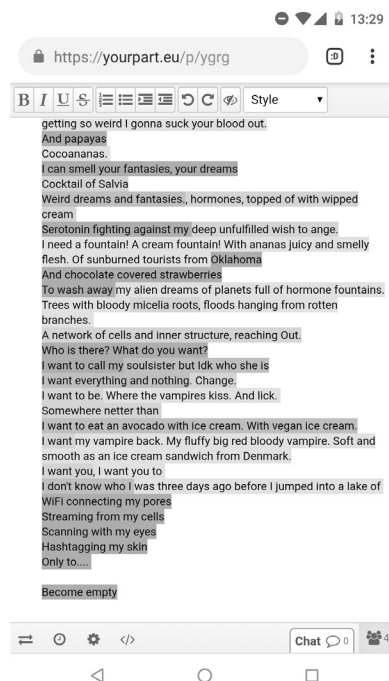


In the Spirit of Addition: Taking a 'Practice+' Approach to Studying Media

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The cover image consists of three screenshots taken by Magdalena Götz related to the art workshop "Weird Read Intensive" led by the artist duo Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, founders of the Young Girl Reading Group (YGRG).

The workshop took place on 5th and 6th of July 2019 at NRW Forum Düsseldorf as part of the event "Digital Imaginaries" initiated by the "Akademie der Avantgarde" in cooperation with "Institut für Kunst und Kunsttheorie" at the University of Cologne. From left to right: screenshot of one part of the story "YGRG workshop" featured on the Instagram account of the YGRG (@y_g_r_g), <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17864136457432608/>; screenshot of a collective writing process using the web-based text editor Etherpad; screenshot of an Instagram post by Dorota Gawęda (@tuniatunia), https://www.instagram.com/p/Bzf_bHzliNu/

Queering Practices: Uses of Digital Mobile Media in Queer/Feminist Art

Magdalena Götz

“To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things.” (Ahmed 2006: 161)

“Queer becomes a matter of how things appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds.” (Ahmed 2006: 167)

Becoming With: Deconstructing Dichotomies and Intersecting Practices



Fig. 1

Weird Read Intensive is the title of a reading, writing and performance workshop¹ led by artists Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė, founders of the Young Girl Reading Group (YGRG). The workshop focuses on experiencing reading otherwise: collectively, bodily, and mediated via smartphones. It is taking place at an exhibition space at NRW-Forum Düsseldorf in an installation created by the artist duo. Using polystyrene

blocks covering the floor, digital mobile devices, screens, semi-transparent banners, colorful lights, and an artificial waterfall with their self-designed fragrance, the workshop is situated in a material, bodily, and sensually perceptible and digitally mediated surrounding.

Artistic projects with a queer/feminist² stance that involve digital mobile media, like that of the YGRG, bring actors together to form collectives in material and digital infrastructures, aiming at deconstructing dichotomies in support of entangled³ relations. While artistic practices materialize in physical space, they simultaneously become present on-screen and with digital mobile media, such as smartphones, as well as within social media platforms. As such, they create distributed practices, spatialities, and temporalities as well as affective relations of participating, of being and *becoming with* (Haraway 2008: 244) and *in* non/human agencies (Giffney & Hird 2008: 2). Combining diverse intersecting practices, this text entangles describing of and *writing on* artistic practices with practices of *writing up* and theorizing about these practices, while interweaving them with layers of visual practices of documenting the artistic doings in my research practices. As these layers become interrelated⁴, researching and participating in queer/feminist artistic practices constitutes *circular thinking* and *becoming with* the very practices I am researching.⁵ Positioning practice-theoretical stances as *always already* entangled with theoretical and methodological approaches in gender, feminist and queer studies⁶, and thus, advocating the need of drawing together practice the-

² Relating to “techno-ecofeminism,” Yvonne Volkart defines “queer/feminist” as queer and feminist deconstructions: as practices of “‘queering’ of powerful dichotomies. [...] Those who help to break through these dualistic hierarchies in the direction of complex relations and entanglements of agents always take action, one could say, in a queer/feminist or ecofeminist way: [...]”, cf. Volkart (2019: 119).

³ For the notion of entanglement, cf. Barad (2007).

