the box is opened) is lifted out, given a cursory once over before being put to one side. Secondly, the box is then emptied of its contents and each item (instruction booklet, warranty card, headphones, charging leads, decals or stickers etc.) is inspected. Finally, the accessories and other items are placed back in the box and the box is moved off screen. This movement off-screen signals the end of the ‘unboxing’ stage of the review, and rarely does the box make another appearance.

The phone is then brought (back) into view and carefully inspected. If there is any wrapping on the phone it is typically removed at this point. As with the earlier inspection of the box, the investigation of the phone might be composed of a sequence of edited shots, or the phone may simply be moved around in the reviewer's hand (as was the case for the 34 of the 60 videos analysed). In each instance, the aim of this inspection is to highlight the physical features of the phone. It is here that we learn where the microphone, front and back camera, light sensors, on/off switch, volume control, charging port etc. is located. If the phone is going to be set up on camera, this inspection usually finishes with the device being switched on (which occurred in 56 of the 60 videos analysed). While this inspection of the phone ostensibly focuses on the technical proficiencies of the new device, the look – and most especially the feel – of the phone is regularly mentioned at this stage of the review. This haptic evaluation is something that I shall consider in more detail shortly.

In most videos, and irrespective of whether the first-boot of the phone is shown on screen, the reviewer offers the audience a chance to see the phone working. Levels of detail vary, but attention is typically paid to the on-board cameras, the speed of the processor, the software (or “bloatware”) included with the phone and any new or novel features (face recognition software, thumbprint ID, NFC technology). While far from universal, (appearing in 25 of the 60 videos) many reviewers perform this evaluation by comparing the new phone with an older device. For example, the same app might be launched on each device to evidence increased processor speed, or photographs might be taken on each phone to illustrate advances in image capture technology.

The deployment of an older phone in the review, acting as a benchmark for measuring the technological and aesthetic prowess of the new device, echoes the anthropological work of Ellen, (1990). In his study of the Nuala tribe of Indonesia, Ellen identified the role that older technologies play in the ‘birth’ of new ones, suggesting that understandings of new objects are often closely tied to memories of older objects. Similarly, old devices are summoned in unboxing videos in order to both ‘remind’ the viewer of these older technologies and highlight the advances made by new technologies. Such comparative work involves the reviewer holding the old and new devices side-by-side, allowing the audience to witness differences in size, materials and build quality. Likewise, the weight of the two phones is regularly compared, with the old and new literally being weighed in the hands of the reviewer. Unlike the tribal shields of Ellen’s study, the emphasis here is on difference, rather than similarity and such comparative work is required in order to highlight the advanced features and design of the new handset. However, while difference is established at a physical level, at a deeper level this process of comparison also suggests a continuity between the two objects. As one phone reaches the end of its life, another comes to take its place and unboxing videos reveal a complex set of dis/continuities whereby obsolete technology serves one final purpose: that of establishing the supremacy of the new device.

Unboxing videos vary in length, and in the sample used for this article, videos ranged from a little over 90 seconds to in excess of 30 minutes, but eventually all videos must end. Conclusions tend to be short and concise, recapping the focus of the review (“*so, thanks for watching my unboxing and review of the Samsung Galaxy S7 Edge*”) and reiterating the reviewer’s opinion of the device. Reviewers typically mention their Twitter handle and YouTube channel in their videos and almost every video in the corpus included an invitation

to subscribe to the reviewer's channel. In some cases, encouragements to subscribe are supplemented by promises of extra content, latest news and even prize giveaways. In the case of professional reviews, where the handset has not been purchased, it might be the device itself that is offered up as a prize to subscribers.

As this brief overview illustrates, a common narrative structure can be identified in the unboxing genre. To repeat my earlier claim, reviewers work to differentiate themselves and there are of plenty of videos that deviate from some of these common narrative tropes. The sample of videos that this article is based on included a wide variety of performance styles (including an unboxing performed... in a box), and the quality of both the filming and the review varied immensely. However, beneath these variations and differences, there was a degree of consistency within the sample; a set of steps were followed and a series of actions were performed, which marked each individual video as belonging to the unboxing genre. Having established this common narrative 'thread', I will now turn to the question of pleasure, and consider what makes these videos so popular.

