WAGERS WITHIN THE IMAGE: RISE OF VISUALITY, TRANSFORMATION OF LABOUR, AESTHETIC REGIMES

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The idea here is to take the measure of some of the socio-historical transformations in the gap between the conjunctures marked, however inadequately, by the terms proletariat and multitude. Such an approach has important implications for the politics of cultural praxis. Between the factory, the assembly line and the labour theory of value on the one side and the deterritorialised factory, the screen and the attention theory of value (or immaterial labour, cloudwork, playbour, cognitive capitalism, etc.) on the other side, a set of transformations have materialised that have shifted the ground of sociality. However, for the moment we will be less interested in the 'politics' of Twitter, Facebook, Google and other multi-billion dollar speculative interfaces (questions such as what it means that our children spend so much time online, or whether it is progressive or reactionary to profit form cell-phone mediated piecework on distributed platforms such as Mechanical Turk), and more interested in a world in which these emergent forms of interconnectivity, along with the banks, shareholders, military-legal apparatuses and nation-states that vest them, are leveraged against the emerging needs of people seeking sustenance, plenitude, and freedom on a variety of platforms, which would include food and arable land. Thus, key here are the issues of the expropriation of sensual labour (and of the senses), and modes of reclamation, repurposing, and survival negotiated with, against and indeed within, the leveraged interfaces of an historically achieved socio-technical expropriation that has resulted in the greatest level of social inequality in all history.

The Rise of Visuality and the Transformation of the Commodity, Labour and the Form of Value

One way to think about this shift (from proletariat to multitude, from factory-mediated labour to screen-mediated attention – and the worlds implied by each) is to look back at the Soviet Experiment. As I endeavoured to show in *The Cinematic Mode of Production* (2006), in the 1920s visual media, particularly cinema, were being deployed in an anti-capitalist mode – cinema was mobilised to produce the critique of capital and the concept and practice of communism. Rather than working in accord with the expansion of capital, as did media in the capitalist world (Hollywood and advertising), these media endeavoured to work against capital's sensibilities towards what was to be its supersession.

For Dziga Vertov, cinema was abstracted from the factory: a 'factory of facts' useful in the struggle for what he called 'the organisation of the visible world' (Vertov, 1984: 58, 72). The organisation of the visible world was ordinarily accomplished by the default perceptual regimes of feudalism and industrial capitalism. His 'Film-Eye' masterpiece, *Man With a Movie Camera*, positions cinema – thematised in the film as an industrial form of the highest order – as the enabler of a new means of socio-historical comprehension via the prosthetic extension of the senses. Vertov used the cinematic interval (the spaces between the shots) to posit connections between the numerous places, times, events and actions involved in social production and reproduction: moments which prior to the cinema remained invisible and indeed unthought by the masses at large. The making visible of the constituent moments of the social totality, the visual working on work, and the presentations of these moments as integrated in a process by which people produced both the built environment and its representations and perceptions allowed for socially produced objects to overcome the commodity reification that divorces commodities from the history of their production. In other words, by visibly rendering objects as social relations by documenting their assemblage in the work process, the subjective content of objective products was perceptible. Cinema functions as a re-mediation of an industrialising world ordinarily mediated by money and the forced disappearance of the worker. Through Vertov's imaging, the objects of the everyday world are revealed as interconnected processes constituted through human activity. At the cinema, then, the audience was able to see precisely *through* the industrial revolution (since cinema is an outgrowth of industry) and grasp the social totality as a collective product – its

own product. Film functions as an eye-in-matter and returns the subjectivity of the labour process to the workers who have themselves produced the world. People see their product as a collective achievement by seeing through one of their products: cinema. Indeed, Vertov understands cinema as a kind of culmination (Humankind with a movie camera) – the historical achievement of a platform capable of dialectical perception and a humanisation of the object-world that is a condition of possibility for communism. When objects reveal themselves as process, the spectator, also a social product, becomes a cybernetic dialectician.

For Sergei Eisenstein, who was an engineer by training and profoundly influenced by Meyerhold and Pavlov, film was somewhat different: it was 'a tractor plowing over the audiences' psyche in a particular class context', capable of conditioning new reflexes (Eisenstein, 1925/1998: 62). He wrote that 'forging the audiences' psyche was no less difficult and monumental a task than forging iron', and famously remarked in response to Vertov's work: we don't need film-eye we need film-fist! (59). In his film most explicitly about the struggle between labour and capital, *The Strike* (1929), Eisenstein cites Lenin's formulation, 'un-organised the proletariat is nothing, organised it is everything'. This insight accords with his summary of his theory of montage: 'the organisation of the audience through organised material' (63). The methods for the cinematic organisation of spectators were themselves derived from the manufacturing logic endemic to industrialisation. Eisenstein's films were machines for remaking the worker. The idea was that cinematic montage could create new conditioned reflexes that would be useful in building the revolution. Workers were enjoined to recreate themselves and their society. In short, the audience was both the medium for the director and the medium of history – the labour power required for the engineering of communism. Stalin called the cinema director an engineer of the human soul, but these souls were being put to work.