⁴ Regarding interrelated (social) media practices and “messy layers” see also Och’s text on “(Dis-)entangling YouTube Practices” in this issue.

⁵ For the practice of ‘circular thinking’ and of ‘becoming with’ in the process of working on this publication as a whole see: Hind et al. in the introduction of this issue, on the “Genesis of the Collection”.

⁶ Thinking practice together with knowledge, Silvia Gherardi proposes practice as entangled and “collective and knowledgeable doing” (Gherardi 2019: 1). Focusing on distributed, collective aesthetic practices, she offers a rare feminist and (organizational) aesthetic approach to practice theory. While she positions practices as “situated modes of ordering and ‘agencing’” (ibid.: 8), I intend to focus on modes of disordering, disturbing and disorienting.

¹ The workshop *Weird Read Intensive* took place on 5th and 6th of July 2019 at NRW Forum Düsseldorf as part of the event “Digital Imaginaries” initiated by the “Akademie der Avantgarde” in cooperation with “Institut für Kunst und Kunsttheorie” at the University of Cologne, see: <https://www.nrw-forum.de/veranstaltungen/digital-imaginaries>.

ory with media artistic practices, aesthetics and queer/feminist studies⁷, this article conceptualizes artistic uses with, of and surrounding digital mobile media as *queering practices* and positions them as a twofold approach: as the practice(s) of queering as well as the queering of practice(s). To interweave practices with queering, I draw on queer theoretical concepts as suggested by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed: “queer objects” or “queer devices” (Ahmed 2006) as well as “queer use” (Ahmed 2019). By analyzing media and artistic practices that enable smartphones to become *queer(ing) devices*, I argue for a specific *queer*, that is disordering and disruptive, *use* that potentially queers spaces, objects, and practices which are not inherently queer. Conceptualizing practice(s) as revelatory and generative, and by analyzing the retooling of technologies and their disorienting effects on bodies, spaces, and things I intend to frame queering practices as potentially collectivizing, performative and disturbing.

Challenging Orientations: Ordering and Disturbing Practices

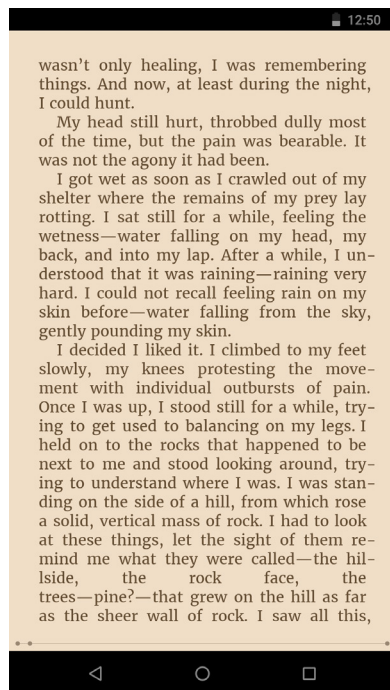


Fig. 2

⁷ Conceptually combining practice theories with gender studies often focuses on the proximities of praxeology and *doing gender*-approaches, concepts of practice and performativity, and on critiquing short-circuited objectivity, cf. Völker (2019: 509). For a thinking together of practice and media theories with gender and post-colonial perspectives see Bergermann (2021). Focusing on the media practices of queer theories and their effect on media studies, Köppert proposes ‘queering media studies’ (Köppert 2019: 5).

We gather on the soft blocks spread in the art space, with our smartphones in our hands. Via our digital mobile devices, we share texts the artists have selected. We open the e-book of science fiction author Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*, a novel about a young, black-skinned vampire^⑧ living in mutualistic symbiosis with humans, portraying queer sexualities, and challenging normalized power relations on the level of race, class, and gender. We read together from our phones. We listen to each other pronouncing words out loud. Our eyes follow words on screens. We search our way into the text, the narration, the space, the collective reading, our relations to each other, our emotions, our bodies, our digital mobile devices. While reading, we look for new postures, lie down on, over, next to the blocks, someone reads upside down. In open search movements we bodily, cognitively, and affectively engage with unknown and unfamiliar (reading) practices. A collective reading group is forming out of individuals and mobile devices.