### **Unpacking the pleasures of the unboxing video.**

"To be affected by something is to evaluate that thing."

(Ahmed, 2010: 31)

While the origins of the unboxing genre can be traced back to older entertainment forms, it must be acknowledged that, before the advent of these videos, few containers were deemed



significant enough to garner much attention at their opening. One might think of Tutankhamen's tomb or Al Capone's safe as two instances where the breaking of a seal and the opening of a container was worthy of an audience<sup>7</sup>. Opening boxes is otherwise considered a mundane activity unworthy of attention. The exception to this is of course *unwrapping* - of birthday presents, Christmas and holiday gifts, or tokens of affection. Gift giving is steeped in cultural meaning (see Cheal, 1987) but the unwrapping of a gift is often less important than the gift itself, who gives the gift and who it is given to.

Unboxing videos stand apart from this long tradition of absent-minded unboxing and render an ordinary activity *extraordinary*. In doing so, they locate and foreground the pleasure of a hitherto mundane act and (re)orient the viewer towards this act as a pleasurable act. In this next section, I want to focus my attention on the pleasures of unboxing, in order to consider what else – beyond the first look at a new device, or a product review – the audience is offered in these videos. In particular, I want to suggest that unboxing videos work to posit the *act* of unboxing as a 'happy' event.

In her work on happiness, Sara Ahmed suggests that positive emotions can become attached, or 'stick', to certain objects as they are 'passed around, accumulating positive affect' (2010: 35). This 'stickiness', Ahmed argues, does not reveal a passing on of feeling, so much as a shared investment in that feeling. It is this shared investment that I believe unboxing videos engender and, via the narrative conventions identified above, these videos offer the viewer an opportunity to occupy a specific *orientation* towards both that which is unboxed, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, unlike unboxing videos, Capone's safe was famously (and disappointingly) empty. I am indebted to Dylan Mulvin for these references to historical 'unboxings'.

act of unboxing itself. Importantly, this orientation, this mode of approaching an object, allows the unboxing to be experienced as a *pleasurable* event:

‘To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) would be simply mean you would share an orientation towards those objects as being good.’ (Ahmed, 2010: 37-8)

This orientation is foregrounded in one of the videos in the sample, produced by the previously mentioned *Unbox Therapy* channel. In this video, the reviewer deviates from the standard narrative of unboxing one product, unboxing all eight variations of the new iPhone. Of particular note is the attention that the reviewer pays to the removal of the plastic screen protector, which every new iPhone features. This attention illustrates the shared orientation communicated between the reviewer and the viewer, something that the reviewer acknowledges:

‘If you are an unboxing aficionado that plastic pull is one of the most satisfying things to do. So let’s go ahead and give you some nice audio on these plastic pulls. ... Oooh...[laughter] can you hear that?...wow! (Unboxing Therapy, 2015)

Here the reviewer invites the viewer – the ‘unboxing aficionado’ – in to the review, validating the pleasure of removing the screen protector, but also marking that act as a pleasurable one. It is this acknowledgement of the peeling of the screen protector as a happy event that identifies the orientation towards the object that the reviewer and viewer share.

Working this line of thinking through, and following in the footsteps of Ahmed, the pleasure of unboxing is thus located neither ‘outside in’ or ‘inside out’ – that is, it exists neither as an external force that comes into us, or as an internal feeling that we express outwards – but instead comes into existence *in relationship* with others: ‘If emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects, then emotions are not simply ‘in’ the subject or the object.’ (Ahmed, 2014: 6).

In creating a relationship between the reviewer and the object, the viewer and the object, and the reviewer and viewer, unboxing videos reveal ‘the sociality of emotion’ (ibid. 8) and while this sociality might not affect the naïve or casual viewer (perhaps because they do not recognise or accept the same orientation as the reviewer), the fan of unboxing is rewarded for their investment in the genre with this shared intensity of feeling. This is arguably one of the reasons why fans of unboxing revisit videos and follow their favourite unboxing channels.