So where in a pre-cinematic conceptualisation of industrial production we had the dialectical production of the labourer/commodity, now, with cinema, we have the labourer-spectator (Eisenstein)/image-object (Vertov). In other words, the domain of the worker was extended to spectators who were there to build the revolution, and the domain of reified objects (commodities) was extended to images. Of course Vertov's objects were what he called film-objects, that is, objects visible as process – pointedly the antithesis of commodities. However, film bent to the

measure of capitalist desire (what Benjamin (1969) called the violation of the film apparatus) and produced objects by the same means (the amalgamation of processes). Those objects hid the assemblage process through eyeline matching, narrative strategies, and the myriad forms for the suspension of disbelief – which themselves became the instruments of a new order of commodification. Thus the image-object became the image-commodity. And, the better part of a century later, in a world where image-commodities (the spectacle) became the dominant relation among people in the increasingly global society that produced them, and thus, themselves, in relations of production, the proletariat became the multitude. I am not claiming that Eisenstein and Vertov single-handedly brought about this shift towards the visual as the locus of production. Rather, the logistics of visual perception were being transformed by struggles over industrialisation to create ever more complex functions of the screen. These two figures both analysed and redeployed significant aspects of this historical, *political-economic*, development. In fact, going back to the early Marx and his analysis of the senses – 'the forming of the five senses requires the history of the world down to the present' – we can see that capitalist production's encroachment on the senses was perceptible before the emergence of actual cinema from industry. Indeed from a consideration of industry, the 'open book' of the history of psychology and the senses, it is arguable that the proletarian worker was a proto-spectator (routinisation) and the commodity a proto-image (fetishism). Without falling into determinism, one might argue that capital had cinema and current iterations of screen/society built into its DNA, or should we say, its programme.[1]

A couple of points gleaned from Soviet cinema: cinema's montage is the abstraction of the assembly line (the *chaine de montage* in French). Additionally, in claiming the revolutionary potential of cinema, the dominant means of *representation* is posited as the dominant means of *production*. Eisenstein's and Vertov's work clearly marks what was rapidly becoming a generalised industrialisation of the visual: in short, cinema brings the industrial revolution to the eye.

I rehearse this argument here because it seems to me that a materialist account of the emergence of cognitive capitalism and a materialist critique of the attention economy are still lacking. The so-called real subsumption of society by capital is an economic shift, no doubt, but it is, at the same time, inexorably a technical

transformation as well. Virtuosity along with the expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic commons (Virno, 2004), the grammatisation of the senses along with the loss of *savoir vivre* (Stiegler, 2010), immaterial labour along with the conceit of 'Empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2001), cognitive capitalist production (Marrazzi, 2010) all arise, fundamentally, from the intervention of audiophonic media (Kittler, 1999), and, above all, the screen.

Let us examine a few consequences of the industrialisation of the visual. As IPO after IPO seems to demonstrate, to look is to labour: looking itself is posited as value-productive labour. We know this now. In the cinematic mode of production this generalises to what I called 'the attention theory of value' (Beller, 2006). Today, after the internet revolution (or, perhaps, counter-revolution), this relation between screen-time and social production is increasingly presupposed. Of course the levels, controls and metrics of interactivity have been vertiginously intensified. Here we see that with the digitisation of the screen as socio-biological interface, with the ramification of both its functionality and the intensive development of a metrics of attention, the stock prices of media companies such as Google are what they are because they are exploits: schemas for the expropriation of value produced by the users (and therefore the used). Early dot.com markets picked up on this shift before it was widely understood. Today, this arrangement along with an increasingly precise metrics of attention has its sights on nearly every aspect of lived and to-be-lived time, even those forms of time that are engaged in organised struggle against capitalist forms of domination. As has been remarked, Facebook's and Twitter's future monetisation potential increases with every 'Twitter revolution', such that unrest in Tunisia, Cairo, Madrid and New York become bankable events for new media corporations in ways at once departing from but analogous to what news has long been for print and television.

This interface between spectator and social machinery, realised as 'the image' (which received rigorous critical analysis by the Frankfurt School, the situationists (Debord) and feminist film theory), has been generalised to the screen and is also being extended to the other platforms and senses: 'the computer,' 'the tablet,' and 'the cellphone' – all of which appear increasingly similar. Now, of course, the programme is being extended to sound, smell, touch and taste – music and game sounds, obviously, but also programmed shopping environments (which themselves extend into the urban fabric) organised by architecture, texture, scent, and

arguably salt, sugar and fat. These innovations and their convergence (towards the omnipresent, omnivorous and indeed omniscient cyber-spatialised mall-military-prison-post-industrial cosmopoplex) bring about new levels of interactivity as well as new and ever more elaborate metrics for the organisation and parsing of attention-production.

Such a transformation of the role of visuality, sensuality and their media technologies in social production and reproduction necessitated the formulation of the above mentioned attention theory of value, which reduces to the labour theory of value at sub-light (sub-cinematic) speeds but allows value formations to persist for a while in the electronic matrix in non-monetised forms. The theory posits that attention produces value in at least three ways:

1. Attention *valorises media bytes and pathways* in ways that can be monetised – paintings, films, war propaganda, advertisements; and monetised on spec: Yahoo, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Groupon (these are all forms of expropriation through privatisation of the commons). While there are various levels and/or strategies for the valorisation of attentional labour (from ticket sales, to the sale of advertising, to the IPO), what needs to be remarked upon is the still intensifying capitalist ramification of the domain of the visual and, more generally, the sensual. This domain (remember the shared institution called privacy?), formerly part of the commons, is now pitted, furrowed and trolled by the avatars of private entities bent upon the capture of formerly extra-economic activities: from accessing water, to looking around, to thought. The extent of this transformation that amalgamates attention with privately owned mediation has completely reorganised the logistics of perception, along with the mental functions that have perception as their basis (which is to say all conscious, and arguably the majority of unconscious processes, including language-function) on a planetary scale.

2. Thus we can say that the techno-economic shifts marked by cinema and its legacy technologies utilise attention to *retool spectators*, reworking *on a minute-by-minute basis* forms of social know-how, of needs, of semiotic and affective capacities, and demanding a constant revamping of 'the soul' (or of soullessness – as the case all too often seems to be). Workers, prosumers, playbourers and those described by Flusser in a different context as 'functionaries' (those who work within the programme of the

camera) ready themselves and are thereby readied for the developing exigencies of the market (Flusser, 2000: 27).

