

Reel me in – Exploring the Dichotomy of Storytelling and Spectacle in Reels on Social Media

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Reels on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become one of the most popular audiovisual formats of our time. While brief and ephemeral, they blend elements of narrative and spectacle that can be traced back to earlier media histories, from Tom Gunning’s “cinema of attractions” to the aesthetics of blockbuster cinema. My article explores this dual identity of Reels: as fragmented stories that engage audiences emotionally, and as spectacles that rely on technological novelty and visual intensity.

Yet in order to study Reels within a humanities framework, one must confront a central challenge: how to treat Reels as research data. Unlike films in an archive or artifacts in a museum, Reels are embedded in opaque infrastructures of platforms, algorithms, and interfaces. They are difficult to collect systematically, subject to constant deletion, remixing, and recommodification, and highly dependent on personalized feeds. This raises methodological questions: Which Reels should be chosen? According to what parameters—virality, hashtags, themes, or algorithmic visibility? How can reproducibility be ensured when the dataset itself is unstable?

My article depends on finding ways to handle these methodological and infrastructural dilemmas in order to answer its research questions. I therefore use this presentation to articulate the challenges of identifying, collecting, and selecting Reels in a way that is methodologically rigorous, rather than based on arbitrary or personal preference. By opening up the “messy middle” of data selection, I hope to spark discussion and gather feedback on possible approaches to working with such volatile materials.