These videos offer an opportunity to see new products up close and often for the first time. In the case of phone unboxing videos, they also provide detailed information about the product and offer a review of the device, comparing it to older models or competitor handsets. However, beyond this evaluative understanding of unboxing, these videos structure an orientation towards the object that produces pleasure. It is arguably this sensation that brings people to unboxing, and which keeps them watching. For we do not have to buy that which is being unboxed to feel happy, and we do not have to hold the device in our own hands to have a share in the enjoyment of it. While an argument can legitimately be made about these videos creating desire – creating a (false) need for new commodities –

such an argument cannot overlook the pleasures of the text in and of itself. These videos offer an opportunity to share in the ‘happy event’ of unboxing a new object by framing that event as a pleasurable experience. To repeat my earlier claim, unboxing videos turn the act of unboxing into a happy event. And repeated viewings offer repeated rewards in this respect, for the affective charge of unboxing does not dissipate, but increases with every new experience:

‘To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only towards and object, but to “whatever” is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival.’ (33)

These ‘conditions of arrival’ involve both the deployment of shared narrative conventions within a single text, and an engagement with the longer history of unboxing, revealing and evaluating; a history of the object (the smartphone), and the practice (unboxing) as pleasurable objects and practices. This history is alluded to by Ahmed when she writes that “the judgement about certain objects being happy is already made” (41); indeed, this judgement may well be the motivation for our happening upon them.

Having conceptualised the relationship between reviewer, viewer and object as a matter of pleasurable orientations, I want to consider how this relationship is developed through the cinematic frame deployed in unboxing videos.

### **Getting Some Perspective**

Unboxing videos rely on point-of-view (POV) shots whereby the camera captures an approximation of what the reviewer sees in front of them. While many videos in the sample included shots of the reviewer talking to camera, as well as slow-pans and cut-aways, the POV shot was present in every text in the sample. Most often, the POV perspective is adopted during the initial unboxing and close inspection of the phone and its accessories and a look back at the earlier, more amateurish videos of professional reviewers demonstrates that the POV shot has long been central to the visual economy of this genre.

This use of POV links the unboxing video to other digital media forms, ranging from first-person perspective computer games through to ‘gonzo’<sup>8</sup> pornography. Writing in the context of the former, Galloway (2006: 41) suggests that the POV shot ‘tends to hover abstractly in space at roughly the same diegetic location of a character’. This hovering does not suggest an indexical relationship between the avatar and the player, so much as ‘an approximation of a character’s vision’ that is more akin to ‘a camera on a tripod’ (ibid.). Offering an alternative reading of this visual perspective, Van Doorn (2010: 420) remarks that the ‘low production value of ‘homemade’ amateur porn has become an aesthetic unto itself’ and that POV shooting is central to this aesthetic, signifying veracity and speaking to the truth of the text.

Unboxing videos sit somewhere between Galloway’s ‘approximate’ definition of POV and the more viscerally indexical reading offered by Van Doorn. Often the core of the review is

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<sup>8</sup> Gonzo pornography involves the director/cameraman acting as the performer (often the penetrative partner) who then shoots the scene from their perspective.

shot from above, the camera trained on the surface below, suggesting the use of a tripod and resonating with Galloway's definition. As such, the unboxing video is only an approximation of what the reviewer sees.

At the same time, unboxing videos regularly demonstrate the DIY aesthetic of gonzo porn identified by Van Doorn. The videos included in the sample were often shot in domestic or work settings, featuring cluttered desks or countertops. Meanwhile, the angle of the camera mimics the position the viewer might adopt when unboxing a similar object, and perhaps also the position that the viewer adopts when watching such videos (for instance on a smartphone screen, held in the hand, over which we bow our heads).

This dialogue with other POV digital forms places unboxing videos within a broader cultural context and allows us to understand the position of the viewer in relation to both the reviewer and the text. Rush (2011: 252-253) posits the notion of the 'embodied metaphor' that momentarily exists when computer game players move out of a temporary state of aporia, and while unboxing videos do not feature such moments direct control, the POV perspective employed *does* point towards a kinaesthetic connection between the viewer and the text.