3. Over time visuo-attentional transformations as indexed by emerging media technologies reorganise (i.e., reprogramme) language-function along with the imaginary and performativity such that the *daily retoolings can be dialectically incorporated into or functionalised by the daily advances in technical interfaces.* Althusserian 'know-how,' the capacity to work for capital produced in schools and other 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser, 1971), receives ever more penetrating and subtle elaboration through the techno-capitalist capture of the 'cognitive-linguistic.' It thus participates in what Virno, giving new life to a term from Marx, effectively identifies as the subsumption of 'the general intellect' (Virno, 2004). In a recent remark, Zizek has noted that what Bill Gates accomplished with proprietary software was the privatisation of part of the general intellect, which we now rent (Zizek, 2012). The result is that privatised media are omnipresent in the praxis of consciousness, never more than a couple of interfaces away from any and all attentional practices, such that attention to any aspect of life becomes a form of production in the social factory of capitalism.

Most of these relations discussed above could be, and indeed were, derived, in one form or another, pre-internet: they were already inherent in cinema and television, even though they have become fully manifest only in the so-called digital age. However, given that capital itself imposed a relentless digitisation of life beginning in the fifteenth century, it is more accurate to think of today's 'digital revolution' as Digitality 2.0. These relations of communication and social cooperation were therefore incipient in the first digital revolution, that of capital itself.

Thus, early in the twentieth century, one could already see that the extension of media pathways was, in fact, the further ramification of the life-world by capital-logic. The communist revolutionary filmmakers marked capital's encroachment on the visual as a site of struggle; Third Cinema (the cinema of decolonisation), in Solanas' and Getino's manifesto, famously asserted that for the purposes of colonialism Hollywood was more effective than napalm (2000). Today the habitation of the senses by the logic of capitalised visuality is widespread, structuring desire, performance, perception and self-perception on a world scale, even in the most unlikely of places. For example, a recent essay by Danny Hoffman entitled 'Violent Virtuosity: Visual Labour in West Africa's Mano River War'

argues that the spectacular crimes against others in the region are precisely that: spectacles of maiming and mass murder designed to garner attention in a world-media system (which includes broadcast news, the internet and the U.N.) that rewards Africa for specific kinds of self-production (Hoffman, 2011). As Hoffman demonstrates through a close analysis of photographic and videographic materials, 'This was a war structured by the economy of attention. To profit in this economy, combatants and non-combatants were required to play to an audience that they knew was there, but often could only sense or apprehend in the most abstract way' (Hoffman, 2011: 952). Although this should be obvious it bears emphasising: just because there is no computer in the room does not mean that one escapes its programme.

One sees two significant factors in this global distribution of the logistics of the image-interface: first, that the struggle for attention is a struggle for existence at many levels. And second, that restricting ourselves to categories that are marked only as politico-economic ones does not allow us to resolve the specific aspects of this struggle. Very simply, race, gender, nationality and other 'socio-historical' categories must therefore be thought in their economic determinations within (and in excess of) the attention economy.

Within the Image

The increasing power of visual and digital media gave rise to new forms of cultural imperialism (which, in case there was ever any doubt, is actually real imperialism by other or additional means). Martin Jay has identified various 'scopic regimes of modernity,' Regis Debray analyses the emergence of what he calls the 'videosphere' which overtakes the 'logosphere' in the 19th century and Nick Mirzoeff in *The Right to Look* identifies complexes of visuality spanning the plantation (1660-1865), imperialism (1857-1947), and military industrialism (1945-present, Mirzoeff's periodisations) (Jay, 1988; Debray, 1996). We can clearly grasp from this intensification of the visual (however periodised and parsed) that capital targets not just territory but also consciousness, visual relations and the imagination itself in its struggle to organise production – which is to say, value-productive labour, and therefore corporeal performance. Capital's geographical expansion outwards is accompanied by a corporeal corkscrewing inward. Therefore, the visual, the cultural, the imaginal and the digital – as the de/re-terriorialisation of plantation and factory dressage, Protestant ethics,

manners and the like – are functionalised as gradients of control over production and necessarily therefore of struggle. This struggle for shares of social wealth is at once over images and within images.

The movement from print and semiotics to visuality and affect, which could broadly be said to characterise the current politico-economic transition from the paradigm of the factory to that of the social factory, dialectically produces the increasing slippage of the signifier from the signified. This slippage and the consequent vanishing of the Real should be historicised and thus understood as a result of the penetration of the life-world by images; the increasing gap between signifier and signified indexes technical degrees of social cyberneticisation and real subsumption. In historical order, linguistics, psychoanalysis, semiotics, deconstruction, postmodernism, virtual reality and reality-TV are all symptoms and accommodations of the scrambling of traditional language function by the intensification and increasing omnipresence of images. As argued in *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, the rise of late-nineteenth and twentieth century humanistic disciplines can be characterised by innovations in their treatment of language and therefore can be used to index or periodise the quantitative intensification of visuality (Beller, 2006). Each intensification of the disruption of linguistic function by images along with the consequent denaturing of 'natural' language requires a new discipline capable of negotiating a receding Real; the sheer quantity of visual processing required by techno-capitalism inaugurates changes in the qualities of thought. The linguistic commons along with its ability to slow down images and configure the Real is put under siege by visual and then digital culture. This siege results in a continuous and radical re-programming of the cognitive-linguistic. The structure, functions and capacities of words themselves today bear the mark of digitisation. Though this hypothesis remains to be demonstrated in detail, we might glean from the mutations in the form of literature during modernity and post-modernity the breadth and consequences of such transformations. A line drawn from the fragmentation of narrative at the turn of the twentieth century to the veritable demise of English departments at the turn of the twenty-first pretty much tells the recent story of language's purchase on the world. If we were serious about taking the measure of linguistic decay, the withering of the Real, the absolute failure of semiotics and, more generally, of representation we could ruefully add to the evidence the 2012 U.S. Republican primary debates.