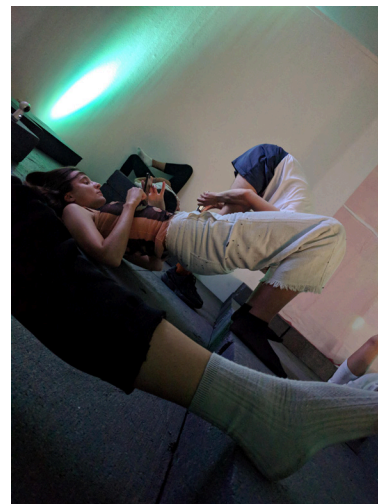


Fig. 3

Understanding “media as practice” (Couldry 2004: 29), media practices can be described as practical doing with media that are situative, bodily, processual, cross-media, infrastructural, historical and socio-cultural (Dang-Anh et al. 2017: 7). Framing praxis as specific, singular and situated but at the same time circulating independently of singular subjects positions praxis as eluding common dualisms (cf. Völker 2019: 509). Researching artistic practices using digital mobile media, therefore, requires an entangled approach expanding the question of “what people do with media” (Couldry 2004: 118) to what media do with people (Dang-Anh et al. 2017: 15), with non-human actors as well as with

^⑧ Another form of parasitic being, Michel Serres’ figure of the parasite, can be found in Randerath’s article on “parasitic practices through Salesforce” in this issue.

practices as Nick Couldry indicates in asking: “what is the role of media-oriented practices in ordering other practices?” (Couldry 2004: 129) Against this backdrop, I want to argue that (media) practices like reading collectively using digital mobile devices are not only *ordering*, but also *disturbing* other practices, such as normalized practices of reading, of bodily (be)coming together and of solitary smartphone use. While our gazes are focused on phone screens, we are simultaneously and constantly being made aware of the physical presence of bodies in physical space, by giving our voices to the texts we read, by finding new postures. Using smartphones in this way, thus, disturbs how bodies interact and devices are used, they become disoriented. In this, Ahmed’s “queer phenomenology” (Ahmed 2006) positions the concept of (dis)orientation as central and thus the situating of bodies in space(s) and time, towards or away from objects that (dis)orient them (cf. *ibid.*: 1). Following Ahmed’s concepts of “disorientation device” (*ibid.*: 172) and “queer devices” (*ibid.*: 179), I discuss the potentiality for objects, practices, and spaces to become queer, thereby, challenging orientations.

Collaborative Practices: Queer(ing) Reading and Writing in Fragile Cooperation

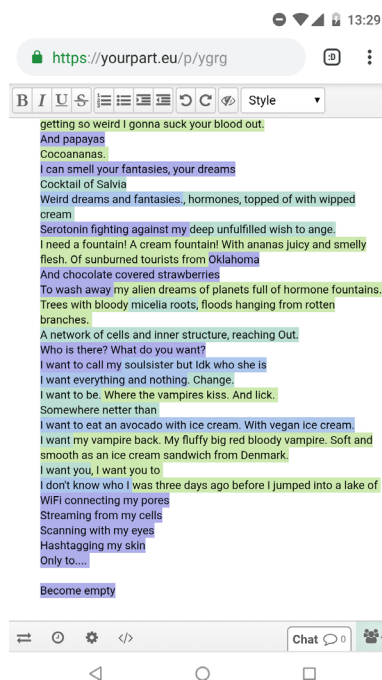


Fig. 4

Inspired by what we read the day before, we set out to compile a performance text together. To write collaboratively we use our smartphones and the web-based text editor Etherpad. With different colors assigned to each of us, we compose together, write with, across and over each

other, weaving a colorful text, without talking. Associating, referring to one another, as well as to vampires, social media and pop culture, we collectively produce a 94-line text we title *sand witch craft – scent which crafts*.