Thus, the hands that we see on the screen become our prostheses and these prosthetic limbs, and work with the POV perspective, to offer a sense of vicarious touch. It is as if we are holding, caressing and evaluating the new phone, and the hands of the reviewer extend into the frame from the bottom corners of the screen, situating their (off-screen) body in the same position as ours. The cinematic apparatus not only allows us to see the phone being unboxed, but also provides us with an opportunity to touch it, if only remotely.

In this way the unboxing video creates instances of what Laura Marks (2000) terms ‘haptic visuality’. Here, the distance between objects - and between object and subject – is reduced, allowing the viewer to ‘move over the surface of its object rather than plunge into illusionistic depth’ (162). This form of spectatorship is ‘more inclined to graze than to gaze’ (ibid.) and invites the viewer to engage with screened objects at a closer, arguably more visceral level. Referring to Marks’ term, Kuhn and Westwell (2012: np) write that,

‘haptic visuality suggests a more all-encompassing, visceral, emotional, sensuous, form of cinematic engagement than that proposed by a mode of film spectatorship defined exclusively in terms of vision.’

This sensuous mode of g(r)azing is common in the unboxing video, which relies heavily on communicating a sense of touch the viewer. Touch has historically been central to the experience of consumption (see Hornick, 1992; Peck & Wiggins, 2006; Peck & Shu, 2009; Abhishek et al. 2014) and, since the story of Doubting Thomas, it isn’t just seeing but also *feeling* that is believing. The important role that touch plays in our understanding of, and investment in, new objects was recognized several decades ago by the producers of home-shopping channels. This platform for remote shopping has long relied heavily on close-up shots of hands holding, caressing and modelling all manner of items, as the camera moves slowly over the surfaces of the object, following the manicured nails of the presenter as their hand moves sensuously over the commodity. O’Connell (2013) comments on the allure of these channels, writing that:

*'I remember being especially transfixed by one presenter's ability to make the opening and closing of a fifty-quid CD player's loading tray seem a marvel of engineering: "Just look at the smoothness of the way it opens up when I depress the button here. Can we get in a little tighter with the camera on this, please? It's a marvelous feature. I could do this all day." I could have watched those guys all day, too.'* (O'Connell, 2013: np.)

Touch is central to the pleasures (and economics) of home-shopping channels and a similar focus on touch – as a mode of evaluation, appreciation and, in a sense understanding the new object - is common in unboxing.

Marks contends that 'in haptic visuality the contact can be as gentle as a caress' and the combination of close inspection and long lingering shots that we find in unboxing videos suggests that we are invited to caress the new object with our eyes, just as it is caressed by the hands of the reviewer. This visceral quality of unboxing is maintained via the regular contact made between the reviewer's hand and the phone, and in unboxing videos reviewers touch their phones *a lot*.

Touching the phone is central to both the visual economy and the narrative structure of unboxing videos. Reviewers are invested in touching, stroking and 'feeling' the phones they are unboxing, and the haptic quality of the phone is central to an apprehension and appreciation of it. Returning to my earlier discussion of affect, it is often through tactile interpretations of the phone and its packaging that the specific orientation to the object is revealed:



*‘Whether you’re a Samsung fan or not, you have to admit it; this thing is gorgeous. And the improved design with the subtle curve on the back makes it feel even better in the hand. There’s no easy way of describing this sensation [...] you want to grab it from the table just to touch it just to feel it one more time and that’s how good the S7 Edge feels in the hand.’*