If capital expands through the development of visuality and the consequences of visuality include the evisceration, or at the very least, the reprogramming of linguistic capacity, then it is clear that socio-historical categories, themselves nothing other than the organisation and semioticisation of appearances, are also economic ones. While there is significant work tracking the interpenetration of economic vectors and those of race, nation and gender, disappointingly, it has also been possible for a self-identified leftist political economy to view racial and gendered formations as somehow epiphenomenal. This is a political as well as an analytical error. 'Race' and 'gender', which is to say race and gender as such, are from (at least) the early modern period onward ineluctably tied to scopic regimes and therefore to economic ones. In other words, these dynamics are constitutive of technologies themselves. Thus it is incorrect to just state, for example, that photography objectifies women or racial minorities. Rather, one has to see the social role of the media platform as also constitutive of the platform. What photography 'is' has everything to do with its social functions, meaning that the objectification of women is part of what photography is, and the legacies of colonialism and slavery are embedded in its history and technical form (Beller, 2012). Otherwise, one grasps a platform fetishistically, as a reification of social relations. IBM developed the punch card to cross-reference German populations for Nazis looking for Jews, gypsies and homosexuals during the Holocaust and this development was a precursor to modern computing (Black, 2012). The social function is embedded in the machine, just as the role of computation in financialisation and in the organising of labour practices in China is also part of the meaning of the computer. Race and gender are endemic to technological form and technological form is endemic to political economy. To argue otherwise is to engage in technological determinism and fetishistic abstraction.

The investor consolidation of major industrial media platforms, from photography through cinema, video, reality-TV (which, for a decade at least, has made the hyphen between 'reality' and 'TV' mandatory) and the ambient computer is to be understood in part as a series of endeavours to profitably manage the transformed and transforming situation of language, race and gender vis-à-vis real transformations in techno-social mediations. Here we might identify four fundamental visual media shifts along with their disciplinary consequences: the visual marking and promulgation of race and gender differences alongside modern sociology (Stage 1: the art of photo-graphy); Hollywood's splicings of black musical talent onto

white faces and the generalisation of montage alongside psychoanalytic attention to language's break-down products and the dream as rebus (Stage 2: the rise of cinema); the promulgation of a mythically all-white, consumerist world bent on denying racism and imperialism on U.S. television alongside deconstruction's placing of the signified, experience, the Real and 'being' under erasure (Stage 3: television/video); the emergence of virtuality alongside the imperative to virtuosity (Stage 4: digitality). Taken together these periodised clusters assemble techniques of subjectivity, of profitably re-mounting a worker-subject able to function in a political economy characterised by the long movement of value extraction from the scene of the plantation and factory floor to that of the deterritorialised factory, aka the scene of the screen and the social factory.

Clarity about the reconfiguration of subjectivity, language function and of interiority by the intensification of visuality, along with the consequent recession (devaluation) of the signified (Real) vis-à-vis the inflation of the sign (image) reveals that there is not a single iteration of social form that is separable from political-economic history. This dialectic further insists that we consider the mediological basis, that is, the system of support-apparatus-procedure that Regis Debray argues underpins 'mediological' transmissions (in his view incorrectly identified for the better part of a century as 'communication'), of some other recent endeavours to treat the transformation of the value form and the transformed situation of labour (Debray, 2006).

In *Empire,* for example, Hardt and Negri return to Marx's idea of social cooperation as endemic to production and argue for the real subsumption of society by capital. This real subsumption is stated as a fact, but we might ask how is it accomplished? What is the material basis of subsumption? What are the media of Empire? Paolo Virno (2004) has argued convincingly that capital has captured the cognitive-linguistic capacities of the species. Pointedly, he argues that we are now all virtuosos who perform speech acts in accord with 'the score' orchestrated by capital – this, precisely, is the operation of the general intellect. Post-Fordist production requires virtuosity for the maintenance of capital expansion. Our cognitive-linguistic abilities have been conscripted and expropriated. But again, what are the mediological conditions of possibility of post-Fordism, and what are the raced and gendered dimensions of the 'servility' Virno identifies?

Relatedly, we also have the work of Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), Christian Marazzi (2010), Tiziana Terranova (2003) on 'free labour' and 'cognitive capitalism,' providing us with a set of post-Fordist variants in which, given the sublime expansion of the financial system, virtuosos, by and large, accommodate themselves and their situations to the requisites of capitalist society in the performance of cognitive labour in a way which, according to some of these theorists, renders value immeasurable and the significance of post-Fordist input potentially undecidable.

One might identify in these innovative modes of conceptualisation a relatively unacknowledged debt to the apparatus theory of Louis Althusser (1971), to feminism (Kristeva 1982, Cixous, 1994, Haraway 1991) and Marxist feminism (Fortunati, 2007; Maria Mies, 1999), to de/post-colonial and critical race theory (Fanon, 2008; Spillers, 1987; Spivak, 1999), and to media theory. However, the dominant post-Marxist arguments could be more cognisant of their conditions of possibility, both in terms of the history of raced and gendered labour (the socio-political *techne*) that inaugurated the very changes in the mode of production being theorised, and in terms of the intellectual debts owed for their own theoretical formulations. This debt is a matter of citational politics, clearly, but not in any simple sense. These theories have been built upon the labour of long suffering communities as well as on their labour of insurrection and insurrectionary critique. For let us agree to consider it a fact that revolutionary energies large and small have advanced planetary intersubjectivity in their quest for liberation even if these same energies have been domesticated by the financialisation of media platforms. We must therefore be relentlessly critical when we observe that in spite of the mass basis of mediological transformations, some critical micro-cultures now proceed as if the only people worth having a conversation with are those avid readers of Badiou and Agamben, a posture that belies the highly circumscribed standpoint of the Franco-Italian insights. This insularity, palpable to readers with roots in queer, of color, and global south communities, underscores a widespread if disavowed complicity with racism, sexism and eurocentrism in still all too Western theory.

The dearth of awareness of these multiple debts and of the historicity of practices that form the new economic order of Empire is least true for Terranova, who draws on feminism, cyber-feminism and critical race theory. Because of this she is sometimes wrongly perceived as being less original and innovative than her male

counterparts. However, in arguing that 'the digital economy [i]s a specific mechanism of internal "capture" of larger pools of social and cultural knowledge [and that t]he digital economy is an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labour,' Terranova is clear that the exploit of digital capitalism draws upon practices and inequalities that were 'always and already capitalism' (Terranova, 2003). In other words, for her at least, racism and sexism are embroiled in capitalism, and it would seem senseless to talk about (or critique) the latter in the absence of the former.