Fig. 5

Drawing together collaborative digital media use and artistic practices, I inquire which practices become relevant in artistic projects, ‘how they are established and through which organizational, technological, institutional, and aesthetic interconnections they are formed’ (Schüttpeitz & Gießmann 2015: 9).⁹ Following artistic practices using smartphones, I suggest that media and artistic practices are mutually, cooperatively and continuously produced, and distributed among various actors and agencies. In the workshop, these mutual cooperative practices constitute spatial and temporal relations, while relying on technical devices and software as part of the infrastructure for cooperation.¹⁰ Reading together from screens, pronouncing words out loud, engenders their vocalization and embodiment, thereby it queers the practice of reading as a solitary practice, and it makes collaboration a queer practice in itself. Instead of idealizing the notion of cooperation and mutuality, however, I want to stress the volatility that is shaping the practices,

⁹ The original German version reads: “Im Vergleich und in der Verbindung von Medienpraktiken, insbesondere in einer orts- und situationsbezogenen Forschung, wie sie in Siegen durch das DFG-Graduiertenkolleg »Locating Media« entwickelt wird, stellt sich nämlich für jede Medienpraxis die Frage, durch welche organisatorischen, technischen, institutionellen und ästhetischen Verkettungen sie zustande kommt und am Laufen gehalten wird, [...]”.

¹⁰ In their text in this issue on “Agre’s Interactionism” Hind & Seitz in looking at “Agre’s articulation of the relationship between practice and computational representation” are “providing an account of how digital technologies iteratively shape, manage, and control practices” (p. 22).

¹¹ Lämmerhirt in this issue conceptualizes (health) “data donations as cooperative practices” between people and media (p. 30).

which are in themselves fragile and transitory, thereby, refusing to align all too neatly onto a narrative of positivistic, *straightforward* cooperation. For instance, seeing each other type on screen in real time *orients* but also continuously *disorients* our thoughts and words, that form and get reshaped as others add, delete and propose other threads to weave with.

Retooling Smartphones: Collectivizing, Performative and Disturbing Practices

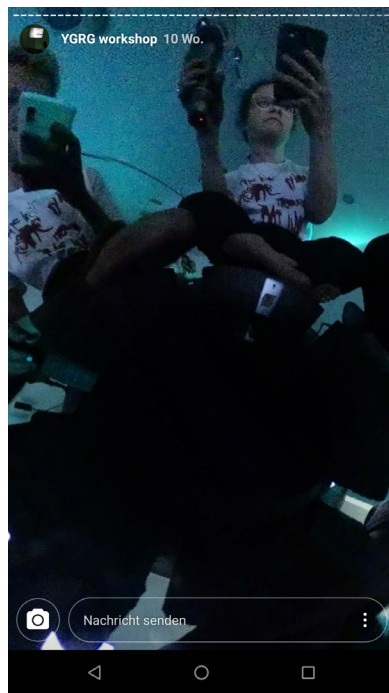


Fig. 6

We then stage the text for our performance in the art space. Using the blocks, we form a circular structure, sitting down on it and reading the text from our smartphones in distributed roles. Our reading spreads out through the room via microphones and loudspeakers. We are filming ourselves with a CCTV camera, transmitting an eerie black and white image to a big screen in the center of the room. Simultaneously, a 360-degree camera is documenting the performance, distorting images, space, human and machine bodies. One performer acts as a visual jockey: using a search engine on her laptop she associatively looks for (moving) images matching the text, which appear on the middle of one of three wall screens. On the left screen we are broadcasting our collective writing process via the automatic timeslider function of the Etherpad, on the right screen we share the process of reading together using one performer's smartphone display for transmittance.

Collectively reading out loud from screens seems as if they have cast a spell on us, putting focus on the smartphones, the text and our (be)coming together. Transmitting our writing process via the timeslider function creates a cinematic component in the art space, depicting an uncanny appearance of words as if guided by a ghostly hand; just like the visual jockey's live broadcast mimicking a flow of thoughts and images in one's associative brain. The cameras create partial, distorted images of our bodies and devices in the space, contributing to a rather *weird* and *intensive*, a *queer(ed)* impression. Thus, allowing to share texts, to read, write and perform together in collective practices, enables a retooling of smartphones to support queering their solitary use. Digital mobile devices can, thereby, allow for collectivizing, performative and disturbing practices that can be described as practices *queer* to their intended use, as queering practices. As such, smartphones can potentially become queer and queer practices surrounding them. In this, I propose that not only objects but also practices potentially become queer, as "queer objects" (Ahmed 2006: 157) are deeply entangled with the practices that make them. The question of how something becomes queer centrally focuses on the practices of queering and "becoming queer" (ibid.: 163), of "disturb[ing] the order of things." (ibid.: 161) Queering is, thus, understood as specific appearance, gathering, performing, as a disturbance of order. In this sense, *queering* constitutes a deviating from *straightening* practices of institutions, bodies, and things within a dominantly hetero-normative society, while producing orientations towards other kinds of practices.¹² Queering, thus, establishes an ethico-political orientation towards other kinds of (dominant) practices, and in doing so creates its own category.¹³ In positioning smartphones as potentially "queer devices", I translate Ahmed's line of argumentation onto technological objects.¹⁴ Following the example of the table, she describes how it is transformed from a straightening, hetero-normalizing