- PocketNow

Of course, the smartphone is the quintessential ‘handheld’ device and from this perspective it makes sense that reviewers would fixate on the feel of the phone in the hand. Nevertheless, touch plays a key role in both the engagement with, and enjoyment of, the smartphone. The care with which reviewers unbox items is reminiscent of the venerated way in which religious texts (the Bible, the Qur’an, the Torah) are opened by priests. Likewise, the convention of carefully unpacking each item of the box and inspecting it, commenting upon it and putting it aside evokes a sense of ritual. This reverence for the object reaches its zenith as the reviewer comes face to face with the new device and focuses their attention on the tactile sensation of holding in in their hands. At this point, words regularly fail them, if only momentarily. For instance, the unnamed reviewer of a *2 Minute Tech*, expresses joy and wonderment when he handles his new device for the first time;

*‘[Sigh] Wow, wow, [sharp intake of breath] ah wow. Really excited by this.’*

Meanwhile, another reviewer, Sebastian Cevallos (2015), scales octaves as he struggles to articulate the awe he experiences as he unwraps his new phone:

*‘Oh my God! Oh my God!! I can’t even!! Like, like I don’t even have any words. Look, how nice that looks on camera! I am freaking out! I’m freaking out! Why you do this every year iPhone? I mean Apple? [high pitched voice] Oh my God!’*

Pels (1998) suggests that objects can become ‘animated’ via a sense of wonderment, and this wonderment echoes Gell’s (1992) discussion of fetish objects and the aura they seem to possess. The pleasurable responses – the gasps and sighs, the exclamations and pauses - contained in these videos suggest that the smartphone comes to us (via the reviewer) with an aura that has the capacity to captivate. The re/viewer is ‘caught’ by the object as they/we move their/our hands over its smooth surfaces, ridges and buttons, discovering it for the first time.

The unboxing video’s ability to captivate echoes broader discussions of technology, which regularly identify the aura that surrounds certain technology companies and the products they design (see, for example, Björkman, 2002 and McArthur, 2014). We might therefore think of unboxing videos as recordings that communicate the aura of new technologies. This sets up a tension between utilitarian and aesthetic evaluations of the new device and reviewers typically frame their videos as offering the former, providing detailed information on the functionality of the new product. However, as those moments of affective response reveal, these ‘technical’ reviews are subject to momentary ruptures, whereby an aesthetic hermeneutic triumphs over a functionalist one; when the pleasure of the object overcomes a more ‘rational’ assessment of it.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is easy to write off unboxing videos as a bizarre Internet phenomenon demonstrating little more than the fact that some of us appear to have too much time on our hands. The fact that top unboxing channels gross millions of dollars a year, does little to alter this line of thinking. Meanwhile, the fact that this genre can be considered as the colonising of yet another aspect of daily life by capitalist culture, has perhaps limited critical interest in what is often seen as nothing more than a new form of advertising. Indeed, as the boundaries between commercial brands and independent reviewers become increasingly porous, unboxing videos are perhaps most commonly understood as a new form of advertising. Such a reading is valid, for unboxing videos have most certainly become advertisements for commodities, even if the genre didn't start out that way. However, this does not prevent them from being intensely pleasurable texts. Indeed, it is arguably the pleasure of unboxing that these videos articulate that mobilises our desire for commodities.

When I embarked on this research, I did so in the hope of giving due attention to the pleasures of this digital form, rather than to the policy and regulatory questions that they invariably call to mind. As a fan of this genre, I find these videos intensely enjoyable even though that enjoyment is tinged with concern for the desire they create in me for new 'stuff'. No doubt like many other viewers, I am aware of how these videos fit into a larger system of compulsory consumption, and that I am being shown something I *want*, rather than something I *need*. Indeed, on some occasions these videos make me want something that I didn't even know existed prior to watching its unboxing. Throughout this project I have been sensitive to the fact that unboxing videos are part of the digital economy and, like other aspects of contemporary life (digital or otherwise), they are products and reflections of a capitalist means of production. It is impossible not to see this.

What has remained less visible until now, however, is the way in which pleasure operates within this genre. Indeed, it is only by acknowledging the shared orientation these videos facilitate, and the haptic pleasures of unboxing they communicate, that we can fully comprehend this wildly popular digital form. An understanding of the pleasures of unboxing helps us to situate these videos within the broader landscape of consumer culture. At the same time, it goes some way to explaining the enduring appeal of this genre, some ten years after that very first unboxing.

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