Given these observations, one should see that the concrete elements of the social: the ideological state apparatus, racial formations, the visual turn, the cultural turn, the feminisation of labour and the servility and virtuosity of cognitive capitalism as part of the same equation. This is one in which *the capitalised image reconfigures cultural praxis as a wholesale production site* in ways that impose servility and would delimit and even foreclose the emergence of *practicable* anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist and anti-imperialist speech-acts. Material formations precisely delimit speech-acts thus, because, generally speaking, the post-Fordist attention economy still depends upon the patriarchal, white-supremacist, imperialist organisation of the global imaginary to maximise returns. The ambient machines of the social, be they concrete machines (cameras, cell phones, networks) or abstract machines (races, laws, nations) are in fact real abstractions, that is, cut-n-mixable instruments available for the virtuosic configuration of social relations such that they adhere to the requisites of raced and gendered capitalist exploitation.

To give but one example here of how a critique cognisant of these relations might take form, Cindy Gao (2012) examines a series of videos by Asian-American YouTube celebrities, including vlogs of NigaHiga and KevJumba, and Wong Fu's *Yellow Fever*, and characterises their practice of performing race as 'virtuosic virtuality' (Gao, 2012). Without essentialising identity (Gao sees the term Asian American as itself a form of virtuality), the construct 'virtuosic virtuality' cranks up the stakes of the virtual and suggests that, here at least, these technologically enabled performances of ethnicity are subsumed by a capitalism that still requires and indeed develops the racial regimes that are the legacy of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Indeed Gao shows that one can investigate this subsumption without insisting that Marxism trumps critical race theory. It is rather that in making the critique of a narrowly

empowering Asian-American performativity (narrow because achieved through the trafficking in gendered and racist stereotypes), anti-racist and anti-capitalist critique go together. To be a bit reductive, it is arguable that in the absence of anti-racist, anti-capitalist critique the cultural movement is inevitably towards a system of structural inequality that invents and indeed *requires* new forms of racism – which is precisely what is going on with many of the popular Asian-American YouTube celebrities (there are certain advances but somebody has to pay, e.g., women, South Asians); or, the movement is towards a critique of capitalism that sees racism as epiphenomenal rather than constitutive and therefore uncritically replicates the racist and eurocentric assumptions of the era.

Thus equipped we must confront the fact that increasingly, every ad we see, every page we browse, every email we send, every word we say, every thought we think and every dream we have is part of the production and reproduction of capitalist society – sensuous labour 2.0. The various media platforms, social categories, and imaginal iterations are one with capital and these *would* script our participation in order to allow capital to think in us and through us. I italicise 'would' here because this point is both complex and contentious and appears to be moving towards a genuine crisis. The dialectic requires that we have it both ways. On the one hand, capitalist expropriation has never lain so closely upon thought, utterance, the imagination and bodily practices – it has engineered a networked cybernetic matrix of control, *an occupation* that has seized the bio-social commons. Anti-racist, anti-capitalist critique is ever more difficult to launch effectively, since the general intellect, increasingly expropriated, thinks for capital. On the other hand, and without doubt, real subsumption can never be complete if it is to matter at all, which it does, if, obviously, the thoughts (and indeed the material connections to life) in, say, this essay, are to be anything more than a means by which you advance your career. And whilst non-proprietary file sharing, p2p, creative commons, copy-left, etc., are laudable endeavors, and 'gateways' (Cubitt, 2012) that may open to a post-capitalist society, it seems premature to claim for any of these innovations that the medium is the message. For these practices at present do not contain within themselves a genuinely revolutionary critique or message (anti-racist, anti-imperialist, prison abolitionist, environmentalist, feminist, queer). It is not even clear that some of them are anti-capitalist.

With our language de-fanged, our critical theory suspect, and our machines and imaginations complicit, where to turn? I suggest

below that there are discursive and aesthetic dimensions to contemporary life that are incompletely explored. Here we must reconsider the third world, its legacies of survival and heritable corporeal commons and the possible non-capitalist transmission of these resources. The reconstitution of consciousness in post-Fordism materially links each to all in ever more intensive ways and raises question of solidarity, democracy and social justice in new domains. As I will show, the attention economy induces a movement from the wage to the wager, and with this shift demands an analysis of the politics of the utterance and aesthetics of survival.

Experience teaches me that when discussing the logistics of the image and social production/reproduction through digital interactivity and human attention, I am obliged to add that none of these statements regarding the violence of media-capitalism and its subsuming of the life-world as well as many of its 'alternatives,' means to say that 'prior' forms of exploitation that are characteristic of feudal serfdom, slavery, proletarianisation, prostitution, domestic work, migrant labour, or the labour of survival in either camps or the postmodern slum have ceased to exist. Rather these persisting modes should be viewed as conditions of dispossession which are coordinated and legitimated, marginalised or made unrepresentable by the command-control apparatus of the digital-visual via a calculus of the image that enlists our for-profit participation in the capitalist military-media-prison-industrial complex. From a macro-structural point of view, human becoming is bent toward two dialectically identical ends: capital accumulation and radical dispossession. The overall result is the immeasurable violence of the world-wide suppression of democratic becoming. We participate in this totalitarian systemic practice despite the relatively clear facts that the earth is headed towards environmental catastrophe and that two billion people (the entire population of Earth in 1929) are even now labouring to survive actually existing Armageddon. Given their intimate and indeed inescapable connection to the world media-system and the attention economy, the dispossessed have thus become the living substrate of contemporary systems of representation (Beller, 2008b). We write our revolutionary tracts on the backs of slaves. Radical dispossession as the other side of a world-media system is in the most literal sense the condition of possibility for our contemporary thought and writing. It bears asking, *under what image or images do the radically dispossessed labour?* And also*, what's it to you?*