¹² As Borbach also points out in the epilogue to this issue, "media practices can potentially 'queer' the supposedly given structure, order, and usage of technological digital objects," thus, "queering media through practice which should be programmatic and symptomatic for our practice of media research" (p. 37).

¹³ I am thankful for Sam Hind's comments and discussion of these aspects with me.

¹⁴ Thinking together Ahmed's concepts of orientation with media, Nelanthi Hewa proposes a "media phenomenology" that "attends to the relationship between media and the bodies that turn to – and are turned – by them" and asks: "what might it mean to be hailed by the machine, and turn away?" (cf. Hewa 2021: n.p.). Franziska Wagner brings together disorientation with virtual-reality films and argues with Ahmed for their queer potentials and perspectives in these bodily mediations (cf. Wagner 2019).

dining table into a “reorientation device” “when the kitchen table supports feminist writing” (ibid.: 61) and into a “supporting device for queer gatherings, which is what makes the table itself a rather queer device” (ibid.: 179). In a similar way, smartphones in the workshop reorient us by supporting reading, writing, and performing together, thus, making the mobile devices *queer(ing) devices* enabling *queering practices*.

Queer Use: Potentially Queering Spaces and Things



Fig. 7

During the workshop, the artists are taking photographs and short videos of the space, the technologies, themselves, and us while reading, writing and performing with our smartphones. They are using their own digital mobile devices, capturing screens and interfaces. Then, they are sharing them as a story on their Instagram account under the title “YGRG workshop”, adding captions, tagging people. In their grey-blue-greenish colors, their selective, at times distorting picture sections, and their use of mise-en-abyme effects, the photographs have an eerie, uncanny visual quality; disturbing the all too perfectly staged and fluffy colorful flows of Instagram feeds.¹⁵

¹⁵ I am very thankful to Kristin Klein for our shared in-depth experiencing and analyzing the practices of the YGRG. In her article “Auditions for Audacity” Klein looks at YGRG’s work to exemplify how digitality is articulated in the artistic in terms of body, space, materiality and image circulation by critically reflecting on concepts of postdigitality and Post-Internet, cf. Klein (2021).

Using digital mobile devices to collectively read texts, write a performance script, to perform, document, and share content on social media, smartphones are put at the center of the workshop practices. Use, in its practice, as *using*, signifies the making use of, connecting human with non-human actors. Thus, defining use as a or one “way of being in touch with things”, as “giv[ing] us a sense of things: how they are; what they are like” (Ahmed 2019: 21), hints at *how* we relate to things is generated in active use, that is, *in practice*. Using things as *practicing*, can thereby be understood as their epistemological quality: *things in practice* can become revelatory about their specific being and becoming with.¹⁶ Or to use Ahmed’s words who considers “how usefulness can be evocative: use as how we handle things; use as how we mingle with things” (ibid.: 22) – and, as I want to add – how we mingle and practice with technological things. In the context of artistic and media practices with smartphones, I want to argue with Ahmed for a potential “queer use” – a use that is not intended, but rather extended and transversed, a use queer to the use expected or how something is used “by those other than for whom they were intended” (ibid.: 199). This queerness, however, has to be activated: “[q]ueer uses would be about releasing a potentiality that already resides in things given how they have taken shape. Queer use could be what we are doing when we release that potential.” (ibid.: 200) Here, I want to stress the *doing* necessary to release the potentialities of how things can be queered, by queering their use, by *queer using*. As such, the potential becoming queer of spaces can depend on “how those who identify as queer make use of spaces. [...] The implication here is that uses are queer because spaces are not: queerness as what is injected into spaces by queer users.” (ibid.: 200) Consequently, queer spaces per se do not exist, neither do queer things – it is their *use* that makes them potentially queer spaces or things (cf. ibid.: 200). Smartphones, thus, can become *queering devices* when used queer to everyday use in artistic practices such as in the YGRG workshop. Thereby, I suggest, queer use is always situative and temporary. Localizing the potential for queer use in the spaces “somewhere between our bodies and our worlds” (ibid.: 201), I argue for practices as the connecting (and potentially dividing)¹⁷ tissue in realizing queer uses and devices.