The questions I pose at this point concern the images written over and on the historically produced informatic black hole smothering the bottom two billion denizens of postmodern globality. They are questions about subalterns whom I have come to think should never be designated by the sign bare life, but, at the very least, by the sign 'bare life,' now in quotation marks. The quotation marks are there in order that the signifier register its own constitutive performativity in relation to those who are being signified upon. 'Bare life' neither merely exists nor merely appears but by virtue of a signifying process – a signifying industrial complex – that codifies its messages on bodies presumed to be incapacitated and unaccommodated to such an extent that they are beyond the reach of dialogue. These bodies are thereby made to signify the limit of sociality and presumed to exist in a condition of social death. My point here is that whether it is Agamben selling philosophy books or bankers and policy-makers selling bailouts and weapons, we find bodies and populations being constituted as surfaces of inscription: bodies whose living labour of survival serves to make them fodder for philosophy, statistics, political theory, entrepreneurs, militaries, banks and states. Subalterns are actively configured as the living substrate of representation for capitalist mediation. In other words, the unceasing dis-figuration of the masses is the price of success, but the success belongs to someone else: the celebrity capitalists, militarised nations, and some of their aspirant followers. Such is the enclosure wrought by the world of technical images. Squatters, trash-pickers, illegals, displaced populations, post-modern slaves, and billions for whom we here have no names and whose deaths will not appear in any newspaper, attend to the historically imposed exigencies of life. Their attention to the world-machine of survival, their endeavours to constitute themselves in myriad ways, underpin the spectacular-digital of meaning, agency, and global citizenship. For the world-media system, subaltern survival or death is mere raw material for semiotics, affect and intensity. As threat, tragedy, irrational irruption or non-entity, entire populations are bundled and sold, converted into semiotic and affective chits for capital's master-gamers.

We must register the violence endemic to the conversion of historically dispossessed others into images and signs – in addition to objects (a concern central to the work of the young urban photo-graffiti artist JR) – because in being figured as bare life, multitudes, refugees, tribes, slum-dwellers, or terrorists, and even when not being figured at all, the capitalised universe of images and signs constitutes and de-constitutes these beings (this flesh, to borrow from Hortense Spillers, 1987) for its own purposes. As entity, non-

entity, iPad, auto-part, rare-earth metal, securitised population or void, the now doubly dispossessed are materially and symbolically disappeared for politico-economic ends. In other words, not only global commodity-chain production (which relies on disappeared labour 1.0) but planetary semiosis and affect-formation (which relies on disappeared labour 2.0) are rooted in the biomass of a planet of persons excluded not just from meaningful dialogue, but from dialogue. It should be underscored that the movement from 1.0 to 2.0 is a movement that took place over a matter of centuries of racialisation and gendered violence but is today 'noticeable' which is to say 'theoriseable' because the chickens are coming home to roost. As Cesaire remarked, what was unforgiveable about the Holocaust, was not the brutality, torture and murder, what was unforgiveable was that the techniques of colonisation were applied to white people (Cesaire, 1972). Peoples of the Global South were the first 'content providers.' Now the situation is generalised.

Understood in this way, it would appear that the result of not just history, but also of the history of representation – representation now 'fully' captured by capital, and shunted into an informatics matrix in which capital structures images and images structure sign function, and sign function is endemic to social production and reproduction – has been *to make democracy structurally impossible.* Such is the 'reality' for which the recession of the Real stands as symptom. The material foreclosure of the logic endemic to the conceit of human being is the technical achievement that provides the historical explanation for 'being' being placed under erasure in the realm of the sign. Understanding philosophically, as it were, that with the expiration of Western metaphysics one also confronts the expiration of humanism and the conceits pertaining to 'the human' follows logically; however understanding mediologically that this emptying out of tradition called post-structuralism is consequent upon the historico-material conversion and therefore demotion of 'natural language' into one medium among media requires a materialist approach to the totality of informatic networks that avowedly post-dialectical and post-historical thought cannot easily accommodate. Admittedly, it might take a book-length study to properly historicise Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and to methodologically 'comprehend' the moment in intellectual history known as 'deconstruction' as a specific symptom of and in the long historical process of uprooting and eviscerating language. Nonetheless, one might speculate that the 'being' under erasure there was formerly assumed to be part of the commons. As Kwame Anthony Appiah indicated in 'Is the Post- in Postmodernism the

Post- in Postcolonial?' there is an intimate connection between the erosion of the birthrights of colonised peoples and the erosion of the Western birthright purportedly guaranteed by Western metaphysics. For our purposes here we may grasp that in both the material and philosophical domains the basis and the rationale for democracy have been steadily eroded. This somewhat controversial hypothesis affirms what has been discernible at least since the onset of post-modernity: because of shifts in the matrix of representation and its material underpinnings, under advanced capitalism neither reality nor being can be adequately mounted and sustained and thus neither democratic representation nor perhaps democracy is possible. From a technical perspective this is an *advance*. Dialectically speaking, from this historically achieved and instrumental condition of generalised simulation there is no return.

From the Wage to the Wager

I would suggest that foregrounding this foreclosure, specifically, the worldwide foreclosure of democracy that occurs simultaneously – *is occurring* – with the increase in the technical capacity for universal interconnectivity and expression via digital media, is how we might most productively think about the recent translations of Vilem Flusser, as well as some of the recent writing of Bernard Stiegler. Flusser's increasingly relevant analysis of the rise of the technical image refers to a programmatic stupidity and unfreedom in which people have become functionaries of apparatuses, apparatuses which are the result of programmes, such as the camera and now the digital computer. Photography, for Flusser, involves a kind of historically emergent triple abstraction: from world to primitive image, from image to linear and scientific writing, from linear and scientific writing to the optical programmes of the camera. The photograph, though it appears to be a window, passes through all these layers of abstraction. Cameras, argues Flusser, have organised the world through this triple abstraction process such that they produce an ever-increasing number of cameras. For him, the technical image has reduced people who do not understand the logistics of photography to functionaries within the apparatus's increasingly inescapable domain. Practices that used to be called freedom are no longer liberatory in a temporally and indeed metaphysically transformed world saturated with and programmed by apparatuses.

Stiegler, in *For a New Critique of Political Economy,* refers to a 'systemic stupidity that structurally prevents the reconstitution of a

long term horizon' (Stiegler, 2010: 5). This is accomplished, in part through what he astutely calls the 'grammatisation of gesture' by industry, and of audiovisual perception and cognition by what he calls 'retentional systems' (10).   In other words, stupidity ('short termism') is an historical result following upon the expropriation first of *savoir faire* – knowing how to make things – by the industrial revolution, and then of *savoir vivre* – knowing how to live – by media technologies which, in Stiegler's view (a view close to my own), harness the libido and the drives in a significant yet woefully under-theorised development of political economy. He describes this harnessing of the libido as the 'proletarianisation of the nervous system' (45). This radical dispossession of the knowledge-capacities necessary to make and to live leads to disenchantment and an 'absolute cynicism.' As Stiegler says, a society of disposability 'destroys motivation in all its forms' (86).

Significantly, this practical and psychic enclosure as configured by Flusser and Stiegler, this paralysis and stupidity characteristic of the latest capitalism, have their aesthetic corollaries – and I am not just talking about the recent (and perhaps only?) Rebecca Black video ('Friday, Friday') that was YouTubed in late 2010 by every teenager in the US with an internet connection. Indeed, it would not be wrong to say (with a nod towards Rancière, 2006) that paralysis and stupidity due to the proletarianisation of the nervous system institutes an entire aesthetic regime. Sianne Ngai has given us the aesthetic category of 'stuplimity', a fusion of the stupid and the sublime marked by the repetitive failure of characters to achieve any narrative progression whatsoever to the degree that the viewer's ego is threatened with annihilation by the relentlessness and immensity of a situational preposterousness characteristic of farce (Ngai, 2007). I have written about contemporary farce as a post-realist phenomenon in my essay 'Iterations of the Impossible' (Beller, 2008a). And affect theory – which Patria Clough (2000), Brian Massumi (2002), Sarah Ahmed (2004), and others have written about – also elaborates a thoroughly reconfigured understanding of the psyche, of what is inside and outside the subject. I would put it this way: these theorists consider a historical situation in which a materially transformed and reconfigured 'self' and 'other' appear, and thus foreground distinctions such as conscious and pre-conscious and individual and pre-individual, amounting to a radical reframing of the terms of cognition and agency. This reframing, in my view, is to be understood as nothing less than the sensuo-aesthetic corollary, a phenomenology, of a society of ambient programmes. That these programmes function at sub- and trans-

individual levels, and undergo endless reiteration and mutation is not in itself necessarily a problem; the problem is that their recursive trajectories appear to be moving towards some kind of final catastrophe that many feel powerless to conceptualise, much less thwart. That the road forward is strewn with corpses offers no comfort.

The distributed agency of ambient programs, of chemical/electronic-material processes distributed among bodies, environments and machines creates, for the would-be-sovereign subject an overarching sense of powerlessness and abjection. The latest techniques of subjectification are all about its failure. This failed subjectivity is the dialectical corollary to spectacularity and connectivity which has, in addition to recent generic innovations in stupidity and farce, given rise to a kind of speculative, wagering or gaming subjectivity precariously adopted as both form of agency and strategy of survival. It is to this wagering that I want to turn. In *An Empire of Indifference*, Randy Martin has shown how under Empire individuals must constantly become their own risk managers and, in every transaction that once fell under the category of the social, must engage in an economic calculus in order to leverage their investments – in all senses of that word. Along this line of understanding processes of subjectification in the over-determined-nation of techno-Empire, Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos, in a brilliantly scandalous essay called 'In Praise of Usura,' have stated that

> Treasury Secretary Paulson was not so wrong in accusing the subprime class of being speculators. It is possible to separate the temporality of speculation from the obligation of debt, as long as living beyond one's means (which today means living beyond the scarcity imposed by the wage) is no longer limited by a deference to repayment. (Cooper and Mitropoulos, 2009)

Lauding the queer alliances that emerged in the post-foreclosure crises without recourse to the hegemonic identifications of race, class and sex in squatter communities and the like, they write: 'And so, while it is commonplace to speak of predatory lending it is too easy, we think, [to say] that those who took out the loans had no sense of risk, or rather, did not strategise within the cramped conditions of what was a monetised, racialised and gendered housing regime well before the advent of subprime loans.' In

solidarity they affirm, 'The subprime class rolled over their debts and lived beyond their means, generating surplus in the most unproductive of ways.'

In a similar vein, Neferti Tadiar, in a chapter from *Things Fall Away* entitled 'Poetics of Filipina Export', suggests that for overseas Filipino workers (the post-colonial Philippines' number one export) 'the act of self-export is a taking on of chance/destiny, an embarkation which hazards present fate and all its precarious guarantees to create an opening for a change of fortune' (Tadiar, 2009: 110). She goes on to state that the 'production of a commodifiable self is made in accordance to a social calculus of contradictory material and immaterial forces, in the course of a cosmic gamble with the fixed fates of home, including the fate of being a woman' (111). Likewise, in 'Petty Adventures in (the Nation's) Capital,' Tadiar understands speculation as at once a poetic and practical cosmic wager undertaken by poets, fixers, crony capitalists, and perhaps theorists. It is a kind of adventurism, 'a hopeful, speculative exercise in making a too well-known history happen differently' (215).