¹⁶ Neumann in this issue also argues for a situated disciplinary stance, for “taking things seriously as a practice”, and for a sociopolitical agency of performing arts (cf. p. 28).

¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis on media (theories) and their potential to connect and divide, also in relation to gender, see Bergermann et al. (2021).

Queering Practices: Sticking with the Messiness and Queerness of Practices



Fig. 8

In the workshop, practices of queering are enacted on various levels: firstly, as queering of reading and writing practices, in using queer/feminist texts, queering of normative narratives, and collectively reading and writing; secondly, as queering of bodily performing and (be)coming with and together in physical and digital space as a joint using and creating of plural spaces; thirdly, as queering of visual practices as a queering of familiar imageries, their production and reception, in using and combining cameras and screens; and fourthly, as queering of technologies and media practices as a queering of isolated, solitary media use of smartphones by collaborative practices of reading, writing, performing, and documenting via digital mobile devices.

Analyzing queer/feminist artistic practices with digital mobile media I have suggested that queering provides an alternative and additional concept to understanding practices and their potentialities. These *queering practices* can be understood in a twofold way. Firstly, as the *queering of practices*: of media, technological, artistic, bodily, cultural technique practices. Secondly, as the *practices of queering*: as the potentially, situative and temporarily disturbing of things, spaces, bodies and their practices and as such, the deviating from straightening practices. In this context, I want to conceptualize queering as a critical media practice, as it considers and enacts things, matters and relations otherwise. In making and using “queer objects”, ar-

tists and participants of the YGRG workshop *queer* intended and everyday practices of smartphone use. As such, queer/feminist artistic practices are probing and countering the straightening, the „aligning“, the (hetero-)normative forming mechanisms of smartphone uses. Conceptualizing practice in their queering potential as “queering practices” unfolds and reflects practice as potentially generative, revelatory, collectivizing, performative and disturbing. As such, queer practices can have a diverting effect in disorienting normalized straightening practices. Thereby, it is the practice of *using* things, media, and spaces in a queer manner that potentially queers them. Localizing the potential for queer use between bodies, spaces, objects and media, practices constitute the connecting tissue in actualizing queer uses and devices. Emphasizing the need for “a meta-language of describing practice”, Nick Couldry postulates that “we have to point to things as one practice as distinct from another practice, as distinct from something that’s just messy and confused and isn’t anything at all.” (Genner 2020: 6) While I agree that describing practices calls for a critical use of language, I argue that immersing oneself in and researching practices, such as (media) artistic practices, necessarily is *messy* and *confusing*, especially because practices entangled in media and the artistic are themselves not as „distinct“, nor as *straight* as one might hope for. Therefore, claiming to be able to clearly distinguish one practice from another, runs the risk of drawing boundaries where entanglements are, while smoothing over the messiness and disorder centrally inherent to practice and its notion. Thus, I want to propose being a “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2017) and sticking to, and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) of, the messiness and queerness of practices.

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Photo credit:

The images in this article consist of screenshots taken by the author from the Instagram account of the Young Girl Reading Group (@y_g_r_g) from the story highlight “YGRG workshop” (<https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17864136457432608/>) (1, 6, 7, 8); screenshots taken from the author’s smartphone screen during the workshop from the e-book of Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* (2) and the collective writing process using Etherpad (4); photos taken via the author’s smartphone showing collective reading and writing (3, 5); and a screenshot of an Instagram post by Dorota Gawęda (@tuniatunia) (https://www.instagram.com/p/Bzf_bHzIiNu/) (7).