There are of course, in addition to these particular analyses of aspects of generalised and often unsustainable risk inequitably distributed by contemporary geo-political economy, other significant theoretical accounts (McKenzie Wark (2007), Rita Raley (2009), among others) of play, risk and game understood specifically in terms of digitisation. As Wark powerfully suggests, the computer game, in which players limn the game-space in an effort to apprehend the reigning algorithm, is itself the model of enclosure by the actually existing game-space of the capitalist world-system in which all are forced to wager. For now, by underscoring that the imperative to wager is the wage of a total, indeed totalitarian, capitalisation, in a world game-space in which no one is master of the code, I would like to move toward a conclusion of sorts. Currently, as we have shown, not just the world, but its representation has been expropriated and the species labours to produce its non-existence. Beyond working for a wage, or even working for other representational approximations of the general equivalent that would include accumulations of attention, pleasure, social know-how, and a modicum of homeostasis secured over and against capitalist pulverisation, we are forced to wager being itself in order to subsist amidst the practical-material deconstruction of life. Threatened with disappearance in a denatured because programmatically instrumentalised globe we are forced to become a

wager. And the odds, though distributed differently depending upon algorithmically determined circumstance, are against us.

Thus, if we desire a politics beyond bio-politics and still insist upon thinking about macro-political issues like social justice, we must affirm that there remains an outside/beyond to capital. However, from within capital's enclosure, what is outside or beyond is only the impossible, the unknowable, all but foreclosed futures. And it is there on forms of all but impossible becoming, ones that might exceed the capitalist rules of engagement, that we must place our bets.

Ultimately it is these rules constituting this new condition of the algorithmic capture of all aspects of the commons, from land to language to the imagination that produces the new pyrotechnics of subjection/affection/abjection. The aporia of capitalist *techne* that materially generates the erasure of being insists that we actively wager our lives. The dialectics of immanent foreclosure and risk push us towards the impossible and permanently refuse a return to a historical modality in which 'being' was sustainable. Within the algorithms of the social factory attention itself, like factory work before it, is the avenue through which living labour would be commodified but might also take another path. To avoid the production of our non-existence we may or perhaps must wager that we are capable of non-capitalist thought and praxis, that Kafka's devastatingly grim pronouncement, 'there is hope, but not for us' does not universally apply.

Thus we confront what I call the politics of the utterance, in which in both recognising and living the exigencies of attentional labour and virtuosity (with its racist, nationalist, sexist, technical programming) one labours under the injunction to somehow speak against encroaching commodification with every breath. Relatedly one seeks through struggle and in life the practical embodiment of a consciousness thus informed. Moments of genuine thinking, always risky, and activist organisation point the way, albeit cryptically and without arrival. Additionally, there is an aesthetic implication. Aesthetic endeavours that do not strive for the forms of power mandated by capital may open a path that although not yet created leads toward a beyond. In certain instances the aesthetic pursuit also becomes a kind of ethical striving and furthermore a form of kinetic praxis. This is a striving for principles that have no metaphysical guarantees whatsoever, and are therefore at once particular, local, and embattled – even if they may seem capable of being subsumed

in 'universal' expressions. The problem is that, as in Brillante Mendoza's unforgettable digital film *Lola* (2009), the correctness of a desire, say, for the decent burial of one grandmother's murdered grandchild *and* for the release from incarceration of another grandmother's grandchild imprisoned for the same murder, is neither guaranteed, nor does the presumed legitimacy of such desires in any way assure that they can be realised. Indeed, we may learn from Mendoza's extraordinarily caring, patient and exploratory tribute to slum-lives lived beyond the frame, made in and indeed with and of life in the slums of Manila, that one struggles for principles, not *because* they are universals, but precisely because they are a matter of dignity and of life worth living, which, in a manner of speaking is to say of survival. In such subaltern struggles one utilises all of one's resources, resources of interpretation and of action, of decoding and coding, of affect, expressivity, movement and *endurance* in a wager of one's very life-energy and life-time. Thus we are talking about a highly refined and attentive movement calculated to confront the most alienating of circumstances, a broad-spectrum yet fine-grained active encounter with the form of life, *an aesthetics of survival*.

As far again from *Ulysses* as *Ulysses* is from *The Odyssey*, we are, with Mendoza, talking about epic struggles for survival however unsung. On a planet such as ours where all inhabitants' forms of worldedness are organised geopolitically at so many levels by being shot through with the informatic vectors of financialisation, these struggles take place ceaselessly, inexorably and without representatives, at the limits of representation, and devoid of all attention save that which the wager can somehow bring to bear. The political project I have sought to advocate here is to steadfastly graft our attention to the wagers sequestered at the limits of representation. Precisely not in the way that Mendoza's camera momentarily shows, almost documentary like, two Phil-Ams (Filipino-Americans) riding the metro through the slums of Manila grabbing shots of whatever ('shoot it in slo mo!') that will look cool for some video. Mendoza's characters wager on principles that have no guarantees, metaphysical or otherwise. Rather than making our attention a wager in expropriation, we might strive to graft attention *such that the myriad yet nonetheless singular aspirations for justice borne by so many at the limits of capitalist representation bear on every utterance and all practice: an increased sensitivity and sensitisation that moves beyond capitalised mediations towards a communal and indeed communist sensuality*. The post-nuclear wisdom of Morihei Ueshiba's (1985) definition of 'budo,' or the warrior's way, is relevant here:

'loving protection for all beings.' Communism might wager on that.

Notes

[1] In an editorial gloss, Patrick Crogan usefully adds, 'Stiegler is very good on this question of determinism; e.g. in *Technics and Time 1* he talks about the "determining" power of technics as different from fixing in place (like with a screw and other "fixers") and more like conditioning the development of, the '–termine' part being the end, the direction of travel, etc. And chapter 1 is a long analysis of the question of determinism: the answer: the cause and effect, origin (essence) of human (and technics) logic of the question is wrong. The thinking of technics as a system interacting with cultural and economic factors, etc., is better (Bertrand Gille), and Gilbert Simondon's idea of a compositional dynamic of human-technical becoming, with industrialisation seeing technics take the more dominant role of re-organising all the others, is better still.'

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